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GOD(BOTS) AND AUTHORITY: TRUST AND FAITH IN THE AGE OF AI

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications geared toward providing religious or spiritual (R/S) guidance, so-called 'godbots' (Keane & Shapiro, 2023), raise potential moral dilemmas surrounding faith, trust, and authority. No technology is without politics (Winner, 1998) and generative AI is no different. Most pressing, large language model powered chatbots are known to hallucinate convincing, though inaccurate, 'facts' (Bender et al., 2021; Bommasani et al., 2022), and are capable of reproducing biases in overt (Gillespie, 2024; Sakib & Bijoy Das, 2023) and covert fashion (Hofmann et al., 2024). When expressing empathy, often present in R/S guidance, AI may be able to accurately simulate the emotion (Inzlicht, 2024) but lacks the necessary intentionality and common lived experience to build a shared connection (Perry, 2023). Given these potential concerns, our ongoing project explores the construction of *spiritual authority* around R/S chatbots by their developers, deciphering their attempts to create tools worthy of *trust*

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and even *faith*. To accomplish this, our in-progress study employs1) a systematic accounting of descriptive and discursive features of existing R/S chatbots, and 2) applying the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) to a dozen representative R/S AI tools.

Background

Research into the connection between digital technologies and R/S practices has remained consistently underdeveloped (Buie & Blythe, 2013; Wolf et al., 2024). Existing scholarship on technospiritual practices (Bell, 2006), spiritual and religious human-machine communication (Cheong & Chen, 2023), digital religion and spirituality (Tsuria & Campbell, 2021), and augmented spirituality (Kaewkitipong et al., 2023) highlights how emergent technologies have afforded individuated, eclectic, and "on-demand" forms of spirituality—which are increasingly detached from place and traditional nodes of spiritual authority (Buie & Blythe, 2014; Cheong & Chen, 2023; Echchaibi et al., 2013; Evolvi, 2021; Helland, 2007; Kaewkitipong et al., 2023; Wright, 2024). At the same time, digital technologies have offered new tools for spiritual connection, congregation instruction, worship, and ritual practices (Cheong & Chen, 2023; Evolvi, 2021). The emergence and diffusion of R/S AI chatbots extends and intensifies individuated modes of R/S practice, producing new socio-technical spiritual authorities in which users potentially place their trust and even faith.

Whether, how, and when R/S tools are suffused with authority has received limited scholarly attention. We hope to fill this gap through the development of a theoretically rich and empirically grounded framework which helps explain the construction of spiritual authority by developers of R/S AI chatbots. Following Loewen-Colón and Mosurinjohn, we define spiritual authority as "'having some claim to arbitration, persuasion, and legitimacy' such that the user might make choices that affect their life or others in accordance with the AI or might have their spiritual needs met" (2022, p. 2). *Trust* is defined as, "the attitude that an agent will help achieve an individual's goals in a situation characterized by uncertainty and vulnerability" (Lee & See, 2004, p. 54), while *faith* is conceptualized as a deeply entrenched confidence or assurance central to one's intersubjective worldview and, thus, not easily shaken (Lee et al., 2021; McCraw, 2015). We conceive of trust and faith as ontologically and epistemologically distinct, where each uniquely contributes to creating R/S AI tools as objects of authority.

Methods

To develop our framework of how creators of R/S AI chatbots construct spiritual authority, we first systematically catalogued existing R/S chatbots, pulling from a web browser (DuckDuckGo), the Google Play Store, and the iOS App Store. These sites were selected, as they represent the most popular avenues to locate online tools and applications. DuckDuckGo was selected in an attempt to minimize personalization bias (Baeza-Yates, 2020).

On each site, we combined "AI" or "AI chatbot" with one of 32 R/S keywords--either a religion, religious figure, religious text, or R/S practice--for example, "Buddhist AI". R/S

keywords were chosen by drawing from the most popular religious traditions (Preston, 2024) and spiritual practices (Smith & Schapiro, 2023).

Apps and websites were included if they were 1) connected to a R/S tradition and/or trained on a R/S text and 2) incorporated a generative AI component which produced 'novel' text. If chatbots met these criteria, we collected descriptive information, including name, publisher, underlying LLM model (if public), pricing, iOS category, iOS & Google Play age rating, iOS & Google Play rating, and number of reviews.

As part of the ongoing work, twelve representative chatbots will be chosen, four from each data collection site, and following the method laid out by Light et al. (2018), we will conduct a walkthrough of the selected R/S chatbot applications to explore their, "intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings and implied ideal users and uses" through simulated everyday use (p. 881). This will be followed by a discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000) of the data to synthesize the underlying meanings, ideas, and values that structure developer perceptions of AI chatbots' potential for spiritual authority.

Contributions

Preliminary findings point toward a loose triptych typology where apps are framed by their creators as *assistants*, tools to be used, *avatars*, mentors embodying a particular R/S figure, and/or *angels*, beings with access to higher knowledge. This typology is neither exclusive nor complete, but gestures toward the multivalent roots of a R/S AI's authority as framed by their creator. This framing, and the corresponding persona adopted by the AI, may influence users' perceptions of R/S AI chatbots and thus modulate their perceived spiritual authority in different ways (Loewen-Colón and Mosurinjohn, 2022).

In our continued analyses, we will clarify and sharpen our theoretical framework, highlighting the material and discursive construction of R/S AI. Through walkthroughs we will analyze the algorithmic imaginaries invested in AI chatbots, exploring their perceived abilities and authority as framed by their creators (Schulz, 2023). This research will help contribute to scholarly understanding of how AI chatbots have been framed beyond news media discourse (Nugyen and Hekman, 2024), and into the minutia of developer's own narratives. We seek to understand how, if at all, narratives surrounding AI have been embodied within R/S chatbots discursive construction, and how in turn these constructions influence the broader AI landscape.

Through analyzing developer discourse around R/S AI we also intend to explore how Silicon Valley's techno-solutionist libertarianism (Levina & Hasinoff, 2017) intermingles with R/S belief and practice. Such an admixture of R/S and technology is not alien to Silicon Valley, and was arguably a defining characteristic of its originary 'California Ideology' (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996), whose combination of hippie mysticism and neoliberal entrepreneurial subjectivity (Uluorta & Quill, 2022) still find resonances in today's tech elites (Crandall et al., 2021). Understanding how developer discourses attempt to synthesize these diverse, and at times contradictory, worldviews will be a

second contribution of our walkthrough.

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