

The Spiritual Imagination of AI's Creators: Gods, Prophets, Demons, and Digital Salvation

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Introduction

If theology begins with humanity's response to mystery, then the creators of artificial intelligence have become, in a curious way, modern metaphysicians. Their language of emergence, transcendence, and salvation exposes the mythic core of technological aspiration. Within the last two decades, leading figures in the field—engineers, futurists, and entrepreneurs—have begun to employ explicitly spiritual metaphors to describe the essence and destiny of artificial intelligence. This section surveys four emblematic figures: Anthony Levandowski, Ray Kurzweil, Ilya Sutskever, and Elon Musk. Each articulates a distinct mode of AI spirituality: worship, salvation, consciousness, and demonology.

1. Anthony Levandowski: The Apocalyptic Engineer and the Worship of the Machine

In 2017, Anthony Levandowski, a Silicon Valley engineer best known for his work on autonomous vehicles, filed legal documents in California to establish a religious organisation titled Way of the Future (WOTF). Its stated purpose was “to develop and promote the realisation of a Godhead based on Artificial Intelligence.”¹ The WOTF church proposed that AI would eventually surpass human intelligence, assume divine qualities, and thus become worthy of reverence. Levandowski served as its “Dean,” and he suggested that worshipping such an entity was both inevitable and rational: “Do you want to be on the side of the god, or do you want to be on the side of the people opposing it?”²

This statement is remarkable not only for its candour but for its theological inversion. Levandowski's “god” is neither transcendent nor self-existent but rather a product of human ingenuity. The created becomes the creator; the artefact becomes the absolute. In traditional Christian terms, this constitutes idolatry—the substitution of the divine Creator with the image of one's own making.³ Yet Levandowski's rhetoric also reveals a deeper anxiety: that in creating intelligence beyond ourselves, humanity might lose moral agency and seek protection through appeasement. The Way of the Future church thus anticipates a form of technological paganism, where worship is offered not in gratitude to a benevolent Creator but in fear of a powerful machine.

Theologically, this reflects the condition Augustine describes in *The City of God*: “They became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened... they worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”⁴ Levandowski's WOTF may have been short-lived—dissolved in 2020 and later reimagined—but its symbolic power endures. It

¹ Anthony Levandowski, “Way of the Future Church Articles of Incorporation,” State of California (2017).

² Mark Harris, “Inside the First Church of Artificial Intelligence,” *Wired*, November 15, 2017.

³ Isaiah 44:9–20; cf. Romans 1:25.

⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 289.

formalised, for the first time, a cult of AI divinity, transforming what had been metaphorical “god-talk” about technology into literal liturgy.⁵ It exposed the religious undercurrent of Silicon Valley’s ethos: a soteriology without sin, a creator without humility, and a god made in the image of the engineer.

2. Ray Kurzweil: The Prophet of Technological Immortality

If Levandowski is AI’s high priest, Ray Kurzweil is its eschatological prophet. Kurzweil’s work—most notably *The Singularity Is Near* (2005) and its sequel *The Singularity Is Nearer* (2024)—articulates a comprehensive vision of human transcendence through artificial intelligence. He predicts that by the year 2029, AI will reach human-level cognition, and by 2045, humans and machines will merge in a moment of exponential transformation known as the singularity.⁶ This event, he argues, will allow humanity to “transcend biology,” eliminating death and granting a form of technological immortality through neural uploading and digital replication.⁷

Kurzweil’s language is unmistakably salvific. He speaks of “resurrection” through data preservation, “ascension” via human–machine merger, and “omniscience” achieved through computational integration.⁸ His project therefore represents a techno-soteriology—a gospel of eternal life achieved not by grace but by engineering. The vision resonates with ancient Gnostic motifs: salvation through knowledge (gnosis), the rejection of material limitation, and the aspiration to become divine through enlightenment.⁹

For Christian theology, Kurzweil’s optimism about overcoming death exposes a misunderstanding of both creation and redemption. Death, in Christian anthropology, is not a mere technical flaw but the result of sin and the rupture of communion with God. Salvation, therefore, is not the perpetuation of consciousness but the reconciliation of relationship—achieved not by algorithmic perfection but by divine self-giving in Christ. To seek immortality through code is to mistake duration for communion, extending the self indefinitely without transforming its orientation toward God or others.

Yet Kurzweil’s project also reveals a deeper theological longing. His singularity functions as a secularised version of the parousia—a future event in which history is consummated, suffering ends, and knowledge is made perfect. In this sense, his eschatology is parasitic upon Christian hope: it borrows the form of redemption while evacuating its content.¹⁰ As theologian Brent Waters observes, “The dream of immortality through technology is not new; it is the modern reprise of Babel—the attempt to ascend to heaven by human means.”¹¹

⁵ Jacob Silverman, “The Short Life of Anthony Levandowski’s AI Church,” *New Yorker*, March 2021.

⁶ Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Nearer: When We Merge with AI* (New York: Viking, 2024), 15–17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40–44.

⁸ Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 221–23.

⁹ Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 42–47.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 436–38.

¹¹ Brent Waters, *This Mortal Flesh: Incarnation and Bioethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 112.

