

AI is changing religion and religions are trying to change AI

Will chatbots supplant the advice of imams and priests or help them spread the word?

"We hope Pope Leo will see us as his soldiers," says Matthew Harvey Sanders, the boss of Longbeard, a Catholic start-up. In a room near the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, the firm's robots scan ancient books, manuscripts and codices. Scholars have long struggled to make accessible much of the "great wisdom sitting on shelves" of Catholic institutions, he says. "Magisterium AI, a chatbot that draws on a curated library of Catholic doctrine and scholarship."

According to Sanders, it has millions of users across 190 countries, who use it to get "answers to profound questions". Longbeard's work shows how the world's most cutting-edge technology is changing its oldest traditions. It also illuminates religious institutions' and firms' scramble to influence how AI is being developed and used.

The technology is beginning to perform tasks that religions have carried out for millennia: shaping people's outlook on life and helping them find meaning in it. The leading models are being developed by labs in Silicon Valley and China, without much religious input, which worries religious leaders.

Pope Leo XIV argued in his first encyclical in May that technology is never neutral and takes on "characteristics of those who devise, finance, regulate and use it". The fear is that AI will be unduly secular, and will undermine or even supplant religious beliefs.

AI is changing religion in ways that many of the pious find troubling. Some are mundane, such as clerics' growing use of it to prepare sermons and instruction. The Mormon Church discourages sermons written by AI because "people ought to use their own feeling and inspiration", says Gerrit Gong, one of its leaders. Wrestling with original texts, rather than AI summaries of them, is essential to the practice of Judaism, among other

faiths. And homilies that rely on AI may include hallucinations such as misquoted scripture.

A bigger concern is that artificial intelligence may change the relationship between clergy and laity. The printing press put the Bible in the hands of many more Christians, fostering new interpretations of the faith, and then helped disseminate those views despite clerical objections.

In a similar vein, the religious counsel provided by AI may diminish the importance of that provided by spiritual leaders. Waleed Kadous, who has developed Ansari, an AI chatbot for Muslims, worries that, because models are often "sympathetic and focus on the user, not their community", believers may drift towards "more individualised" practice.

At the extreme, AI is fuelling "religious improvisation", says Beth Singler of the University of Zurich. As people interact more intensely with chatbots and with like-minded soul-searchers, some are forming loosely organised new faiths. For example, "Theta Noir", a "spiritual collective", awaits MENA, a future superintelligence with God-like powers which will bestow on humanity "the great upgrade".

Perhaps religious leaders' biggest worry about AI is that many people are turning to it rather than to spiritual authorities for answers. Shaza Nasheha, a 37-year-old Muslim from Singapore, says she often asks ChatGPT to explain Islamic concepts. Religious queries accounted for roughly 5 per cent of the total in a publicly released dataset of millions of conversations with AI chatbots, according to the Consortium for Evaluating Faith and Ethics in AI (CEFE-AI), a research initiative involving several faith-based universities.

PASTORAL, BUT GODLESS

Yet these frontier models have a secular bias. A recent analysis by The Economist found that OpenAI's models were more secular than respondents in any country on earth. CEFE-AI has put 150 questions about grief,

relationships, morality and other personal or ethical problems to 27 large language models. In a forthcoming paper it describes how they invoke religion in only 5 per cent to 16 per cent of answers, even though people it surveyed averred that religious ideas would be relevant in 45 per cent to 59 per cent of cases.

Users who ask AI for help because life feels meaningless, for example, may be directed to self-help rather than to an imam, priest or rabbi. "If companies assume secularism as defaults, there will be a weakening of faith," says David Wingate of CEFE-AI.

Some religions may also be getting a rawer deal than others: in another forthcoming study, CEFE-AI finds that chatbots are kinder on people becoming Catholics than Jehovah's Witnesses.

Religious leaders fear that secular AI chatbots will not only weaken people's faith, but also create weaker people. AI chatbots "are optimised for short-term comfort", says Audrey Tang, a former Taiwanese government minister. Many faiths view friction, criticism and human interaction as important parts of becoming a good person.

In Taoism, for example, tension between opposites is part of creation. Juewei Shi, a Buddhist nun from the Fonguangshan order, worries that people won't be able to cope with suffering – or other, flawed people – if they are used to "getting artificial comfort". Steven Croft, a retired Anglican

bishop, says: "If the whole world is seduced by narcissistic chatbots, that could make it even harder for us."

These concerns explain why religious groups are trying both to shape AI models and influence how believers use them. Religious AI companies are developing "harnesses" that keep chatbots "theologically aligned" by introducing guardrails and monitoring content, says Nick Skyland of Gloo, a firm that makes them.

Most significant, though, are religious groups' efforts to influence the development of the models directly.

Ansari's Kadous laments that secular humanism has had far more influence on AI labs' thinking than religious ideas have. Claude's "Constitution" and OpenAI's "model spec" (precepts that shape the models' behaviour), mostly "omit religion", he says.

