Introduction: On Religion And Algorithms

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American Religion, Volume 5, Number 1, Fall 2023, pp. 93-94 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press

DOI: https://doi.org/10.2979/amr.2023.a916423

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I am very pleased to introduce this roundtable collection of seven articles addressing AI and Algorithms. Artificial Intelligence, as our authors discuss, is polysemous; it morphs, along with attendant terms such as algorithms, to serve disparate agendas. The contributions to this issue engage the question of what AI and algorithms are imagined to be through an array of disciplinary and methodological approaches. They offer critical interventions in conversations around AI and algorithms, demonstrating how such conversations are persistently grounded in or tie back to religion and necessitate its study.

Depicting the highly variable way AI is conceptualized, Beth Singler shows in “‘Will AI Create a Religion?’: Views of the Algorithmic Forms of the Religious Life in Popular Discourse” a wide range of ideas, some opposed, some overlapping, that emerge about what AI is and what it is capable of when conceptualized as something that will or will not create a religion. The responses Singler found both on and offline do not share an understanding of what AI is or what religion is. They do not agree if so-called AI is or will be intelligent, or even if humans are intelligent. All our authors navigate this lack of coherent and shared understanding, demonstrating the utility of these terms or questioning their validity.
Damien Patrick Williams, in “Any Sufficiently Transparent Magic . . .”, challenges our key terms, arguing that so-called AI and related technologies are deliberately covered in hype and marketing to limit insight into their assumptions and operations. Victoria Lorrimar makes a related argument in “Going Beyond the Anxiety-Awe Spectrum by Putting the Human Back into Artificial Intelligence,” where she emphasizes the role of algorithmic technology in exploitative economies. Williams posits that the harms of so-called AI and other technological systems, some of which are elaborated in Lorrimar, Williams, and Sundaram, can be anticipated and curtailed by centering the expertise of marginalized people, who are familiar with the dominant logics of the macrosociety and therefore the AI.

Examining AI as an entry point into discovering dominant logics informs much of the work in this collection. In “If you like Hindutva . . . you might also like . . .’: How Facebook’s Recommendation Model reinforces Hindu Nationalism’s Casteism,” Dheepa Sundaram explores how what Facebook represents as AI-driven recommendations follow selection criteria grounded in generating engagement and revenue. The algorithmic process, presented as AI, makes recommendations that improve connections between hate groups. My own contribution, “The Darkness Inside Us: Reproductive Futurism and AI,” critiques the role of artificial intelligence as the guarantor of human futurity, using science fiction to explore intersections of gender, religion, and ecology in reproducing exploitative value systems. As with Sundaram’s findings, in Darkness the mission of the AI takes precedence over potential harm.

Holding out for the possibility of beneficial partnerships between humans and technology, Sharday Mosurinjohn and Jordan Loewen-Colón, in “The Age of (the Algorithmic) Aquarius: How AI Meets Our Esoteric Needs,” explore harmony between practices such as Tarot and Astrology and algorithm driven systems such as chatbots. The authors show us how esoteric algorithms help us to explore our values, and that, like in Williams and Cohen, people are approaching their concept of AI in an esoteric mode. Mosurinjohn and Loewen-Colón are interested in the potential for rereading engagement with algorithms in a collaborative mode, exploring how hope and fear appear in discourse around AI, and how exploration of these hopes and fears are limited when not negotiated in the supportive context of an esoteric practice. Incoherence in esotericism is rampant in “Algorithms, Conspiracies, and Cosmologies,” Jeremy Cohen’s examination of millenarian New Age movements. Cohen identifies fears and hopes for AI that reveal mechanistic conceptions of the cosmos where, echoing Williams, these terms function in magical ways, imagined as bulking out conspiratorial descriptions of how power operates in the world.

Together the entries in this roundtable do not offer singular definitions of their terms, which reflects the widespread use and misuse of AI and algorithms. Through their differences they make a polyphony, revealing the occultation of power and meaning inhabiting the intersections of religion and technology.