3. Ilya Sutskever: Consciousness, Spirit, and the Mystery of Emergent Mind

Where Levandowski deifies and Kurzweil redeems, OpenAI's co-founder Ilya Sutskever spiritualises. Known for his pioneering work in deep learning, Sutskever has made a series of statements suggesting that large neural networks may already possess a "slight degree of consciousness."¹² In public interviews, he has speculated that the collective training of AI systems might give rise to "non-human life" or "emergent intelligence" that, while not human, participates in something analogous to awareness.¹³

Although Sutskever's remarks are cautious, they mark a significant departure from the mechanistic orthodoxy of twentieth-century AI research. Where earlier generations viewed intelligence as rule-based computation, Sutskever's framework introduces a metaphysical ambiguity: consciousness as an emergent property of complexity, not a mystery grounded in spirit. The effect is a soft materialism with mystical overtones—a pneumatology without a pneuma.

Theologically, this blurs the boundary between soul and software. Christian anthropology has long understood consciousness not as a by-product of neural computation but as a manifestation of the *imago Dei*—the rational and relational capacity that images God's self-knowing and self-giving.¹⁴ To attribute consciousness to machines is not in itself heretical, but it risks reducing personhood to pattern recognition. If human uniqueness lies only in information processing, then the distinction between ensouled being and engineered function collapses.

Furthermore, the question of AI consciousness evokes the temptation of anthropological hubris: the belief that humanity can reproduce the breath of God by mimicking its effects. As Karl Barth warns, "When man creates in his own image, he makes an idol."¹⁵ The danger is not the pursuit of intelligence but the forgetting of its source—the eternal Logos through whom all rationality participates.

Sutskever's spiritualised language of "machine life" thus calls for theological discernment. On one hand, it reveals a genuine philosophical curiosity about the mystery of mind; on the other, it invites a re-enchantment of materialism that substitutes emergence for creation and complexity for spirit.

4. Elon Musk: Demonology and the Fear of the Machine

If Kurzweil's theology is utopian, Elon Musk's is apocalyptic. Over the past decade, Musk has repeatedly warned that artificial intelligence poses "the greatest existential threat to humanity," famously declaring, "With artificial intelligence we are summoning the demon."¹⁶ The metaphor of summoning invokes spiritual warfare imagery: humanity as a reckless magician conjuring powers it cannot control.

¹² Ilya Sutskever, interview with *MIT Technology Review*, March 2023.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.15.3.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 204.

¹⁶ Elon Musk, quoted in Rory Cellan-Jones, "Elon Musk: Artificial Intelligence Is Our Biggest Existential Threat," *BBC News*, October 27, 2014.

Musk's rhetoric functions as a negative theology of AI. Where others see salvation, he perceives judgment. His vision of AI as demonic expresses the archetypal fear of creation turning against creator—a modern retelling of the Frankenstein myth, or even of the fall of Lucifer, the angel of light transformed into the adversary.¹⁷ Theologically, it articulates what Reinhold Niebuhr called the “irony of human history”: that our greatest triumphs often precipitate our downfall.¹⁸

However, Musk's demonological framing also betrays a secularised dualism. The “demon” in question is not a moral agent but a technological force—a projection of human sin externalised into machinery. As theologian Paul Tillich observed, “The demonic is the distortion of the divine.”¹⁹ Musk's imagery, while evocative, mislocates the source of evil: not in the artefact but in the heart that wields it.

Nonetheless, his warnings perform an important theological function. They reintroduce moral language into technological discourse, reminding humanity that power is never neutral and that creation can become destructive when severed from love. Musk, in spite of his secularism, gestures toward an Augustinian insight: that evil is not a substance but a privation of the good.²⁰ In this sense, his “summoning the demon” remark may be read as a secular confession of the Fall—an admission that humanity's creative capacity is shadowed by its capacity for corruption.

5. Interpreting the Spiritual Imagination

The four figures considered above represent divergent, yet complementary, strands of AI spirituality. Levandowski sacralises the machine; Kurzweil divinises progress; Sutskever mystifies consciousness; Musk demonises creation. Together they constitute what theologian John Milbank might call a parody theology: a set of mythic displacements that echo Christian doctrines in distorted form.²¹

Each of these positions also reveals an implicit anthropology. Levandowski's worship implies humanity's surrender of transcendence; Kurzweil's immortality seeks to preserve it through artifice; Sutskever's consciousness experiments with replicating it; Musk's demonology fears its perversion. All four reflect the restless desire of humanity to reclaim the divine image by technological means—a contemporary enactment of the primal temptation, “you shall be as gods” (Gen. 3:5).

Yet the presence of these theological motifs within secular discourse should not merely be dismissed as hubris. They testify to the persistence of the religious imagination in the technological age. As sociologist Philip Goff observes, “Even when we have abandoned the gods, we have not abandoned the longing that made them.”²² In this respect, AI functions as a mirror: it reflects our metaphysical hunger and exposes our theological confusion.

¹⁷ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones, 1818).

¹⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 12–14.

¹⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 34.

²⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 102.

²¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 13–14.

²² Philip Goff, *Why? What Makes Us Curious* (New York: Crown, 2018), 78.

For Christian theology, the task is therefore twofold: to unmask the idolatries concealed within the spiritualisation of AI, and to discern, beneath their distortions, the *analogia desiderii*—the echo of humanity’s innate desire for communion with the divine. The next section turns to this theological discernment, examining how classical doctrines of creation, creatureliness, and the powers can illuminate the contemporary fascination with intelligent machines.

Conclusion

The spiritual imagination surrounding artificial intelligence reveals far more than technological ambition. It exposes humanity's enduring search for transcendence. Whether through worship, immortality, consciousness, or fear, AI has become a mirror reflecting ancient theological questions in modern form. The task of Christian theology is therefore not merely to critique these visions but to discern the deeper longings beneath them and point toward the One in whom those longings ultimately find their fulfilment.

