Izvirni znanstveni članek/Article (1.01)
Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly 84 (2024) 4, 835—846
Besedilo prejeto/Received:08/2024; sprejeto/Accepted:12/2024
UDK/UDC: 128.5:27-1:004.89
DOI: 10.34291/BV2024/04/Platovnjak

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Artificial Intelligence and *Imago Dei*: A New Dilemma for Philosophical and Theological Anthropology

Umetna inteligenca in Imago Dei*: Nova dilema za filozofsko in teološko antropologijo*

Abstract: The advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI), with its vast applicability, has already influenced nearly every aspect of our lives, including our self-perception. At the same time, AI calls for wisdom, hope, and belief that transcends sophisticated knowledge produced by AI. The main argument in this article is an inevitable call to rediscover the essence of human nature that AI technology cannot adequately grasp. From a Christian perspective, AI challenges us to rediscover the idea that humans are created as an *imago Dei*, an image of God, where relations are an essential part of God's nature and, consequently, of human nature as well.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, anthropology, human nature, an image of God, spirituality

Povzetek: Razvoj umetne inteligence (UI) je s svojo široko uporabnostjo že vplival na skoraj vse vidike življenja, vključno z našim dojemanjem samega sebe. Hkrati UI kliče po modrosti, upanju in veri, ki presegajo sofisticirano znanje, ki ga ustvarja UI. Glavni argument v tem članku je neizogiben poziv k ponovnemu odkrivanju bistva človeške narave, ki ga tehnologija UI ne more ustrezno zajeti. S krščanske perspektive nas UI izziva, da ponovno odkrijemo idejo, da je človek ustvarjen kot *imago Dei*, Božja podoba, kjer so odnosi bistveni del Božje narave in posledično tudi človeške.

Ključne besede: umetna inteligenca, antropologija, človeška narava, Božja podoba, duhovnost

1. Introduction

Our contemporary cultural landscape is in many ways reminiscent of Socrates' dialoguing with the sophists.[1] The Oracle of Delphi deemed Socrates the wisest

[1] The article was written as part of the research program "P6-0269 Religion, Ethics, Education, and Challenges of Modern Society" supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

man for his recognition of his own ignorance. "I do not think I know what I do not know." (Plato 2002, 26) This was not the case for the sophists, who thought they knew something, whereas, in reality, they did not. In Socrates' context, the sophists were considerable celebrities, active in public affairs, who proved themselves as professional educators offering instructions in many subjects, especially in public speaking and the successful conduct of life. While the sophists believed they possessed knowledge, Socrates confessed he was in search of and in love with wisdom.

The new sophists of our age are not human philosophers but advocates of Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems and machines, which can apparently provide us limitless access to information and instructions at every step of our existence. No doubt, AI advancements rapidly and profoundly influence our way of thinking, acting, and believing, both on the personal and social levels, and trigger profound unease about the future.

The reality is that there is no definitive answer to what our future with AI will look like. This struggle underscores the need for wisdom, hope, and belief that will transcend sophisticated knowledge produced by AI; it calls for a deeper and more nuanced understanding that incorporates the essence of human nature, including its spiritual dimension. Thus, AI technological advancement invites us to rediscover human nature, the purpose of life, and the meaning of human flourishing. Above all, AI challenges us to move from a life of isolation and self-centeredness to a life based on genuine relations and connections with myself, others, nature, and the divine. From a Christian perspective, it challenges us to rediscover the idea that humans are created as an *imago Dei*, an image of God, where relations are an essential part of God's nature (Pevec Rozman 2021, 840).

2. Within an AI Cultural Framework

The 21st century is not the first time that philosophers and theologians have been challenged to deepen and rethink their anthropological statements. Copernicus's heliocentric model challenged the geocentric worldview, as well as the place of humanity and the divine in the universe (Westman 2011, 1–17). Similarly, Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection questioned the static, divine creation of species, proposing instead a dynamic, interconnected biological history. These two and many other paradigms shift initially faced resistance, as they seemed to undermine established theological and philosophical principles. This is the point where it is crucial to distinguish between the personality of the scientist and the personality of the ideologist hiding behind the scientist. "Some scientists have a gift for masking their unscientific ideology with a scientific façade." (Verschuuren 2019, xiii) Not paying enough attention to this distinction, one can easily accept and confuse the facts based on science with the scientist's worldview. Thus, it is reasonable to question the worldview of scientists because they are not scientific theories that can be tested in science. Their worldviews are beyond scientific

methodology. Without paying attention to this distinction, one can uncritically accept the claim that the Catholic Church holds an anti-science position or that AI is entirely against the spiritual aspect of human existence.

