[Book review of:] Robot Theology: Old Questions through New Media, by Joshua K. Smith
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emphasis would have to be on hair being in the “physical” world. That would make hair subject to biological and cultural selection. Instead of Innes two justifications for not using an evolutionary or biological approach, he simply could have written unapologetically in the Introduction that the book is based on the history and sociology of hair’s relationship to religion. I am not at all faulting Innes for not including anything evolutionary or biological. No one can know every perspective on a particular topic and the historical and sociological perspective does give insights in ways that other approaches to not.

To briefly mention the evolutionary and biological approach for balance, religious texts, rituals, hair and clothing would all be considered as “physical” as the stones and mortar in a church building. Their symbolic meaning of any of these items, not ever addressed in biological and cultural evolution, would be irrelevant. If politics and religion both have the same biological function (separate from theological, sociological and historical functions), one of the best candidates for that function, based on the work of Martin A. Nowak (SuperCooperators), is to “structure” larger human groups into smaller ingroup breeding populations (“marry within the faith”) that compete with one another. If one accepts that, which most people reading this will not, what would be important about a specific religion’s texts, rituals, hair and clothing, is that they simply need to be different from those in other religions. They easily identify someone of the outgroup from the religion-specific ingroup. In summary, what any of these items do is more important (biologically) than what they are. Gene-culture coevolution does not address truth in what its studied.

That all being said, Innes’ book has to be judged on what it is, not on what it is not. For what it is, it is very good. I highly recommend it for anyone interested about learning more about the relationship between hair and religion from a historical and sociological perspective.

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Under the catchy title, the book aims to explore the ways in which robots might serve as new media for theological and metaphysical discourse. Written in an accessible style, and aimed primarily at theologians and religious people, the book serves as an excellent introduction into some of the challenges and opportunities engendered by the rise of AI and robotics.

In the first chapter, “Gods and Robots Have Always Been Around”, the author traces our fascination with technology all the way back to antiquity and outlines the dangers inherent in the human tendency to idolatrize technological products. Futuristic discourse is usually polarized between two extreme attitudes: it either regards robots as nothing but mere tools, or it endows them with god-like powers. Smith advocates for a more balanced approach, one that finds the middle ground in this unhelpful binary. If used correctly, technology’s potential for “great blessings” can be unleashed without falling into the trap of buying into the eschatological promises of AI designers (p. 16).

For the theologian reader, the most interesting part of this chapter might be the one where the author debunks the implicit philosophical and theological claims that undergird AI and robotics. In his view, this is just the latest installment in a political war against Aristotelian metaphysics, which dates back to the 18th century. Smith is adamant that any hope to solve old philosophical problems through AI is futile, because machines are mere “extensions of the human perspective, not alternatives to it” (p. 18). His commitment to the idea that machines will never become subjects, in the same sense that humans are (something known as ‘strong AI’) is made explicit throughout the book but it is never argued in any detail. The possibility of humanlike machines is simply dismissed outright: “can a machine have humanlike intelligence, freedom, and responsibility? The answer, theologically speaking, is no” (p. 45). Although I am sympathetic to this view, I think an in-depth discussion of the theological arguments for and against the strong AI hypothesis would have enriched the book.

Chapter 2, “Welcome to the World of Robot Ethics”, recapitulates the main ethical challenges raised by AI – responsibility, privacy, ecology etc. – and evaluates them through a theological prism. Smith rightly points out that technology is neither good nor bad in principle, but rather each technological product should be assessed individually. He proposes four criteria: “does this technology (1) Conflict with God’s moral law? (2) Promote the Christian understanding of love? (3) Foster the biblical concept of stewardship? (4) Oppress and limit the liberty and conscience of those outside of my ethical frames?” (p. 27). I find this to be a useful grid to think about the ethics of AI from a theological perspective. Most theological discussions about
technology revolve around the first criterion, which has very much to do with what robots could become, ontologically speaking, and whether humans have the right to play God with artificial life. These discussions are fascinating, but they often neglect all the other ways in which our pursuit of AI already has meaningful ethical implications. As Christians, Smith convincingly argues, we should also pay attention to the power dynamics behind AI – who is getting more power through technology and on whose behalf? –, as well as to all the environmental issues related to how we acceleratingly destroy our current world in pursuit of more computation and a future technological utopia. As we become increasingly aware of the implications of data collection and use, we have a moral obligation to fight for fair regulation and protection of the vulnerable from harm and exploitation. The problem of racism, and how deeply entrenched it is in current AI and robotic industries, is unpacked separately in chapter 6.

