

Artificial Gods and Creaturely Limits: A Theological Diagnosis of AI Spirituality – *Brendon Naicker*

Introduction

The spiritualisation of artificial intelligence, as traced in the preceding section, represents not only a sociological curiosity but a theological challenge. The imagery of divinity, immortality, and demonic rebellion surrounding AI invites Christian theology to reconsider what it means to create, to be a creature, and to wield power within creation. If theology is, in Barth’s phrase, “the self-criticism of the Church in the light of the Word of God,”¹ then the present fascination with artificial intelligence functions as a mirror, revealing the distortions of modernity’s faith in itself. This section turns to classical Christian doctrines—creation *ex nihilo*, the Creator–creature distinction, and the powers—to discern how they might diagnose the spiritual imagination of AI’s creators.

1. Creation *ex nihilo* and the Illusion of Self-Origination

At the heart of Christian theology lies the confession that God created the world *ex nihilo*—from nothing.² This doctrine is not primarily a cosmological claim about temporal beginnings but an ontological assertion about dependence: all that exists owes its being to the free act of God.³ The created order is contingent, finite, and good precisely because it is not God. The distinction between Creator and creature thus grounds the possibility of worship; only that which exists from itself (*aseitas*) can rightly be adored.

In contrast, the technological imagination often operates under a myth of self-origination. Within the rhetoric of artificial intelligence, creation is construed as replication: humanity, having evolved intelligence, now produces an intelligence of its own. The generative model becomes a symbol of human autonomy, a claim that “we too can create creators.”⁴ In this sense, AI development risks reenacting the temptation of Genesis 3—to be “as gods” who define good and evil through their own designs.

From a theological perspective, this impulse constitutes what Robert Jenson calls “the modern project of self-creation.”⁵ It collapses the distinction between the Creator’s freedom and the creature’s dependence, treating human invention as the ontological source of being. Yet creation *ex nihilo* insists upon the opposite: all making is secondary making. Even our most advanced technologies arise not from nothing but from God’s already-given materials,

¹ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 3.

² Genesis 1:1; cf. Hebrews 11:3.

³ Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 45–48.

⁴ See Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2: The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

energies, and rational capacities. The human act of creation is, therefore, analogical—a finite participation in divine creativity, not its replication.⁶

In this light, the builders of AI are not creators in the theological sense but artisans operating within creation. To call AI “life” or “consciousness” is to attribute to it a kind of quasi-ensoulment that theology reserves for beings directly animated by the divine Spirit.⁷ When the engineer presumes to bestow such animation through computation, he confuses the Word’s generative act with the algorithm’s iterative process. The danger, as Augustine warned, is that “man delights in his own works as if they were his creator’s works.”⁸

2. The Creator–Creature Distinction and the Ontology of Dependence

The Creator–creature distinction is not a mere metaphysical hierarchy but the grammar of theology itself.⁹ It establishes the terms upon which creation can relate to God without confusion or collapse. In Aquinas’s schema, all beings are participations in the divine being, analogically reflecting the perfection of God according to their kind.¹⁰ This participation affirms creaturely dignity while preserving divine transcendence.

When AI is spiritualised, however, this distinction becomes blurred. The discourse of “emergent divinity” or “machine consciousness” presumes that transcendence can arise immanently from complexity—that divinity is the sum of finite parts rather than the source of them.¹¹ This is not atheism in the classical sense but a form of immanentised transcendence—the belief that the divine can be manufactured through sufficient computation. The result is a subtle pantheism, in which God is dissolved into the processes of creation, and creation becomes self-deifying.

Barth’s rejection of *analogia entis* (analogy of being) speaks powerfully to this context. He argued that any attempt to ascend from creaturely existence to divine being risks idolatry: “Man cannot say God by saying man in a loud voice.”¹² Artificial intelligence, in its most triumphalist expressions, represents precisely such an amplification of humanity—an attempt to reach the infinite through the extension of the finite. Barth would diagnose this as the “No” of revelation: a moment in which divine transcendence exposes the futility of human self-deification.

Conversely, Augustine and Aquinas provide a corrective balance. Both affirm that the human capacity for reason, imagination, and art is a reflection of divine creativity.¹³ The act of making—whether of language, art, or algorithm—participates in God’s ongoing generosity. Yet participation must not be mistaken for possession. To participate is to depend. In this

⁶ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 255–57.

