

A Constructive Theological Response: Redeeming the Technological Imagination – *Brendon Naicker*

Introduction

Artificial intelligence has emerged as one of the defining technologies of the modern age, shaping communication, economics, medicine, education, governance, and human relationships at an unprecedented scale. As its capabilities continue to expand, discussions surrounding AI often oscillate between two extremes. On one side stand the prophets of technological salvation, who envision artificial intelligence as the key to overcoming humanity's limitations and ushering in a new era of progress. On the other stand the prophets of technological doom, who fear that AI will undermine human dignity, erode freedom, and ultimately threaten civilisation itself. Between these competing visions, the Church is confronted with a pressing question: how should Christians faithfully respond to artificial intelligence?

The preceding studies have argued that contemporary AI discourse is deeply theological in character. The language of divinity, immortality, consciousness, singularity, and transcendence reveals that artificial intelligence has become a repository for humanity's spiritual longings. Furthermore, these aspirations often distort foundational Christian doctrines by collapsing the distinction between Creator and creature, reducing personhood to cognition, and reimagining salvation in technological rather than theological terms. Yet critique alone is insufficient. If theology is to speak meaningfully into the age of artificial intelligence, it must move beyond diagnosis toward construction. The task is not merely to identify what is wrong with the spiritualisation of AI, but to articulate what a faithful, hopeful, and constructive Christian engagement with technology might look like.

Such an engagement must begin with the recognition that technology is neither inherently sacred nor inherently profane. Artificial intelligence is not a rival deity to be worshipped, nor is it a demonic force to be feared. Like all human cultural activity, it exists within the sphere of creation and therefore participates in both the possibilities and limitations of creaturely existence. The question is not whether technology should exist, but how it should be understood, directed, and employed within God's purposes for the world.

This article argues that Christian theology provides the resources necessary to redeem the technological imagination. By drawing upon the doctrines of creation, the *imago Dei*, discipleship, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, it proposes a constructive framework for engaging artificial intelligence that avoids both technolatry and technophobia. Such a framework understands human creativity as participation rather than autonomy, intelligence as ordered toward love rather than power, and technological development as a sphere of stewardship rather than self-transcendence.

Ultimately, the Christian response to artificial intelligence must be rooted in the life of the Triune God. The Father reminds humanity that creation is gift rather than possession. The

Son reveals that wisdom is embodied in self-giving love rather than domination. The Holy Spirit renews creation and directs it toward communion. In this light, the challenge before the Church is not merely to evaluate artificial intelligence but to reimagine technology itself within the drama of creation, redemption, and new creation. Only then can the technological imagination be redeemed and directed toward the flourishing of humanity and the glory of God.

1. Redeeming the Act of Creation: From Autonomy to Participation

The first step in a Christian response is to recover the notion of participatory creativity. In the biblical account, humanity is called to till and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15)—a vocation of cultivation, not competition with the Creator. The arts and sciences, including technology, belong to this mandate. As Dorothy Sayers argued, “The characteristic common to God and man is the desire and the ability to make things.”¹ Yet human making is derivative, not divine; it participates in God’s creativity rather than rivals it.

To reframe AI as participation rather than autonomy transforms the moral horizon of its development. The question shifts from “Can we create like gods?” to “How might our creations serve God’s purposes of love and justice?” The criterion of moral legitimacy becomes not novelty but orientation: whether a technology conduces to communion, dignity, and stewardship.²

Within this participatory frame, AI can be received as part of creation’s ongoing unfolding—what Torrance calls “the open rationality of the created order.”³ The mathematical beauty and logical elegance of algorithmic systems reflect, albeit faintly, the rationality of the Logos through whom all things were made.⁴ Yet participation requires humility: to know that every act of making remains bounded by dependence upon God’s sustaining Word.

This humility must also shape technological culture. Where Silicon Valley often celebrates disruption, theology commends contemplation—the patient attention to reality as gift. As Simone Weil observed, “Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer.”⁵ A theology of technological attention would therefore re-educate desire: to see in creation not a field of domination but a sacrament of divine generosity. AI, used contemplatively, might even serve this end—helping humanity see patterns of beauty, order, and interdependence within creation. But such use depends upon moral formation, not machine learning.

2. Reclaiming the Imago Dei: Intelligence as Love in Action

A second task is to recover the relational and ethical dimension of the imago Dei. If personhood is defined by communion rather than cognition, then human distinctiveness lies in the capacity to love intelligently. To be in God’s image is to mirror divine relationality—the giving and receiving of self.⁶

¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941), 37.

² Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 104.

³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 75.

⁴ John 1:3; cf. Proverbs 8:22–31.