In chapter 3, “Christian Anthropology, Patiency, and Personhood”, Smith creatively explores the possibility of robot personhood, based not on ontological properties but on a more performative and relational definition of personhood. He interprets Jesus’ example and teaching as pointing towards an understanding of personhood not in terms of ontological or accidental properties, but of playing a character in God’s narrative. This, in Smith’s view, could be used as an argument for expanding the category of personhood from God’s creatures to some of the products of human creativity (p. 51). His main argument for robot personhood is framed in terms of moral patiency, which is not about what the entity (patient) is, but about the kind of moral agency that humans can exercise in interaction with it. He provides three reasons why robots should be considered for moral patiency (pp. 54-56), of which the most convincing is their potential as a medium for either virtue or vice.

The same proposed inversion between ethics and ontology, employed to advocate for robotic personhood based on moral patiency, is also used in the fourth chapter to make a case for robot rights. Following Emmanuel Levinas, philosopher David Gunkel amply argues for robot rights from a relational perspective: what matters in granting basic rights is not that we know for sure that the ‘other’ is a rational agent, but whether we consider it to be a who and not a what (like we do with our animal pets). Smith summarizes current philosophical debates on robot rights and concludes, based on historical examples, that the natural law concept in Christian thought is not the most helpful framework in thinking about robot rights. Instead, he is emphatically for the idea of granting some rights to robots, regarding it as a necessity for optimizing the benefits and minimizing the harm of robots in society.

Could we be friends with robots? Could robots play a role in pastoral ministry? These are the questions tackled in chapters 5 and 7, respectively. Smith’s answer to both questions is a qualified yes. Robotic friendships can be both
healthy and virtuous, despite the intuitive preconceptions, and robotic assistants could bring immense administrative help to overburdened pastors and people who are lonely or disabled. However, as Smith carefully points out, there is a thin line that should not be crossed: the robot caregiver, companion, or friend should only complement and never completely substitute human presence.

Perhaps the main strength of Smith’s book is its commitment to engage with AI not as a futuristic thought experiment, but as it currently exists in our world plagued by economic inequality, political polarization, and the COVID-19 pandemic that has altered how we live our lives on and offline. Before speculating about the ontological status of potentially conscious robots of the future (as I often do), Smith has convinced me that Christian scholars need to also critically push against the current model, where the vision of few powerful humans gets implemented in AI without any concern for the countless people who are oppressed and voiceless. It is the theologians’ job to come up with balanced accounts of modern technologies. These accounts should include both an openness to the potential benefits of a fair use of such products, as well as a critical eye for the ideologies and the power dynamics promoted through them.

If there is any weakness to the book, it is that, despite its promising title, it only covers a tiny sliver of what could be called robot theology. Perhaps naively, and largely due to my own academic interest, I was expecting the book to also go into more audacious things, like the possibility of robots becoming subjects of divine revelation, or all the hard theological questions that might suddenly be tackled from surprising, new viewpoints because of the reality brought about by AI. The term ‘robot theology’ immediately leads one to imagining robots doing theology, a possibility that Smith completely dismisses, but many scholars don’t.

Overall, this is an excellent book for people who are interested in the intersection between theology, technology, and ethics. It is a very timely book, and it demonstrates that there is high potential for a careful and balanced theological engagement with the promises and perils of AI.

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