

AI GODS, JEANS GODS, AND THRIFT GODS: RESPONDING
TO RESPONSES TO THE BLESSED BY THE ALGORITHM
PAPER (SINGLER 2020)

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"But what about another example. What about if someone told you on a night out, something like, 'those jeans are really blessing you?', meaning you looked really good. We wouldn't think they were thinking about Jeans as some kind of God, would we?"

I am starting my response to the essays in response to my "Blessed by the Algorithm (BBtA)" paper with another reaction to it that I just recently received. There are some relevant comments that link this response and the others. But perhaps it is also just too difficult for an anthropologist to write something that does not begin with observations of actual situations.

The above quote is from a Master's student who had just listened to me speaking on my BBtA paper, and other related research, for the past hour or so, and had patiently waited with another example of this kind of language, to be offered as a counter example. Admittedly, there are many instances where we draw on implicitly religious language and do not spend time thinking about the theistic baggage that comes with those narratives and images. Expressions like, "Oh, she's so good, she's an angel!", "It was hell on earth", "Their sacrifice will not be forgotten", "This cake is so sinful", "I guess it was just my karma" etc., etc. These terms are multi-vocal; they still speak on different levels and evoke older traditions that we can recognise.

Further, the analogy comes with its own presumed attributes. If I call you an angel, and you do not have wings, a halo and the other abilities

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presumed of angelic force, then the comparison I am making must be in relation to some other aspect of yours that reminds me of the angelic – your benevolent and kind personality. If we talk about jeans blessing us, we have a little idea already of the dominant attributes of a pair of jeans – they have an impact on our appearance. However, the issue with AI (Artificial Intelligence) is that we have not gotten a grip on its attributes. Not yet at least, and perhaps not even ever.

I think this uncertainty is the underlying issue of AI that any discussion of the BBtA tweets has to take into account. Metaphorical language about AI abounds because we do not know how to place this thing into a stable category. It is a thing, a field, a future entity, a human aspiration, a mistake, and many more things besides. I have previously related AI as an object of discussion to the concept of liminality, particularly liminal beings. Just like the ghost, the centaur, the zombie, and (obviously) the robot, it approaches closer and closer in our imaginations to the entity perceived as the "human" but still differs from it in some ways in our conception of it. For some this leads to a feeling of the uncanny, as in Masahiro Mori's 1970 concept of the Uncanny Valley. But primarily, this escape from familiar categories places AI in a meta-category of the liminal that prompts theological and spiritual language in a way that a pair of jeans does not. Holding this meta-category in mind, as well as the multi-vocality of the term "blessed", we can see that we are in an extremely fertile moment for a variety of tones in the discussion of AI – including the seriously religious, the implicitly religious, the parodic, the ironic, the metaphorical, the academic, the financial, and even the moralistic.

I think all of the responses to my 2020 paper on the Blessed by the Algorithm tweets recognise this multi-vocality and the particular moment that AI presents us with. By which, I do not mean a moment of techno-determinism – the idea that AI is making us approach it in particular ways. Instead, that there is a technology that is increasingly interactive, which enhances not only our human tendency to anthropomorphism, but also encourages theism. We see this both with particular applications – such

as the new JesusGPT, which uses a "generative pretrained transformer" to answer questions "as" Jesus – and through the wider discourse about the dangers of superintelligent AI gods in the media.

There is a recursive and self-fueling relationship between the metaphorical theist language we use and our visions of AI as a godlike entity. These four comments to the BBtA article take seriously the complications and limitations of the language around AI and the potential outcome of thinking that AI might have superagency, while simultaneously not seeing the "humans in the machine". These responses also have valid questions and comments on the work, which I will address within the limitations of my own language.

Starting with Jacob Boss's essay, the first thing I have to say is that one of the difficulties of formulating a response to a response is knowing how to deal with compliments. I have known Jacob for a while, and I know that he is a strongly professional academic who thinks very deeply and sincerely about his comments on others' work. So, when he calls me a "teacher of researchers" I am extremely pleased, but also awkwardly British and uncertain how to respond – a state I found myself in when reading parts of the other responses as well. I am more comfortable diving into the questions and critiques of these essays.

With Boss' response, the immediate thing to respond to is his suggestion that other models of the development of religiosity, beyond Weber's tripartite scheme for legitimation, might be valuable to consider. Many scholars have their touchstone figures, and mine has long been Weber. All the way back to an embarrassing early moment in Cambridge where I spoke about his work on charisma with great enthusiasm to my supervisor, only to be gently reminded that as a German, his name began with a "v" sound, not the softer double-u of the English tongue. Durkheim's work on collective effervescence, proffered by Boss here, should be examined like a gem from many sides, to see if its facets also fit the circumstance of the BBtA tweets. Are these tweets the beginning of some religious collectivity beyond a shared

metaphorical framing? And who would serve that community and facilitate that effervescence?

