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Beth Singler, *Religion and Artificial Intelligence: An Introduction*

(New York: Routledge, 2025). pp. 1–217. £35.99 (Pbk). ISBN 9781032187648

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When considering artificial intelligence, religion seldom emerges as a central theme in the thought process. However, Beth Singler's *Religion and Artificial Intelligence: An Introduction*, recently published as part of Routledge's *Engaging with Religion* series, challenges this tendency. Singler's work invites readers to think, or rethink, about the relationship – or, as she describes it, the *entanglements* – between AI and religion, offering anthropological, ethnographic, philosophical, and personal insights into their interconnected dynamics.

The book is well-structured, with each chapter – except the final one – opening with case studies. Apart from the introduction and conclusion, the chapters follow a consistent format. They begin by presenting case studies, followed by a 'Discussion' section in which Singler highlights key insights, makes critical distinctions, and draws on interdisciplinary scholarship to enhance the reader's understanding of the cases. Each chapter concludes with a 'Questions for Further Thinking' section, which will undoubtedly serve as a valuable resource for instructors integrating the text into their courses. The book is divided broadly into two parts. The first captures the ways in which religion(s) and AI are entangled via 'Rejection' (chapter 2), 'Adoption' (chapter 3), and 'Adaptation' (chapter 4). The second part of the book, which helpfully uses the rejection-adoption-adaptation schema of part one, critically analyzes transhumanism (chapter 5), new religious movements (NRMs) (chapter 6), and posthumanism (chapter 7), with the final chapter, 'Entanglements, Imaginaries, and Futures', dedicated to identifying pathways for scholars to investigate further.

In the introduction, Singler draws out the fluidity of the terms 'religion' and 'AI', covering some of the methods and theories of each, and begins to sketch her rejection-adoption-adaptation schema. It is prudent for Singler to remind the reader in this introduction that the case studies involve '*a* religious response to AI, not *the* religious response' (6), a point which scholars of religion will appreciate and is representative of the book's overall aim at including religious perspectives that transcend Christianity.

In chapter 2, Singler introduces Hanson Robotics's *Sophia*. Readers familiar with the technology ethics literature will be familiar with Sophia and the controversy surrounding it (or depending on who you ask, her). However, Singler's multi-directional exploration of the issues goes beyond surface level detail. For example, Singler describes the *Sophia Awakens* video that was released by Hanson Robotics and explores its religious undertones. Additionally, Singler reports on Sophia and the controversy over Saudi Arabia granting

it citizenship, which includes contextualizing the political and financial strategies of the Saudi government, particularly their belief in AI and data as the new oil. Furthermore, Singler's digital ethnographic research explores the implications of what it means for a robot to receive citizenship (i.e., rights) when, as people on digital forums note, the country has current citizens like women that have limited rights, leading one to question the message that this sends to these marginalized groups. Singler does not answer this question but gives the reader enough content to formulate their own position on the matter.

Singler shows that blanket statements like 'AI is forbidden in Islam' are clearly false, especially given that AI is present in the *Hajj* – one of Islam's five pillars. However, specific applications of AI are likely to cause controversy when interpreted through the lenses of religious doctrines. For example, some Muslims may perceive certain applications of AI that are aesthetically similar to the human form as *haram*. Additionally, 'evil' is a loaded term, but Singler introduces Christianity's original sin myth to show how some Christians justify their rejection of AI in their religious worldview – is it forbidden knowledge, a product of original sin, a ploy by the creator of evil?

Religions are often thought of as being incongruent with technological progress, but the cases covered in chapter 3 that deal with prayer apps, sermons produced by generative AI, and theomorphic robots demonstrate some of the ways that religions are adopting AI and other advanced technologies. The former case will be of particular interest to philosophers engaged with the privacy literature, as Singler effectively highlights the ethical challenges posed by companies' negligent – or, in some cases, malicious – use of user data. Additionally, it would be remiss not to mention that one of the book's delights is the opportunity to explore the fascinating content Singler references – such as the Hallow's commercial *A Day with Hallow* – inviting readers to follow intriguing tangents and delve deeper into related topics.

The case studies in chapter 4 all 'introduce algorithmic outcomes on religion and demonstrate how they have a shaping effect on religious activities and understandings of society, politics, and even reality and the truth' (101). For example, 'Case 10: Covid-19, AI, and Religion' explores (among other things) the religious consequences that followed transitioning religious services to virtual spaces during the pandemic, thereby influencing religious members' conceptions about the authenticity of digital spaces. Singler applies the term infodemic to aid in analyzing this case and states that 'the COVID-19 infodemic resulted in vaccine hesitancy; a refusal to halt in-person gatherings, leading to superspreading events; and inter-religious tensions' (89). Ultimately, Singler draws out some of the issues that emerged from religious services transitioning to online modalities, such as declining membership, religious leaders using generative AI to write sermons, and the challenges with virtual technology itself.