How can these two examples, taken from the Western history of science, help us confront the overarching presence of AI in our time? There is no doubt that AI already influences nearly every aspect of human life, including work, interpersonal relationships, education, mental health, social norms, cultural practices, and beliefs, and leaving us uncertain about our future. With just a few clicks, AI can deliver desired answers within seconds. These answers can be intricate and multifaceted, drawing on vast amounts of information the human brain cannot feasibly process within a reasonable time frame. Historically, access to information was a privilege afforded by education; in contemporary times, the combination of internet connectivity and AI provides an overwhelming volume of information at every turn, surpassing the brain's capacity for adequate comprehension and evaluation.

The opportunities for the application of AI appear almost limitless. Current trends in mental healthcare reveal AI's transformative potential, such as the early detection of mental health disorders, personalized treatment plans, and AI-driven virtual therapists (Olawade 2024, 1). The same AI technology challenges the boundary between life and death. AI systems like Thanabots or Deadbots recreate deceased individuals and allow interactions with them. Even though this might be very beneficial in the initial process of grieving, the AI application transforms our perception of death, alters the experience of the finitude of human life, and creates the possibility of a 'postmortal society' where biological death is no longer an inevitable end. Thus, AI acts as a mediator between life, death, and the human being, allowing a new form of communication with the deceased (Reséndiz 2024). These two examples, with many other AI applications, bring forth many ethical, philosophical, and theological challenges that transcend our present reflections on human existence. Questions of data privacy, ethical and emotional questions about its authenticity, purpose of recreation, AI autonomous decision-making process, as well as ethical vulnerability, transparency, and the democratization of these technologies, challenge fundamental notions of human existence.

Knowing that AI can elaborate only on data that already exists in digital form, the question arises about data that has not yet been digitalized. In addition, what are the rights and duties of the owners of this data (Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook)? The increasing implementation of AI technologies is building so-called data capitalism, giving big companies more power that can be used for the augmentation of their initial capital. At the same time, the everyday person, minorities, the poor and excluded are left out. Like capitalism, data capitalism is rooted in oppression and reinforces the dynamics of power and profits.

Shall we exclude cultural diversities and peculiarities, popular wisdom, and unspoken values that shape societies and individuals? What about entire nations and minority groups who cannot actively participate or are excluded from active participation in the creation of digital data? Hamilton Mann claims that AI presents

a new homogenization of the world based on sophisticated algorithms designed to optimize efficiency and certain preferences. "While AI has the potential to enrich and diversify our cultural landscape, it is also steering us toward a more monolithic and less diverse world." (Mann 2024)

AI homogenization creates new forms of cultural discrimination, reinforces biases (Hercheui 2022), and perpetuates societal prejudices, leaving out the less popular voices and forms of expression, minorities, and especially those who have nothing to say in writing the new AI algorithms. So-called minority data representation is becoming a significant concern in the field of AI, impoverishing our cultural and intellectual landscapes, diminishing the potential for breakthrough ideas, and creating unique and unconventional perspectives way beyond the popular average. Dealing with the average reduces the probability of an exceptional and groundbreaking outcome. "The integrity of the nuanced and often unpredictable nature of human creativity is at stake." (Hamilton 2024) If this is the case, AI should make us realize our own importance as humans, not so much as individuals, but much more as social beings whose essence grows and reaches its fulfilment through connections and relations.