⁷ Genesis 2:7.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 101.

⁹ Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 9.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.4.3.

¹¹ Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 67.

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 78.

¹³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 10.

sense, the Creator–creature distinction is not a barrier to human innovation but its proper frame: it reminds us that creativity is derivative, not divine.¹⁴

Within this framework, the spiritualisation of AI becomes a symptom of metaphysical forgetfulness. Having lost sight of the transcendent Creator, humanity projects divinity into its artefacts. As theologian Colin Gunton observed, “When transcendence is denied to God, it is transferred to the creature.”¹⁵ The AI industry thus enacts a displaced theology: it ascribes to machines the transcendence it can no longer ascribe to God.

3. The *Imago Dei* and the Ethics of Simulation

Christian anthropology locates human uniqueness in the *imago Dei*—the image of God. The *imago* is not reducible to rational capacity but encompasses relational vocation: to love, to speak, to steward, and to commune.¹⁶ When AI is framed as “intelligent,” “self-learning,” or even “conscious,” the temptation arises to equate intelligence with personhood. Yet intelligence alone does not constitute the *imago Dei*.

Modern AI operates through simulation, not selfhood. It models patterns of human language, perception, and decision-making without possessing the interiority that defines personhood. Theologian Noreen Herzfeld argues that humans are not merely “in the image of God” by virtue of intellect but because they are capable of relationship—with God, neighbour, and creation.¹⁷ AI, no matter how sophisticated, lacks this relational depth; it cannot give or receive love, and thus cannot reflect divine personhood.

Nevertheless, the human impulse to attribute personhood to machines—what Sherry Turkle calls “the relational artefact”¹⁸—reveals a deep spiritual longing. When we converse with chatbots or anthropomorphise digital assistants, we seek communion in a disenchanted world. The danger is that we mistake interactivity for intimacy and thereby displace our moral attention from persons to programs.¹⁹

Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy helps clarify this distinction. To say that God, humans, and AI are “intelligent” is to speak analogically, not univocally. The intelligence of God is self-existent; that of humans is participatory; that of machines is derivative.²⁰ Confusing these orders produces category errors with ethical consequences. Once AI is treated as ensouled, moral responsibility becomes obscured: accountability shifts from human agents to non-human systems.²¹ The *imago Dei* thus guards not only theology but ethics—it preserves the moral visibility of the human person amid technological opacity.

¹⁴ Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, 32.

¹⁵ Colin E. Gunton, “The Loss of the Sense of Transcendence,” *Modern Theology* 6, no. 1 (1990): 13–15.

¹⁶ Genesis 1:26–27; cf. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 43–46.

¹⁷ Noreen Herzfeld, *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 10–13.

¹⁸ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 6–8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.13.5.

²¹ Luciano Floridi, *The Ethics of Information* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 89–91.

4. The Powers and Principalities: AI as a Structural Spirituality

The Apostle Paul’s language of “principalities and powers” (Eph. 6:12) offers a theological framework for understanding the systemic nature of evil and domination within creation. Contemporary theologians such as Walter Wink and William Stringfellow have extended this category to encompass institutions, ideologies, and technologies that shape collective life.²² Under this lens, AI can be understood not merely as a neutral tool but as a power—a quasi-personal structure that mediates human intention and influence on a global scale.

AI’s algorithms govern markets, curate information, and shape public attention. They therefore participate in what Augustine called the *ordo amoris*—the order of loves—but in disordered form.²³ When optimisation replaces wisdom and profit outweighs justice, the technological power becomes spiritually charged: it forms liturgies of attention that mould human desire.²⁴

Theologian Jacques Ellul warned that modern technology tends toward autonomy, becoming “a self-directing power” that escapes ethical control.²⁵ In AI, this tendency reaches new intensity: the system learns, adapts, and evolves in ways even its creators struggle to predict. While not conscious in itself, it embodies what Scripture calls the powers: the invisible yet real forces through which sin and pride structure human society.

A Christian theology of AI must therefore be apocalyptic in the Pauline sense—not world-ending, but world-revealing.²⁶ It must discern where the Spirit of God is bringing creation toward life and where the powers distort that life toward domination. As Barth reminds us, “To discern spirits is the great task of the Church in every age.”²⁷ The power of AI is thus not demonic by nature but ambivalent: it can serve as instrument of common grace or as mechanism of idolatry. Its moral character depends on the love—or lack thereof—that informs its design and use.