In chapter 5, Singler focuses on the ways in which transhumanism 'is entangled with religion in both its rejection of religion and its adoption of religion's rhetoric, narratives, tropes, and eschatological frameworks' (109). Case 12 shows ways in which transhumanism is perceived as an anti-religious endeavour. For some, there will be a point where transhumanism leads to negative metaphysical consequences. 'Changing the human at the genetic level is also seen by some users as destroying our status as creations made in God's image, *imago Dei*' (110). Despite the eclectic transhumanism literature, Singler's efforts in the previous chapters provide the reader with enough framing and tools to engage meaningfully with the material in this chapter, thus making it easy to reason out why some religious imagery like the apocalypse, ideas such as losing one's soul, and Satan are sometimes found within the same sentence as transhumanism.

Also in this chapter is case 14, titled 'Transhumanist Visions of an Afterlife', which introduces things such as digital immortality, digital rapture, and digital heaven. A host

of interesting and important philosophical questions get raised here such as who will own these digital afterlives? This contrasts with the standard religious framework where each particular religion appears to have ownership over its afterlife destination. However, the digital afterlife of the future might be owned by major corporations like Meta. Furthermore, Singler's examples raise the question of whether religious individuals would choose a digital afterlife, knowing that – according to their religious doctrine – their previously deceased loved ones are believed to reside elsewhere. In other words, will Christians choose a digital afterlife knowing their loved ones reside in Christianity's heaven?

In chapter 6, Singler 'explore[s] both intentional and playful efforts to develop AI religions' (138). Specifically, Singler discusses two new religious movements: Theta Noir and Turing Church.

Singler's discussion of religious theories explores how religions emerge, leading to insights on new religious movements and the cultural forces shaping them. New religious movements often experience shifts in public perception over time. Initially, the public fears these religions, then reduces them to stereotypes, and eventually starts mocking them. The main point of this discussion is to show that 'AI NRMs are also subject to these forces of culture and counterculture, fear and parody' (159). Put differently, the reader is led to ask the question of what stage is the public in when perceiving these AI religions? Will these AI NRM's follow a similar trajectory as NRMs that were labelled 'cult' by the media in the early 1960s and eventually become the focus of parody within popular culture? Only time will tell.

In chapter 7, Singler tackles the issue of posthumanism and its entanglement with religion. Philosophers working in the philosophy of religion, technology ethics, and the philosophy of mind will be familiar with some of the details in case 20 titled 'AI "Consciousness", "Sentience", or "Souls"?', but Singler's digital ethnographic research is commendable and provides interesting perspectives on communities involved in creating highly advanced AI that challenges our 'sentience' category. According to Singler, 'AI discourse in these communities partakes of particular visions of the human, creation, and posthuman that owe debts to existing theologies and eschatologies' (182). So, to understand these – often perceived as secular – communities, we must grapple with the religious elements.

In the final chapter, Singler focuses on 'three thematic areas – entanglements, imaginaries, and futures – and explore[s] through them moments, spaces, and methods that could potentially inspire further research into religion and AI' (198). This chapter also offers pithy summaries of the previous chapters, refreshing the reader's memory of the intellectual journey undertaken throughout the book.

Any deep philosophical critique of this book would be uncharitable, as it exceeded my expectations as an introductory exploration of religion and AI. However, philosophers of religion may find it lacking in its treatment of ontology and normativity, as the book does not delve into these areas in significant depth – nor should it be expected to, given its intended audience. For example, *should* religions adopt emerging technologies and what are the ethical implications of doing so, and is this emerging digital landscape an *authentic* space with the religious framework? Although these questions persist, Singler provides readers with sufficient insights to approach these questions more informed.

This book is a valuable resource for instructors teaching religion courses in both philosophy and religious studies departments. It features clear writing, a well-organized structure, accessible references for further exploration, and end-of-chapter discussion questions that make it an easy-to-use teaching tool. The book is worth reading entirely but given Singler's efforts, reading individual chapters is possible to fit the needs of the instructor.

In the twentieth century, the secularization hypothesis was proposed to predict the decline of religion as science and technology advanced. Many have pointed out the flaws of

this hypothesis, but some want to apply similar reasoning to our current ethos: advancements in artificial intelligence will replace religious thinking, action, and institutions (i.e., religion). Singler's *Religion and Artificial Intelligence: An Introduction* shows that religion and AI are entangled and here to stay. If one wants to understand this entanglement, I highly recommend reading this book.