3. Disconnection from the Body, Earth, Others, God, and the Decision-Making Process

While acknowledging the numerous advantages and benefits that AI brings to our lives, it simultaneously raises profound philosophical concerns. Are we grappling with questions rooted in Cartesian dualism? René Descartes (1596–1650) posited that human reality comprises two fundamentally distinct substances: the non-physical mind, characterized by thought and consciousness, and the physical body, characterized by spatial extension and mechanical properties. Descartes' fascination with the capabilities of the human mind led him to struggle with appropriately situating the human body. Thus, his famous statement: "/…/ nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing. /…/ and not an extended thing /…/ [since] I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and I can exist without it." (Descartes 1993, 51)

Descartes, often regarded as the father of Modernity, significantly influenced Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in his defining Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another." (Kant 1983, 41) Kant's definition reflects Descartes' emphasis on human reason as the fundamental aspect of human nature, dispelling the darkness of unenlightened ages and empowering humans to act maturely by following the universal categorical imperatives.

The last two centuries have witnessed remarkable scientific discoveries,

technological advancements, and two World Wars, including atomic bombs. Advanced technology has opened new dimensions of the universe, allowing exploration not solely from Earth but from the universe itself. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt describes the mixed feelings of triumph and relief when the first man-made object was launched into the universe in 1957. People felt relieved at taking the first "step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth" (Arendt 2018, 1). So, technology, as a product of human reasoning and creativity, promises that humanity may not remain bound to Earth indefinitely.

As we struggle to exist within our material bodies and seek to transcend earthly boundaries, AI now presents us with a new challenge: relinquishing reasoning, a unique feature of human nature, to algorithms embedded in cyborgs or other machines responsible for making life decisions. Overwhelmed by Kant's enlightened maturity and the secularization of the modern age, which diverts us from religion and God, AI seems an inevitable next step—potentially leading us to abandon our capacity and responsibility for decision-making, particularly moral choices, thereby undermining a pivotal aspect of our humanity (Horvat, Roszak and Taylor 2022).

These disconnection forms should not be taken as something organic and natural. In his reflections, Joseph Wilson argues that "AI /…/ is not a technical thing, a scientific thing. It's not even a scientific concept, because nobody can really define it. It keeps changing over time. It's a cultural thing, a social concept. It's a cultural fact, not a scientific fact." (Wilson 2024). Wilson further explains that some scientists immersed in this AI culture often forget that the computer functioning as a brain is merely a metaphor, not reality. AI culture tries to persuade people that they are conversing with thinking entities when interacting with AI devices. The more these devices resemble humans, the more convincingly we attribute human-like qualities to them. This phenomenon, known as pareidolia, is the tendency to perceive specific, meaningful images in random patterns, akin to the Rorschach inkblot test. For instance, we often perceive shapes, objects, or scenery in clouds or rocks. Following this logic, AI culture encourages us to perceive AI devices as 'humans', attributing agency, emotions, and the capacity to think, even though they are not technically alive. Wilson contends that the ingrained notion of a Cartesian split between mind and body allows some transhumanists to envision uploading their minds onto computers while maintaining their essential sentience; they consider human intelligence as merely information processing that can be separated from the body. "That is a cultural quirk of the West," Wilson makes his point (Wilson 2024).

4. AI and Humans from a Transcendental Perspective

In contemporary times, two parallel dynamics are observable: on the one hand, there is a movement away from the body and the earth, which implicitly encompasses a movement away from other people; on the other hand, there is an endeavour to render the human environment and human life artificial by severing the ties that connect humanity to nature (Kraner 2024). Hannah Arendt reflects that the same desire to

escape earthly imprisonment also inspires our attempts to create life in a test tube, aiming at the perfect human. This desire reflects an aspiration to transcend the human condition, a rebellion against the given human existence, and a pursuit to replace this created world with something artificial, non-organic, and man-made. Do we genuinely wish to employ new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction? This question cannot be answered by science alone or relegated to professional scientists (Arendt 2018, 2–3). It is a fundamental question that necessitates the inclusion of political, ethical, philosophical, and theological considerations regarding our future.

Setting aside the challenging aspects, the current AI culture presents a unique opportunity to redefine the essence of what it means to be human. As intelligent beings endowed with bodies, cells, and emotions—including fears, loneliness, pain, suffering, and death—humans possess the capacity to connect with entities and phenomena that transcend mere analytical perception. Intelligence, for instance, can encompass irrational activities such as shamanism, intuition, foresight, hope, prophecy, and beliefs—domains that extend beyond pure information processing, which characterizes AI devices. Additionally, human emotions like love, sympathy, empathy, fear, anxiety, and the unceasing quest for meaning in life elude the capabilities of AI information processing alone. Human uniqueness, self-reflection, dignity, freedom and free will, personal relationships, and mysteries of human life and death have intrigued human minds and spirits from the dawn of human existence. It is, therefore, impossible, if not irresponsible, to reduce all these aspects of human existence to mere data analysis. Let us not forget that the technical man in awe with the AI technology remains a spiritual man.