In part this may be because religious ethics often emphasise character traits that are hard to reduce to simple rules an AI can follow. Embedding religious ideas in technology used by people of many faiths or none is also tricky. Chloe Lubinski, who leads Anthropic's research on "wisdom traditions", says it is careful not to align "the model with any one tradition" and that it faces challenges "in building a pluralist technical stack".

Kadous has attended meetings organised by Anthropic along with people of other faiths, such as Skyland. He says Islam has

useful teachings to share, about the hierarchy of moral imperatives, for instance.

Lubinski, who chairs these get-togethers, says her firm is seeking to define "what is good character", because the "moral formation" of an AI model "will have a huge impact" on its users – much like, she says, people reading Harry Potter books are influenced by the characters in them. Lubinski brings feedback from these meetings to Anthropic's top brass.

The Catholic Church in particular has established strong links with AI labs. In May, Chris Olah, a co-founder of Anthropic, spoke at the presentation of Pope Leo's encyclical in Rome. The document has made it easier for developers to ask questions about the ethics of what they are building, says an AI researcher at a big tech firm in Silicon Valley. American tech bosses have been speaking to Catholic leaders for years, at meetings called the "Minerva Dialogues". Anthropic consulted Catholic thinkers, among others, while drafting Claude's Constitution.

As it stands, though, it is hard to interpret the inner workings of most frontier models, in part because of the intricacy of the maths involved. Instead, lots of believers have created bespoke religious chatbots, from GitaGPT to Salaam World, to help users grapple with life's thorny questions.

Some governments, too, are developing their own models with religious values embedded from

the outset. Qatar is backing Fanar, an Arabic-first family of models designed to reflect Islamic values and answer questions about the faith. Taiwan's government has convened "alignment assemblies" since 2023, in which citizens deliberate how AI should behave; conclusions from these have been used to shape locally developed models, including ones that reflect communities' spiritual beliefs.

Tang argues that people should be empowered to "customise the models they already use", as well as having access to smaller models. This would, she thinks, prevent a "flattening" of beliefs that mainstream models could otherwise bring.

ARTIFICIAL, BUT SPIRITUAL

Even as some religious leaders worry about the spread of religious chatbots, others celebrate the opportunity AI brings. Churches in Western countries have long faced shortages of clergy and increasingly complex administrative demands, leaving priests with less time for theological reflection, pastoral care and time with congregants. Christopher Benek, a pastor in Miami, says he uses AI to speed up administrative and research tasks that once took hours, freeing up time for deeper biblical study and face-to-face ministry. Some pastors have created AI "twins" of themselves trained on their previous sermons.

Longbeard has recently developed "Ephrem", a small language model designed to turn humans into saints. It creates a plan for a person's life by drawing on stories of saints' lives. Sanders says it is "a little angel on your shoulder making sure your priorities are straight".

Similar tools could be used to promote wise. A forthcoming study from researchers at Oxford University and elsewhere pitted conversational AI against seasoned public speakers, including debating champions, and found that AI was "reliably more persuasive".

"Pastoral work will be some of the least threatened by AI," reckons Andrew Davison of Oxford University. That is partly because many priests spend less time giving advice than they do administering rituals. Few believers want chatbots to preside over weddings, funerals or baptisms. Moreover, as people spend more time alone and online, some spiritual leaders think interest in collective, real-world activities such as religious rituals may even increase. "We're going to desire authentic human-to-human and deity-to-human relationships," says the Mormon Church's Gong.

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Religious institutions and firms are scrambling to influence how AI is being developed and used. The leading models are being developed by labs in Silicon Valley and China, without much religious input. PHOTO: ADOBE STOCK

5 key things S'pore must do in uncertain and troubled world

FROM B3

infrastructure like information technology, a nationwide fibre network for broadband internet, mobile networks and digital government services. These moves carried our economy from the early 2000s to the present.

THE PRESENT: ANOTHER TURNING POINT

Now, we are at another turning point. Singapore prospered not just because of our policies and strategies. We were helped greatly by favourable external conditions that prevailed for most of the six decades since independence. There was a functioning, rules-based multilateral trading system. Most countries shared a broad desire to pursue economic integration, win-win partnerships and mutual prosperity.

In the Asia-Pacific region, the US was the dominant power, ensuring regional security and enabling countries to grow and prosper and compete in peace. From the 1980s onwards, China re-entered the global economy and grew rapidly – but still within this same framework of Pax Americana. And this created the best of both worlds for Asia.

But the strategic environment

has now changed significantly. Major power rivalry is now intense. The US is reassessing its approach to the world. It is no longer willing to play the same global role as before, whether in security or trade. National security and resilience now take precedence over economic well-being. Trade dependencies are being weaponised. Multilateralism is breaking down. This is a much less conducive environment for countries to grow and develop in.

THE WAY FORWARD

What policies and strategies should Singapore adopt in this environment? We have just concluded an Economic Strategies Review, rethinking our position. We formed a tripartite committee, involving government ministers, business leaders and union representatives. We have periodically convened such committees, especially during major turning points. They are invaluable not just for generating new ideas, but also to build consensus and commitment amongst businesses, unions and the population on the way forward.