Boss picks up my mention of Sophie Bishop's work on "self-styled algorithmic experts" who I proposed might be interpreted as the prophets and priests of the algorithm. But he then asks whether Durkheim's description of the magician might not be a better fit than Weber's focus on the prophet figure, and the priests that then routinise their charismatic pronouncements. The focus on a client relationship seems to be the key, as Boss cites Durkheim who said, "the magician has a clientele, not a Church", and notes the lack of a community focus for both magicians and such algorithmic experts.

Boss' response raises a larger question about how religion and magic are framed as different efforts and domains in wider religious studies literature and in popular discourse. The framing of magic as individualistic and of religion as communal has long been an ideological act of othering by both religious and academic authorities. Likewise, in more recent centuries magic's increasing synonymity with the fraudulent and the false only enhanced a story of difference. There are also similarities between the magician and the priest that are sometimes ignored in favour of this narrative of difference. For instance, when Boss speaks of people turning to the "magicians of the algorithm for assistance in recovering some control over their experiences and algorithmic outcomes" it as though priests have never asked anything of their deities through propitious offerings. Certainly, priests do not do this to "control" their deities, but I also wonder to what extent algorithmic experts think they are trying to 'control' the algorithm versus trying to gain the right kind of attention at the right time?

In fact, one of the more frequently used words we see in relation to fine tuning your CV for an AI enabled applicant tracking system (ATS) is the modern neo-liberal term, "optimisation", not control. Such optimisation requires the use of keywords for the "soft skills" that the algorithm will recognise, such as "communication", "adapt", "organise", "time management" or "professionalism" (Hays, 2023). These are not words that will order the algorithm what to do. Instead, to extend the priest/god relationship metaphor,

these are words that are successful in garnering the algorithm's attention by matching tags it has already been trained to identify and highlight in its outputs. Again, this description of "the algorithm" quickly falls into personification, even when describing advice from a very mundane focused employment site such as the recruitment firm, Hays (2023).

The building anxiety that emerges in the face of the algorithm that we can feel suffusing such online CV resources – and, I would argue, in the more religious framing of the BBtA tweets – is also rightly highlighted by Boss. He recognises that the blessings, and curses, of the algorithm have very real effects in a neo-liberal society where every person is transformed into "a small corporation". Boss also notes the push to "optimize" here, as well as the "exploitation, vulnerability, and contingency" that the deployment of AI in our modern society brings about. I have written elsewhere on the existential despair that more religious and mythological accounts of AI, such as Roko's Basilisk can bring about (Singler, 2019). However, it was not my intention to say that only the most exponential views of AI had this potential for harm, and I appreciate Boss' call for a pushback against the "algorithmic obscurantism" that fuels more theistic interpretations of AI, and his indication towards work being down at the "grassroots" level by the punks, the biohackers, the grinders, the outcast researchers, in spaces where collective effervescence might actually be appearing. My wider ethnographic work with intentional AI new religious movements also indicates similar moves, with more obvious evidence of ritual and community than was being shown by the BBtA tweets. But I would still hold that these tweets are on the same spectrum of religious views of AI, with similar responses to the liminality, and possibilities of AI.

Boss' reference to the House of Ellil in Atrahasis, the Babylonian creation myth, is a fecund analogy, as its moral is about knowing where to place responsibility. In our case, where to locate the responsibility for the harms of AI. The Devil's Advocate in me, another religious metaphor with multi-vocality, wants to warn about adding more religious metaphors into the AI conversation. This metaphor might also serve to emphasis superagency

and only add to the algorithmic obscurantism Boss warns about. I also had this thought when he asked, "What would a cosmology capable of overcoming or resisting algorithmic obscurantism look like?". Cosmologies are themselves hard to control and can often be taken by others to run with in directions you were expecting, including the theological.

Likewise, to be as self-reflexive as possible as an anthropologist, there was always the concern that in writing and speaking about the BBtA tweets I might be fueling the conversation about them. Every modern anthropologist has this moment of concern. Our relationship with our field is a two way one: we are mutually changed by the interaction. Sometimes this is more quantitative than qualitative: there are quantitatively more tweets about BBtA now because some of them have come from me.