From the perspective of Christian philosophy and theology, AI compels us to reevaluate a human's position in front of a transcendental God, a role seemingly supplanted by man-made AI. This fundamental anthropological question, as the cornerstone of Christian traditions, urgently requires rediscovery. The concept of *imago Dei*—that humans are created in the image of God—is a foundational source for deeper reflection.

5. In What Way Can AI Not Be a Better *Imago Dei* than a Human Being?

The concept of human beings as *imago Dei* (image of God) (Genesis 1:26-27; 5:1-3; 9:6) is central to the biblical revelation of human nature and to biblical anthropology, which seeks to define what it means to be human. As the International Theological Commission (2004, 7) states, "the mystery of man cannot be grasped apart from the mystery of God".

In recent decades, the notion that AI could reflect or represent a kind of *imago Dei* has emerged as a provocative idea, opening up new dialogues between philosophy, theology and digital technology. Scholars such as Foerst (1998), Jackelén (2002) and Herzfeld (2002a; 2002b) have explored this concept extensively. However, it is important to further explore why AI cannot embody the imago Dei more fully than humans.

5.1 Human Intellectual Capacity

Influenced by Aristotelian philosophy, many interpreters of Genesis (1:26-27) have identified the rational and cognitive abilities of human beings as the key aspects that reveal their likeness to God. In the past, humans were considered the most rational creatures in the world (Pevec Rozman 2024, 7). However, today's AI systems - from simple algorithms to sophisticated machine learning and neural networks—often surpass these human abilities (Oeming 2022).

5.2 Human Creativity

The uniqueness of human beings and their likeness to God is particularly evident in human creativity. The Second Vatican Council (Gaudium et Spes 34) emphasizes that human action, especially creative action, reflects God's creativity, which is both its origin and its model. While AI is also capable of generating creative outputs in various fields such as music, art, literature and technology (Cheng 2022), it works primarily on the basis of pre-existing patterns and data. As a result, the 'creativity' of AI is often limited by the information and algorithms it relies on. Despite its technical sophistication, AI's inability to experience emotions often means that it lacks the depth that characterizes human creativity (Farina et al. 2024). The true value of AI to the creative process is not to replace human creativity, but to complement and augment it. Properly understanding and fostering this synergy will be critical to the advancement of art, technology, innovation, science and even theology.

5.3 Human Autonomy and Independence

The God-likeness and uniqueness of human beings is also reflected in their freedom, especially in their autonomy and independence. Human beings possess free will, enabling them to make morally and ethically complex decisions. Furthermore, their independence allows them to go beyond mere reactions to external stimuli. This autonomy is the basis for human moral responsibility, creativity and innovation (Lah 2003, 268–272).

While advanced autonomous AI systems exhibit a degree of 'freedom' by operating without direct human control, this is distinctly different from human moral autonomy. Some researchers are working on ethical algorithms to enable robots to make moral decisions in certain situations. Although these algorithms are not equivalent to human moral autonomy, they reflect an attempt to embed basic values into AI behaviour (Etzioni and Etzioni 2016). Formosa (2021) emphasizes that the integration of AI into society must be carefully considered in order to preserve and respect human autonomy and ensure that it enhances, rather than impairs, the free agency and dignity of humans.

5.4 Human Management and Stewardship of the Visible World

As bearers of God's image, humans have a unique role in the universe: they are to participate in God's stewardship and management of the visible creation (Ang 2024). This role involves cooperation with and submission to God's ordering of the world.

The International Theological Commission (2004, 61) emphasizes that humans fulfil this responsibility by "gaining scientific understanding of the universe, by caring responsibly for the natural world (including animals and the environment), and by guarding their own biological integrity".

