

AI – Friend or Foe?

Once this article is completed (which I guess it must be if you're reading it), it will no doubt be appended to an email and sent to the FiBQ editorial team. And, judging by my record to date, there's a 50% chance that I'll forget to attach the document that actually contains it. In days gone by this would often result in a polite response from the recipient pointing out my oversight, but now such misdemeanours are averted by a clever little widget in my email editor that tells me it might be forgotten.

I've never really stopped to fully think about how it works, but I guess it scans the written text, and on discovery of the word "attach", or something recognisably similar, and in the absence of any actual attachment, up pops a quick message to ask if I intended to add one. Occasionally, of course, it gets it wrong, as there are other contexts in which I might use the word. But the benefits far outweigh such inconveniences, and overall I'm grateful that the programme is watching my back.

And my point is . . . ? In such circumstances, I am the beneficiary of Artificial Intelligence: a very simple and low-grade example perhaps, but AI nonetheless – digital technology performing a task that I am perfectly capable of doing myself, yet often forget. And yes, the same programme also checks my spelling, and suggests places where my grammar might be improved.

But Artificial Intelligence is a lot more than that. The truth is not only can it improve my writing and make sure that I've remembered my attachments, it has advanced so far that it could probably write the text of this article itself. In fact, the editorial team might find it more reliable and efficient simply to approach a relevant "deep learning" programme and ask, "Write a 1000-word article about Artificial Intelligence in the style of Phil Jump" – although having done just that, I was disturbed to learn of my

demise as AI spoke of me entirely in the past tense. AI has its shortcomings!

It did though attribute to me an insightful quote that I would be happy to own – describing AI as "a mirror reflecting the values and biases of society. It's programmed by humans, and as such, it inherits our prejudices and ideals." He (Phil Jump that is) "encouraged a thoughtful approach to AI development, emphasizing the importance of ethical considerations and responsible AI implementation".

I chose the example of the email programme because it's something that just found its way into my life through one of the many regular update packages on my PC. I'm sure I could turn it off if I wanted to, but AI would only turn up somewhere else in my life – such as a few reminders about regular purchases on my online grocery shop, or maybe a recommendation to buy batteries when I've just ordered an electrical item from a retailer. AI is not some opt-in special interest project for boffins but will increasingly become part of everyone's life.

That's why Prime Minister Rishi Sunak recently hosted the first major global summit on AI safety. While some herald it as one of the greatest advances in human achievement, others portray it as the harbinger of all ills, which means the truth lies somewhere in between.

But the advent of AI raises many questions for people of faith: some at an existential level about the very nature of human identity, when an increasing amount of what we once felt defined the human self can be replicated and even done better by machines; other questions that are far more down to earth: about whether it is ethical to use a chatbot to write a sermon or a magazine article. And as any AI buff will tell you, it's now doing a lot more than simply scanning

emails for the word "attach" – it is doing the thinking for us, learning from us and learning from itself. Irrespective of our viewpoints, AI will affect the whole of our lives. For an organisation like ICF, founded on the premise that "Jesus Christ is the Lord of all life", this raises some significant questions:-

How will our experience of work change as an increasing proportion of the 'function' of work is done for us? Will it result in greater leisure time, will it throw us all into workless poverty? Or will work itself become a much more social and community-centred experience? If so, how is the mission and calling of the church impacted by such social change? Might we become more aware of what uniquely defines us as human, thus leading to a greater spiritual openness? Or will we simply dismiss human identity as an evolutionary illusion, whose very essence is thrown into doubt through its digital replication?

This article does not answer the issues, challenges and opportunities that AI generates. But it is an area that people of faith cannot simply ignore. Indeed, virtues and beliefs might become increasingly important as this virtual world evolves, because, as my virtual self contends, the human designers of AI will unintentionally build in – and thus trigger – the amplification of their own societal biases.

That's why ICF recently acted as host to the inaugural gathering of the AI Christian Partnership (<https://aichristian.org>), a coalition of activists, developers and theologians who are engaged in this arena. It was a lively and fruitful gathering, initiating a number of emerging projects and resources to help Christians navigate this significant world. I sense that much, much more will be said on this subject over the coming years, and if the faith community is absent from those conversations it will be to our detriment. 



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