This is an issue I thought about while reading Marta Kołodziejska's response. She mentions that "Once the Internet became widely available and popular, and turned into a mundane part of everyday life (the way the Internet works is also not a great mystery anymore), such utopian and theistic associations have become less popular". However, how would one go about proving this decline in mystical thinking about technologies? We have the idea of the "hype cycle", which might be pertinent. Would a theo-hype cycle also be possible to outline and observe accurately? And connected, how would I ever be able to return to the BBtA tweets and deduce whether they are growing in influence, and burgeoning into a new religious movement as Giulia Evolvi also asks, as we shall see below, and would I be able to extract my influence in that conversation since publishing my article on them in 2020?

There are existing statements that argue for the diminishment of the mystique of technology, such as the Internet, and more pertinently, AI. As John McCarthy once said, "As soon as it works, no one calls it AI anymore", meaning that AI, true artificial intelligence remains a high on eschatological hope, even when narrow application after narrow application succeeds. This demystification could then be presumed to lead to a smaller and smaller

domain of theistic AI as more and more uses of this emerging technology are domesticated.

However, something still niggles, and to play Devil's Advocate again, I must ask – "Do people REALLY understand how the Internet works?", as Marta Kołodziejska claims? Digital religious scholars like Kołodziejska might do, along with others directly working in computer science, etc. Perhaps Kołodziejska is correct, and AI only has its current enchantment and its possibility to enchant because it seems newer? It is not, of course. AI predates the Internet in its 1956 conception at the Dartmouth Summer Conference attended by John McCarthy and the other 'founding fathers' of AI. But the age of AI is often surprising to many, as it is so often presented as an exciting emerging technology when really what is new is a larger data set or a specific technique such as Deep Learning, which is also not necessarily understood by the public. Once AI is more widely available and popular, as Kołodziejska suggested with her discussion of the Internet, will it lose this mystique? Perhaps, However, I would argue that the intentional personification of AI as an individual entity that we can directly communicate with is a distinct difference to the Internet, which has remained overall a potential space, rather than a potential person, or deity. Even if that space can be sacralised by practitioners and in metaphorical language.

I also want to note and take on board Marta Kołodziejska's criticisms of my paper. The primary criticisms from Kołodziejska are about the methods of data analysis and the too brief reflection on the parodic/ironic nature of the tweets. On the former, I suspect that, like many academics, I formulated my approach during earlier research and training and decided unconsciously to give more space for the material to breathe instead of rehashing a method description yet again. This is a weakness of the paper and suggests a need to turn the self-reflexivity I mentioned above back onto my methods and my effect on the field I am discussing. The comment on the need for further sentiment analysis is also fair, but I would note that not all tweets lent themselves to such analysis. Likewise, when Kołodziejska asks for more background on the tweets, sometimes it simply was not there. As with earlier

research I performed on statements of affiliation on Twitter – for instance, I examined tweets from people just sending out in the world the two words "Indigo Children" (Singler, 2017), there are times when people are simply broadcasting their immediate thoughts on social media.

Like the Master's student in my seminar, Kołodziejska also questions what makes the AI-related narratives distinct to other colloquial accounts of being "blessed". However, I think Kołodziejska's example is a weaker counterexample than the jeans one. She notes tweets where people describe being "blessed by the thrift gods" – assuming that this is intended solely jokingly and not indicative of burgeoning religious beliefs in new thrift gods. What makes this a weaker counterexample for me is that it the multi-vocality of "blessed" is still more strongly tied with theism in these tweets, far more than in the jeans god example. Further, the "luck" that this expression is indicating towards has a longer history of theistic interpretations than the aesthetic enhancements of a pair of jeans. This counterexample from Marta fits more neatly into a discussion of theistic continuities through metaphor than the Master's student's example, which instead provides something like an argument *ad absurdum* (I personally have never heard this kind of compliment before) to refute my description of the BBtA tweets as theistic.

The third response, from Carly Machado, is a blessing in itself. It has introduced me to a variety of exceptional and emerging work from Brazilian ethnographers who are tackling similar intersections of religion and technology, while also bringing in important evidence and perspectives on race, power, inequality, politics, and more. Also appreciated is the direct connection between these works and recent events in Brazil that Machado makes. In particular, that she raises the work of Letícia Cesarino in relation to the mobilization of technology and technology companies in the 2018 and 2020 Brazilian elections, and how platforms and apps supported the relationship between religion and power in those moments. I thank Machado for reminding us again that power is an entrenched factor in the discussion of religion and technology, particularly in this current moment of national shifts towards voices of popularism and conservatism (with some instances

of rebellion against this trend, of course). I appreciate Machado's claim that my work will help with producing the "analytical capacity to understand the power plots, how they are made, and also how they can be undone".