The development of AI and its growing impact on various aspects of society raises important questions about its potential ability to govern and manage the world. Philosopher Nick Bostrom (2014) sees the realistic possibility of AI reaching a super human level of intelligence in the future, referred to as artificial superintelligence (ASI). Unlike humans, who are limited in their capacity for cognition due to the physical limitations of their brains and the inevitability of death, machines are not subject to these limitations. As a result, ASI could potentially become more intelligent than any individual human and even surpass the collective intelligence of humanity, ultimately surpassing human understanding.

Nick Bostrom (2014, 181) outlines three possible operative roles for ASI: as oracle, genie and sovereign. As an oracle, ASI would answer our questions; as a genie, it would carry out our orders; and as a sovereign, it would govern the world and be tasked with achieving broad and long-term goals. This sovereign role mirrors the role ascribed to God in monotheistic religions and raises important questions about human exceptionalism as imago Dei. If ASI could potentially govern the world more effectively than humans, it could be argued that ASI could represent the imago Dei to an even greater degree.

However, as Marius Dorobantu (2022, 186–188) argues, we must recognize that the human vocation to steward creation goes beyond mere temporal stewardship to include a spiritual dimension. Humans are not only called to steward creation in a temporal sense, but are entrusted with the higher task of leading creation to its ultimate spiritualization (Rom 8:18-23). Dorobantu also emphasizes that the computerization of matter made possible by AI is fundamentally different from the spiritualization described in Christian theology. While both information and spirit are immaterial, the Christian concept of spirit is much broader and includes the transcendent dimension of reality. Furthermore, Christian theology connects the spiritualization of matter to the loving relationship between God and human beings, which implies the ultimate transparency between the Creator and creation. Without the love of God, any attempt to spiritualize matter has no real content and meaning.

A theology of the *imago Dei* should therefore emphasize the spiritual dimension of our governance and stewardship and not only focus on the historical aspect in which AI might actually surpass us. AI, however advanced it may be, will never be able to replace humanity's mystical role in the world. Bearing the image of God is not just about acting as a representative of God in a particular historical moment; it involves an ongoing, authentic love relationship between humans and the Creator in the world. This understanding leads to a relational interpretation of the imago Dei, in which the image of God is deeply rooted in this divine-human relationship (Dorobantu 2022, 188).

5.5 Human Vulnerability and Our Relationship with God and Others

Human God-likeness is particularly evident in our relationships with others and with God (Stegu 2023).[2] The documents of the Second Vatican Council, in particular *Gaudium et Spes* (24), emphasize that every person is created as a unity of body and spirit in the image of God for personal communion with Him. The absolute openness of Jesus and his devotion to the Father show in a special way that the true identity of human beings arises from their ability to enter into a relationship with the Other (Ratzinger 1968, 140–144). A human person fully lives out his or her identity and his or her existence to the full in a historical relationship that is founded in the sonship of God and that represents the deepest fulfilment of their "being-in-itself" through "being-for-the-other" (Roszak 2024). This relational identity also enables the individual to overcome the conflicts between individuality and relationality. To the extent that a person increasingly discovers the sonship inherent in their being, their capacity for free choice and their recognition of their own personhood as a gift and calling also grows (Lah 2003, 270).

As beings created in the image of God, humans possess autonomy, i.e. they have their own stability, independence and ability to make decisions for themselves. At the same time, they have the ability to transcend themselves in relationships by freely giving their love to others and forming deep connections and a life together. Through their work and creativity, people contribute to society and help shape culture and transform the world. However, this journey can sometimes lead to a loss of personal identity or the risk of being controlled by external forces or dependencies. The way to guard oneself from these risks is to have a personal relationship with God that allows for true self-discovery and preserves personal integrity. Only when the individual realizes himself in the infinite, completely free and loving relationship with God can he become fully who he is meant to be (272).