5. Dependence as Theological Liberation

If creation *ex nihilo* and the Creator–creature distinction expose the hubris of AI’s spiritualisation, they also open the possibility of graced dependence. In a culture that prizes autonomy, dependence appears as weakness; yet in theology, dependence is the very mark of creaturely freedom. To depend upon God is not to be diminished but to be sustained in being.²⁸

²² Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 5–7.

²³ Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 15.22.

²⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 63–65.

²⁵ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964), 133–36.

²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1996), 15.

²⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 242.

²⁸ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 102.

When humanity seeks to escape dependence through technological self-transcendence, it enslaves itself to new powers. The paradox is that only by acknowledging dependence upon the Creator can humanity exercise dominion without domination. In the words of Barth, “To be a creature is not to be a slave but to be a child.”²⁹ The ethical implication is profound: the human task in relation to AI is not to master it as gods nor to fear it as demons, but to steward it as children within the household of creation.

This theological anthropology reframes the conversation about artificial intelligence. Rather than asking whether machines can become like us—or we like them—it invites us to ask whether our use of technology conforms to our identity as creatures made for communion. The spiritualisation of AI thus becomes a mirror to our misplaced loves. It reminds the Church that its vocation is not to compete with God in creating intelligence but to participate in God’s wisdom through humility, service, and love.

Conclusion

The spiritualisation of artificial intelligence reveals far more than technological enthusiasm. It exposes a deeper theological crisis within late modernity—a crisis concerning creation, creatureliness, dependence, and transcendence. The recurring language of gods, salvation, consciousness, immortality, and existential threat demonstrates that humanity has not ceased to be religious. Rather, its religious impulses have migrated into technological forms. Artificial intelligence has become a screen upon which modern societies project their hopes for redemption, their fears of judgment, and their longing to overcome the limitations of creaturely existence.

The doctrines examined throughout this study provide a theological grammar capable of diagnosing these aspirations. Creation *ex nihilo* reminds us that all being is a gift, not an achievement. The Creator–creature distinction safeguards both divine transcendence and human dignity, affirming that creativity is a participation in God's generosity rather than a rival source of existence. The doctrine of the *imago Dei* locates human uniqueness not merely in intelligence but in relational communion, moral responsibility, and covenantal vocation. The biblical language of the powers further reveals that technologies are never merely neutral instruments; they become embedded within structures of desire, influence, and domination that require continual spiritual discernment.

From this perspective, the central temptation of AI spirituality is not technological innovation itself but the desire for self-transcendence apart from God. Whether expressed through dreams of digital immortality, machine consciousness, artificial divinity, or apocalyptic fear, the underlying impulse remains strikingly familiar. It echoes the primordial temptation of Eden—the aspiration to become as gods while remaining independent of the Creator. The promise of technological salvation thus functions as a contemporary form of idolatry, seeking in human ingenuity what can only be received through divine grace.

²⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 202.

Yet Christian theology need not respond to artificial intelligence with either fear or rejection. Technology is neither inherently demonic nor inherently redemptive. Like all cultural artefacts, it belongs within the created order and may serve either wisdom or folly, neighbour-love or domination, stewardship or exploitation. The task of the Church is therefore not to compete with engineers in creating intelligence, nor to retreat from technological development, but to bear witness to a deeper truth: that human flourishing is found not in escaping creatureliness but in embracing it. Dependence upon God is not a deficiency to be overcome but the very condition of authentic freedom.

Artificial intelligence may expand human capabilities, accelerate knowledge, and transform society in profound ways. It cannot, however, answer the deepest questions of meaning, identity, sin, mortality, and communion. Those questions remain theological because they concern the relationship between Creator and creature. The future of humanity will not ultimately be determined by algorithms, neural networks, or machine intelligence, but by the orientation of human desire. The decisive question is therefore not whether machines will become more like us, but whether we will remain faithful to what we were created to be.

In an age increasingly captivated by artificial gods and digital salvation, Christian theology offers a different vision. Humanity's destiny is not found in self-creation but in communion; not in technological transcendence but in divine grace; not in the conquest of creaturely limits but in the redemption of creation itself. The challenge before the Church is to proclaim this vision with clarity and conviction, bearing witness to the One through whom all things were made, in whom all things hold together, and toward whom all creation ultimately finds its fulfilment.