

COMMENT BY EVOLVI TO SINGLER

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Beth Singler's article "*Blessed by the algorithm*": *Theistic conceptions of artificial intelligence in online discourse* (2020, 2023) explores theism in online narratives, and discusses secularization. Hence, the article seems to sustain the argument that the use of religious-inspired language and metaphors disproves the theory of disenchantment. Specifically, the sentence "Blessed by the algorithm" (BBtA) attributes a quasi-magical character to artificial intelligence, proving how algorithmic logic behind social media and platforms can contribute to novel religious imaginaries. Through an ethnographic exploration of tweets mentioning the sentence "Blessed by the algorithm", Singler identifies seven coding categories that span from parody to reflections about the gig economy, and shows how certain wording can connect religion to larger social and cultural debates.

The article is innovative in focusing not only on how algorithms shape contemporary digital religion, but in analyzing narratives about algorithms. Critical works on algorithms are very much needed, especially when the proliferation of AI forces companies and users to question its ethical – and not only technological – implications. Indeed, works such as Safiya Umoja Noble's "*Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*" (2018) already denounced how AI perpetuates existing stereotypes and mirrors a society tailored to the needs of white men, who are often also the creators of algorithms-based platforms. Furthermore, algorithms have been associated negatively with the raise of hate speech (Lim, 2017). However, on the positive side, it has been suggested that algorithms can be used by social justice activists at their advantage, once they understand their functioning (Treré, 2019). According to this perspective, users can be

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aware of the mechanisms behind algorithms, rather than attributing some quasi-magical power to them.

In this context, works on algorithms and religion have often focused on how religious authorities and individuals react to AI-driven religious services, such as confession apps (Scott, 2016) or robotic intelligence performing religious functions (Cheong, 2020). Singler brings this conversation a step further, analyzing how users conceptualize algorithms and how they talk about them on Twitter, a platform that is also algorithm-based. In so doing, Twitter users discuss AI as something inevitable that conditions everyday life, a pervasive logic that works in almost mysterious ways, not unlike religion. I will now delineate the three main strengths I find in Singler's work (two theoretical, and one methodological), posing for each of them some questions regarding the future implications of this type of research on algorithms and religion.

The first strength of Singler's work is that it forces a rethinking of the definition of religion in the context of digital narratives. Indeed, the type of religion that Singler identifies seems connected to fluid practices and the embedding of religious language in everyday conversations. The task of defining religion, which is the subject of endless academic debates, has been partially solved by scholars in the fields of religion and media and digital religion (Campbell, 2007; Campbell and Tsuria, 2021; Hoover, 2011) by adopting Clifford Geertz' definition of religion:

A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, quoted in Campbell 2007, 7).

This definition is sufficiently broad to encompass quasi-religious phenomena occurring outside of religious institutions, but still relies on criteria that differentiate what is religious and what is non-religious.

Singler, perhaps on purpose, engages neither with specific definitions of religion, nor with literature in digital religion that discusses the issue. This avoids restricting the analysis of religious narratives to certain types of institutional religion, and constitutes an approach that enriches the scope of the field of digital religion. In particular, the merit of this approach is that it poses attention on what people do and discuss, rather than on normative descriptions and definitions of religion. In so doing, the article focuses on the existence of quasi-religious ideas and their long-lasting role in a society that is often portrayed as having forgotten religion. Moreover, the article briefly touches upon secularization theory, hinting, but not explicitly saying, that today's religion can be explored in a post-secular context (Habermas, 2008). To analyze secularism and post-secularism, I believe, more than providing definitions, it is important to individuate the experiences, practices and discourses that continue to revitalize the role of religion in society. Thus, my questions would be: what are the instances that can point to a religious character of AI, and how can they be identified and analyzed as religion? How can they contribute to the scholarship on secularization and post-secularization?