If our relationships are the best reflection of God, we need to consider whether the development of AI could challenge this unique aspect of our humanity (Bilagher 2022). What might happen if machines become capable of forming personal relationships? We already converse with chatbots, and it is conceivable that in the future we might interact with machines as naturally as we do with other humans. However, as Dorobantu (2022, 189–190) notes, AI would approach these interactions in a distinctly nonhuman way. When AI makes mistakes, they are not the same mistakes that a human would make. Even if artificial beings were to develop consciousness and subjective experiences, these would differ from human experiences due to their different embodiment. Robots would have different sensory perceptions, different access to memory, different internal states and a different relationship to time. Their needs would also be different, which would affect their interests and motivations. Even if they reached the level of human capabilities, they would still be fundamentally dissimilar to humans. Therefore, when the theology of the imago Dei emphasizes human kinship, it refers to a likeness to God that robots can never fully realize.

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[2] In other words: Man's 'Godlikeness' is his ability to (be) dialogue (Skralovnik 2021, 124).

Similarly, our ability to enter into relationships is closely linked to our anthropological vulnerability. We form relationships because we are vulnerable and mortal, and because we inherently need one another (Globokar 2022, 8). An artificial being that is practically 'invulnerable' and theoretically 'immortal' cannot enter into relationships in the same way as humans because it lacks the capacity for voluntary vulnerability that is essential for deep and meaningful connections. Humans do not reflect God's image when they are powerful and unbreakable, but when they are loving and vulnerable (Dorobantu 2022, 191–192).

It is also unlikely that AI can build human-like relationships due to its hyper-rational nature. An artificial being that makes decisions based solely on cold calculations of the best possible outcome is unlikely to engage in the risky and irrational behaviours that characterize human relationships (Šegula 2021, 922–923). Humans seek relationships not because of perfection, but because of our imperfections and our deep desire for a completeness that we cannot achieve on our own. This drive for connection comes from a place deeper than our rational mind. A completely rational being would not behave in this way. Experiences such as falling in love, creating art and exploring spirituality —although seemingly irrational—add beauty and fulfilment to life. In this sense, the development of AI is a blessing for the theology of the imago Dei because it highlights and helps us appreciate the unique qualities that set us apart from machines. Compared to AI, we may seem irrational and outdated, but it is precisely our physical and cognitive limitations that allow us to form loving and authentic relationships, thereby revealing and developing our likeness to God. Our limitations are just as significant as our strengths (Dorobantu 2022, 192–193).

6. Conclusion

Rapid advancements in AI bring us to a new crossroads. AI's potential challenges not only our cognitive abilities but also our understanding of what it means to be human. Just as Copernicus and Darwin's theories compelled us to reevaluate our place in the universe, AI now pushes us to reconsider the essence of human nature, including our spiritual dimensions and our relationship with the divine. While AI can replicate and even surpass certain human intellectual and creative capacities, it cannot express the fullness of what it means to be created in the image of God. This image includes autonomy, creativity, emotional depth, and profound connections we create with ourselves, others, the earth, and the divine. These qualities cannot be reduced to mere data processing or algorithmic patterns.

In addition, the uniqueness of human beings lies in our capacity to love and be loved, self-awareness, compassion, and ability to deal with mysteries that cannot be quantified but only explored. Finally, human existence is so complex that it cannot be grasped with concepts; it must be experienced and lived. Socrates and other philosophers like him, were aware that what really matters is exploring, experiencing, being aware of boundaries, and following the most important principles. These activities are much more than simply knowing or having a certain conceptual understanding, typical of Sophists who believed to know but did not.

Moreover, humans' role as stewards of creation, as envisioned in the biblical concept of imago Dei, also includes a spiritual responsibility. While AI may achieve superintelligence, its role as a manager, governor, or oracle cannot replace the human vocation to elevate creation toward its ultimate spiritualization, i.e., communion with a loving God. This communion integrates all aspects of human existence, including suffering, pain, and death (Jerebic, Bošnjaković and Jerebic 2023, 361–362). Replacing a loving God with a human-made AI, even though superintelligent, leads us further away from our bodies, the earth, and genuine relationships towards disconnection, isolation, and self-centeredness.

AI should complement and extend our capabilities while keeping us connected to the core of our humanity. AI technology challenges us to rediscover and reaffirm the sacredness of human life, our connections with others, and our relationship with the divine. Prioritizing these connections ensures that AI advancements enrich human existence rather than diminish it. As advanced as technology can be, it cannot grasp the depth of our humanity, which reflects the image of God.

Abbreviations

AI – Artificial intelligence.
ASI – Artificial superintelligence.

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