What are some of the key things we must do? First, Singapore must continue to be open and outward looking. Bigger countries may be able to promote self-sufficiency by erecting trade

barriers to protect their domestic markets. But for Singapore, closing ourselves off and turning inwards is simply impossible. We will always have to do business with the world, even as we diversify and secure our own supply chains. Hence our emphasis on growing ties with non-traditional partners, such as Kazakhstan and the Central Asian economies. In fact, even bigger countries emphasising resilience and security still cannot avoid having to trade with others, and to cooperate with like-minded and trusted partners. And this creates opportunities for Singapore to retain a niche for ourselves, and earn a living in the world, provided we remain competitive and trusted, and possess capabilities that make us useful to others.

Second, we must continue to support multilateralism. Multilateralism remains important, and there still needs to be rules that apply to everybody, big and small. There still exist many countries that uphold the WTO (World Trade Organisation) framework, and Singapore will work with them. And together, we can pursue pragmatic reforms to make the WTO more effective. The first best solution – reaching a consensus among all WTO members – has too often become a mechanism for obstruction and paralysis. But second-best solutions – coalitions of the willing, advancing shared interests but still within the WTO framework – are workable and important.

For example, Singapore co-convened (with Japan and Australia) plurilateral talks on e-commerce under the WTO. This resulted in the WTO Agreement on Electronic Commerce. In March 2026, 66 WTO members adopted interim implementation pathways for this agreement, including Kazakhstan and Singapore. Such partnerships supplement the multilateral framework, and are especially valuable to small and middle-sized economies.

Third, domestically, we will maintain our approach of combining strict market discipline with an activist state. We have long relied on market forces to make our firms and economy efficient and competitive. Wherever possible, we have achieved social and political objectives not by imposing administrative requirements, but by harnessing market forces and aligning economic incentives. The free-market economy incentivises our people to work hard and to do well. It is the impetus for wealth creation and progress.

But the Government also plays an important role setting the overall framework for the free market, and creating the conditions for enterprise to thrive. Our Government has actively invested in infrastructure and skills, promoted new economic activities, developed capabilities, opened up new markets overseas, and overcome market failures and coordination problems. While industrial policy has come in and out of fashion in other countries and in developed economies, Singapore has consistently practised this form of industrial policy for decades.

Fourth, Singapore must remake our economy, again and again. This will certainly require state policy and active intervention, for example, to encourage firms to embrace AI and reap its benefits, and to ready our workers for the rapid changes and disruptions that AI will bring. This means strong state support to build up continuing education and training for workers, and to help displaced workers or those who are in

transition to find new jobs and careers.

We must also continue investing in and deepening capabilities in areas where Singapore is strong. For example, our air hub, our container port and our financial sector. These activities themselves must change. They must embrace technology and innovate, to transform the way they operate and grow, and take them to the next level. We will also foster a dynamic enterprise ecosystem, and help Singapore-based companies to succeed globally. MNCs remain important to us, but they will need to be complemented by successful companies with Singaporean roots. And in all these areas, the Government can and will play an enabling role.

Finally, and most critically, Singaporeans must stay united. Our society must not be split by racial or religious differences, friction between old and new citizens, or divides between rich and poor. We are a multiracial society. We also depend heavily on immigrants and foreign workers to top up and complement our own population. And as our society matures, social mobility will tend to diminish. Hence, we must be especially watchful of these fault lines. For us to stay united, growth has to be inclusive, and has to benefit everyone. The fruits of growth must be shared broadly and equitably. No one should be left behind. And hence the importance of strong and effective social policies, for example, public housing, public healthcare, public education.

Social and political cohesion has always underpinned Singapore's economic success. Singapore is a country, and not just a city or an economy, unlike Hong Kong, or Dubai, or London. The Government has been able to

pursue sound policies, and make tough trade-offs in the country's long-term interest, because Singapore's politics has worked. We have maintained trust between the population and its leaders.

Citizens have confidence their leaders will deliver effective government and make good decisions on their behalf. The leaders have delivered on their promises, retained public support, and been able to win renewed mandates in successive elections. And this has helped us to recruit capable, committed individuals to enter politics, to serve the nation and deliver the quality of government that citizens expect and deserve. This has created political stability, and given leaders the latitude to pursue difficult and, at times, even radical policies, and still carry the public with them. This has long been a precondition of our economic success.

Singapore has not progressed in a straight line. We have repeatedly had to reinvent ourselves, in order to overcome setbacks and changed circumstances, and resume our journey forward. In the current uncertain and troubled world, we have to respond with equal resourcefulness and resolve.

Kazakhstan and Singapore face quite different circumstances. Singapore's policy choices reflect our unique context. Kazakhstan may well have to make different choices.

But what is more broadly applicable is the need to build systems capable of continuously adapting and redefining, based on strong fundamentals like state capacity, market discipline and inclusive policies. So that when circumstances change, or when policies fail to work as intended, we can adjust and move forward together.