The second strength of the article, which is closely connected with the first one, is the discussion of AI in relation to new religious movements. While the alliance between technology and religion is in no way new – suffice it to think of the first "technopagans", who believed in the sacrality of technology decades prior to the proliferation of social networks (Cowan, 2004) – Singler revitalizes this debate by applying it to algorithms. The article discusses interesting phenomena such as the Turing Church², which is not directly connected to the diffusion of the BBtA sentence, but it seems

² The Turing Church, according to Beth Singler, is a transhumanist movement which assumes a scientific perspective to deify AI. It is a new religious movement that comes out of online spaces and is connected to transhumanist offshoots of Christianity and Mormonism. Its doctrinal document is the "Tales of the Turing Church", written by Giulio Prisco.

to prove that there is a tendency to attribute a divine character to AI. Once again, this perspective is not tight to a specific definition or understanding of religion, but rather allows the exploration of quasi-religious phenomena that contribute to new forms of religiosity that are connected to technology.

Above all, Singler argues that new religious movements can be created also from parody and metaphors. Reading this argument, parody churches such as that of the "Flying Spaghetti Monster" immediately come to mind, as well as religious groups that originated from science fiction and pop culture (Kienzl, 2014). While this perspective allows scholars to analyze a wide variety of phenomena and consider the formation of religion within non-religious environments, it remains unclear what kind of contribution can scholarship on digital media and technology offer to the understanding of new religious movements. Hence, my questions: can the BBtA tweets be considered as leading to the creation of a new religious movement, or rather, are they an example of how traditional religious imaginary persist in society? What is "new" and what maintains a certain religious worldview in the context of algorithms and religion?

The third strength concerns the method of the article, a qualitative ethnographic exploration that applies an anthropological perspective to digital media. It is interesting how the article, while presenting some numerical data about the BBtA tweets, refuses quantitative correlations and goes against the contemporary tendency of relying on big data analysis. It does, indeed, not seek to assess the impact of the sentence, nor it claims that it is becoming a trend on the Internet. Rather, Singler focuses on an extremely small sample to provide an in-depth coding, probably inspired by a thematic analysis approach, to individuate seven main categories of analysis. In so doing, the article focuses on the linguistic aspects of the tweets, analyzing discourses in a perspective that resembles discourse analysis and, therefore, permits exploring the potential power of language in shaping society (Fairclough, 2010). This is important to establish that relevant online discourses are not only those that attract a high number of comments and great circulation, but also those that hold cultural significance because of

their intrinsic meaning: the simple fact that the word "blessed" is used to describe AI seems to predict that people are willing to create some sort of conscious or unconscious connection between algorithms and divine power.

Furthermore, while limited to the study of tweets, the digital ethnography allows for discussing the impact of algorithms on a variety of platforms, including the apps that form the backbone of the gig economy. Even if Twitter is mostly text-based, and thus does not invite the development of aesthetic representations of religion, the analysis reports vivid images that people conjure using language. The article also mentions the spreading of narratives across platforms, which leads to my questions: how can an ethnographic approach allow for the explorations of multiple platforms, including, but not being limited to, visual social media such as Instagram and TikTok? What kind of methodological and theoretical perspectives would help to account for both texts and aesthetics about algorithms, as well as their spreading across platforms?

In conclusion, Singler's article describes a novel phenomenon –religious language applied to narratives about AI –that helps broaden the understanding of what religion is, provides tools for discussing new religious movements, and entails methodological implications for the qualitative study of online discourses. The final questions that remain to be asked concern the future not only of academic studies on algorithms, but of algorithms in general. As new social media are rapidly created and expanded, there is the possibility that the future of digital culture will no longer be so influenced by algorithmic powers. Platforms such as Mastodon already try changing algorithmic logic, and this could be a partial solution to the AI-related issues that Noble (2018) denounced in her book. Therefore, what would the implication of AI for religion be in the future, given the rapid evolution of digital culture and algorithms? And, if there is an alternative future to algorithms, how can scholars capture the relation between AI and religion, and how will the interstice between religion and technology look like?

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