A related topic, that of hegemony, can also be raised in response to Machado's criticism that the BBtA paper focusses too solely on Christian theology in relation to AI theism. Certainly, there is extensive scope to discuss other theologies and forms of futurism and their influence on AI discourse and imaginaries: in the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Religion and AI* that I have co-edited with Fraser Watts we have excellent chapters on Black theology, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and I have another monograph forthcoming that explores other examples of AI's relationship with other established and newly established religions.

However, one thing that is very apparent in AI discourse is the narrative of AI hegemony and singularity. Predictions about the development of AI can fall quickly into scenarios of a forthcoming AI arms race as nations rush to develop increasingly superior AI that outdoes that of other nations. This narrative can also lead to the conclusion that these multiple AI super-intelligences will necessarily face off against each other. Further, if we were to survive this form of "AI apocalypse", we would live to see a singular AI Singularity in ascendance across the globe. Hence, we can see how such an account can fit to a form of "AI henotheism" that then evolves through conflict to "AI monotheism". Or, we can see how some forms of AI discourse speaks little of the steps taken to get to this AI monotheism, and instead just jumps to the dominance of a singular Singularity.

Thus, while there is abundant material on other religious conceptions of AI, when people conceive of "the Algorithm" as fitting in the god-space, it is predominantly a singular god – even in the current moment of algorithmic proliferation, even within the same platforms. Moreover, the dominant religious cultural legacy for many of these interlocutors is a form of common or vernacular Christianity. In other forthcoming work on our conceptions of how AI might (or might not) create religion, I explore an example of narrative elements adapted from non-Christian, but monotheistic,

conceptions of god. For instance, in Isaac Asimov's short story "Reason" (1941) in which the machine followers of a new "AI god" mimic the Islamic *shahada*, the proclamation of faith, to state that: "There is no Master but the Master and QT-1 is his prophet". However, this adoption of Islamic ritualized speech is resting upon Asimov's sometimes quite overt critique of religion; writing and mocking such religious robots is Asimov's way of expressing his view that religion is the result of irrationality and credulity (Singler, forthcoming).

I also appreciate Machado's linking of my work to a longer history of discussions of "The Future of Religious Past", in particular the work of Hent de Vries and the academic momentum to explore the intersections of religion and technology in the early 2000s. Moreover, that through reframing this title we can also explore "the past of the future of religion", in Machado's words, and contest any claims that religion has only just begun to look to the "future" through the adoption of emerging technologies. As Machado draws out of my work, and poses as a question, "Is there AI not entangled with the religious, and is religion not entangled with technology", to which my loud and perhaps obvious answer is simply "no".

To be the anthropologist again, I want to briefly refer to a recent moment of spontaneous fieldwork, that I think is relevant to Machado's comments here, and which was a moment in which I could express what I think might be our shared stance on the nature of religion. After giving a brief public talk on religion and AI in Zurich, Switzerland, I was approached by an older Swiss gentleman. He told me that he just didn't "get" my talk. Believing it to be a language issue, or perhaps that I was unclear, I very briefly and carefully reiterated the basic points of my short talk. "No", he replied, "It's that I don't see what AI has to do with religion when religion is just beliefs". Of course, I then pointed to the same elements that Machado does in her citation of Jeremy Stolow's work, that it is impossible to imagine

[...] any form of religious experience, practice, or knowledge [...] without technology. No instruments, tools, or devices; no architecture or clothing,

no paint, musical instruments, incense, or written documents; not even the disciplined practices (Stolow 2008, 194-195).

Unfortunately, I did not seem to convince him. However, I still assert, as Machado seems to too, that there can be no such thing as religion without technology, and, vice versa, we cannot see technology emerging without religious and cultural influences, imaginaries inspired by existing eschatologies, and new forms of religiosity innovating from those imaginaries and new experiences of the technology. And AI might be the newest example of this relationship, but it is not a unique moment in that sense, even if its interactivity and tendency to be anthropomorphised shapes this relationship in particular ways, including deification. I am also gratified that Machado referred my research and its place within a longer history of the study of NRMs, including her own work on the Raelians, as I am certain that this academic field is only increasingly relevant for conceptualising this moment in technological and societal change.