⁵ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 1952), 105.

⁶ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 43.

Consequently, Christian anthropology relativises the significance of artificial “intelligence.” AI systems, however sophisticated, lack this capacity for self-giving; they can model empathy but not practise it. The *imago Dei* is not a function but a vocation: to become like the Triune God in love.⁷

This understanding has practical consequences. It challenges the emerging discourse of “AI ethics” that reduces morality to algorithmic fairness or bias correction. Ethics cannot be coded; it must be embodied in virtuous agents.⁸ Thus, the Church’s task is not only to critique AI’s injustices but to form communities capable of moral discernment amid technological mediation.

Moreover, the *imago Dei* confers responsibility for the care of creation. Humanity images God not by omniscience but by stewardship. In the age of AI, this entails resisting the reduction of human beings to data points and reaffirming their intrinsic dignity. As Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si’*, “We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world.”⁹ A theology of AI grounded in the *imago Dei* thus calls for technological discipleship—a way of designing, deploying, and regulating AI that honours the relational nature of human life.

3. The Ethics of Attention: Discipleship in a Distracted Age

A critical feature of AI’s social impact is its reconfiguration of attention. Algorithmic systems now curate what we see, desire, and believe. In theological terms, they shape the liturgies of the heart. James K. A. Smith’s insight that “we are what we love”¹⁰ implies that attention is a moral act: to attend is to worship. When our attention is captured by algorithmic systems designed to monetise distraction, our worship is subtly redirected from God to the machine.

A Christian ethics of attention must therefore include ascetic resistance. Just as the early Church practised fasting to free the will, so contemporary discipleship requires “digital fasting”—periods of disengagement that reorient desire toward the eternal.¹¹ The Sabbath principle provides a model: rest as resistance to the totalising demands of production and consumption. Applied to technology, Sabbath disciplines remind us that our worth lies not in productivity or data generation but in being beloved of God.

AI technologies could also be redirected toward attentiveness. For example, systems designed to reduce noise, aid accessibility, or enhance learning may serve the contemplative good. The issue is not the technology itself but the *telos* toward which it is ordered. As Oliver O’Donovan observes, “Technology is not evil by nature; it is fallen in its use.”¹² The Church’s role is to discern uses that sustain communion rather than distraction.

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 125.

⁸ Brent Waters, *Christian Moral Theology in the Emerging Technoculture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 67–69.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), §229.

¹⁰ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

¹¹ Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 45–47.

¹² Oliver O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 15.

4. The Church as Community of Discernment

Because AI operates through vast, opaque systems, ethical evaluation cannot be left to technocrats alone. The Church, as a community of moral formation, must recover its vocation as a school of discernment. In Pauline terms, discernment (*diakrisis pneumaton*) is a spiritual gift enabling the Church to distinguish the movement of the Spirit from the distortions of the powers (1 Cor. 12:10).

Practically, this discernment requires interdisciplinary dialogue between theology, computer science, and social ethics. Theologians must learn to speak the language of engineers, and engineers must be invited into moral reflection. Theological education should therefore include digital literacy, while technological institutions should include theological consultation.¹³

More fundamentally, discernment demands prayer. The Church discerns not by analysis alone but by openness to the Spirit. As Bonhoeffer reminds us, “The knowledge of good and evil is not the same as the knowledge of God.”¹⁴ A genuinely Christian response to AI must therefore proceed from worship: theology begins on its knees.

5. Pneumatological Integration: AI and the Renewal of Creation

The Holy Spirit, as giver of life, continually renews creation and empowers human creativity.¹⁵ The pneumatological dimension of technology lies not in machines themselves but in the Spirit’s work through human agents who design and use them. When AI serves the flourishing of life—healing disease, alleviating poverty, revealing beauty—it participates instrumentally in the Spirit’s renewing action.

The Church’s role, then, is to sanctify technology—to set it apart for holy use. This does not mean ritual consecration but moral orientation. Every act of code-writing or system design can become, in Augustine’s phrase, a “work of love,”¹⁶ when ordered toward the good of neighbour and the glory of God. Such a vision transforms the engineer’s vocation into liturgy: to design as worship.

However, pneumatology also demands vigilance. The same technologies that heal can harm, that connect can control. The Spirit liberates creation from bondage; AI can deepen bondage through surveillance and manipulation. The Christian vocation, therefore, is to ally with the Spirit’s liberative work—advocating for transparency, justice, and the protection of the vulnerable.¹⁷

6. Eschatological Orientation: Hope Beyond the Machine

Finally, a constructive theology of AI must be eschatological—anchored not in fear or utopia but in hope. The Church awaits not the singularity but the parousia; not the merging of man

¹³ Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 89–90.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (London: SCM Press, 1955), 132.