Finally, turning to Giulia Evolvi's response, we can see some positive and negative critiques of my BBtA article that overlap with comments from Kołodziejska and Boss as already discussed, as well as some new contributions. First, I appreciate her recognition that I have intentionally not delved into the "definition of religion" miasma. The definition from Geertz offered by other scholars of digital religion, as mentioned by Evolvi, is useful enough, just as Boss' citation of Durkheim's collective effervescence is useful to think with. However, I do not think written definitions will capture entirely people's more intuitive engagement with their cultural forms in popular discourse. Again, attempts have been made to do so, and we might also cite useful attempts like "vernacular religion", "implicit religion", "lifestyle religion", "everyday religion", etc., when they indicate towards a particular approach to religion as an object. However, they will only ever be partial. Instead, we can operate with what I would call a "theory of religious mind". That is, we can operate with the assumption that our subjects have within their own mind an object that they are thinking of when they think of religion

and are acting accordingly. And in expressing themselves through religious metaphors, tropes, images, narratives etc., they are doing something that we might not be able to encapsulate through one singular definition, but which might still be religious in their conceptions of the term.

Evolvi seems to agree that not getting caught in the circularity of definitions of religion in my BBtA article is a theoretical strength, as I focus instead – as anthropologists should – on what people *do* and *discuss*. There is the caveat from Evolvi that such an approach raises the question of how such undefined instances can contribute to wider discussions on religion. Or to discussions on secularisation and post-secularisation. One answer, although not necessarily an entirely satisfying one, is to suggest that the form of the ethnographic material and the ethnographer provides a shaping effect, and vice versa. To say, in effect, something like "the subject of the religious studies scholar is religion, and that the study of religion makes the scholar a religious studies scholar". This is tautology, of course, but one that rolls along moderately well in academia, nonetheless. Scholars who commit to combatting such unassessed truisms through the decolonialisation of the object "religion" will not approve, I assume. But I also find merit in their work, as I did in a 2023 blog post on contesting the concept of "secular religion" (Singler, 2023a). Academics in the study of religion can operate at diverse levels of involvement with the formation of their field and its objects at various times, and I see this as a strength rather than weakness.

A second strength of the BBtA article identified by Evolvi is the discussion of AI in relation to New Religious Movements (NRMs). As mentioned above, there is a difficulty in assessing the development of this field, or the quantitative escalation of BBtA tweets, after having shared material on it and having had some, minor, influence on people's awareness of this expression. Evolvi's question as to whether the BBtA tweets represent a developing NRM (New Religious Movements) or an example of continuities with traditional religious imaginaries makes me want to respond with the "Why not both" Meme (Know Your Meme, 2011) or the "Both is good" Meme (Know Your Meme, 2012). A third option, as mentioned above, is that both the

BBtA tweets and NRMs are on a spectrum of theistic responses to AI, and that they might also have influence on each other. I do not know of an AI NRM that uses the expression "Blessed by the Algorithm", but I think wider conversations about overt theistic interpretations of AI might encourage uses of BBtA in public discourse, both in parody and in aspiration – although this is merely conjecture at this point.

The third element that Evolvi describes as a strength is the method, in contrast to Marta who I feel had some good points to make about the lack of discussion on it. I do appreciate Evolvi supporting paying attention to more niche online discourses that do not attract a high number of comments and a large circulation. Noticing the small things is an intrinsic part of anthropology, in my view.

It is also a valid question to ask, as Evolvi does, what kind of ethnographic approach might be brought to bear on more visual social media. In the same year as the BBtA article I also wrote on the dissemination of the "AI Creation Meme" – the remixing of the Creation of Adam by Michelangelo with an AI/robotic focus (Singler, 2020). These images in my sample were found on websites, but were also shared on social media, so there is a large scope for further exploration of visual material artefacts of AI theism and theistic metaphor when they appear on social media such as TikTok and Instagram. Some scholars are already working in these spaces looking at spiritual interpretations of AI as a divinatory or revelatory force behind the scenes, and I am excited to see more work from religious studies scholars on AI, and our apprehensions of it.

In summary, it was a pleasure to read these responses and see my work critically engaged with. Each response has made me reflect on my methodology, methods, ground assumptions, and on the path to further work in this space. As an academic, there is little more gratifying than the feeling that you really are a part of a larger discussion. Academia can be an isolating place, both socially and in terms of our intellectual bubbles. We cite others, and they cite us (hopefully!), but too often it is a just a note in passing, so to have this level of deep engagement with my work is a privilege

and enthuses me for further work both alone and possibly in collaboration with these excellent scholars. I am grateful for this opportunity to reflect on their comments, and to reflect again on my own work.

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Received on: 1st November, 2023

Approved in: 5th November, 2023

ARTIGOS