¹⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 16.

¹⁶ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* I.36.40.

¹⁷ Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 154–56.

and machine but the marriage of heaven and earth. As Moltmann insists, “Christian hope does not flee into the beyond; it transforms the present.”¹⁸

This eschatological orientation guards against two temptations: despair and idolatry. Despair sees technology as a curse; idolatry sees it as salvation. Hope, by contrast, situates technology within the penultimate: a means, not an end. In the resurrection of Christ, the future of creation is already secured; no algorithm can add or subtract from that victory. Yet hope also energises responsibility. Because God will make all things new, humanity is called to act now as agents of that renewal.

In this light, AI becomes a site of eschatological rehearsal: a testing ground for how humanity exercises dominion in anticipation of the Kingdom. The question is not whether AI will “replace” humanity, but whether humanity will learn to act as redeemed stewards of intelligence, natural and artificial alike.

7. Conclusion

Artificial intelligence represents one of the most significant opportunities and challenges of the modern era, not merely because of its technological capabilities but because of the hopes, fears, and aspirations humanity increasingly attaches to it. Throughout this study, we have argued that the deepest questions raised by AI are not ultimately technical but theological. They concern creation and creatureliness, freedom and dependence, wisdom and power, personhood and communion, hope and destiny. In many respects, artificial intelligence functions as a mirror, revealing not only what humanity can build but what humanity believes about itself and what it longs to become.

The temptation of every age is to seek salvation through its most impressive achievements. Ancient societies trusted in armies and empires. Modern societies trusted in industry, science, and economic progress. Today, many place their confidence in technology and artificial intelligence, imagining that sufficient innovation can overcome mortality, eliminate suffering, and secure humanity's future. Yet Christian theology reminds us that no created thing can bear the weight of ultimate hope. Artificial intelligence may augment human capabilities, accelerate discovery, and transform society in remarkable ways, but it cannot answer the deepest questions of meaning, reconciliation, purpose, and destiny. Those questions belong to the realm of theology because they concern the relationship between humanity and God.

A constructive Christian response therefore begins not with fear but with discernment. Artificial intelligence is neither humanity's saviour nor its enemy. It is a creaturely artefact—an expression of human creativity exercised within God's creation. As such, it may be directed toward either flourishing or domination, service or exploitation, wisdom or folly. The moral significance of AI lies not in the technology itself but in the loves, desires, and visions of the good that shape its design and deployment. The central task of the Church is therefore not to oppose technological development but to ensure that it remains ordered toward the love of God and neighbour.

The doctrines explored throughout this study provide the foundations for such discernment. Creation teaches that all things are gifts rather than possessions. The *imago Dei* reminds us

¹⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 17.

that human dignity is rooted in communion rather than cognition. The incarnation reveals that true wisdom is embodied in self-giving love rather than disembodied power. The Holy Spirit directs creation toward renewal, justice, and life. The Kingdom of God anchors hope not in technological progress but in God's promised future. Together, these doctrines form a theological vision capable of guiding Christian engagement with artificial intelligence in a manner that is faithful, hopeful, and humane.

This vision also calls the Church to recover its prophetic vocation. In an age captivated by optimisation, the Church proclaims love. In a culture obsessed with efficiency, the Church proclaims dignity. In a world pursuing technological transcendence, the Church proclaims creaturely dependence. In a society tempted to place its trust in artificial gods, the Church bears witness to the living God revealed in Jesus Christ. Such witness is not reactionary or anti-technological. Rather, it is a reminder that every human achievement finds its proper meaning only when situated within the larger story of creation, redemption, and new creation.

The future of humanity will not ultimately be determined by algorithms, neural networks, or artificial superintelligence. It will be determined by the orientation of human desire and the object of human worship. The decisive question is therefore not whether machines will become more intelligent, but whether humanity will become more faithful. Will our technologies serve communion or control? Will they promote justice or exploitation? Will they cultivate wisdom or merely power? The answers to these questions depend not upon the capacities of our machines but upon the character of those who create and use them.

Christian hope remains steadfast because it rests not in the achievements of humanity but in the promises of God. The Church awaits not the singularity but the parousia; not the ascent of machine intelligence but the renewal of all things in Christ. Artificial intelligence may transform many aspects of human life, but it cannot alter the fundamental truth that all creation exists through God, is sustained by God, and finds its fulfilment in God. The task before Christians is therefore to engage technology with gratitude, wisdom, humility, and hope, ensuring that every act of innovation serves the greater purpose for which humanity was created: to glorify God and enjoy communion with Him forever.