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Artificial Intelligence and Spirituality: A Tool for Engagement or a Threat to Transcendence?

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Abstract. The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into spiritual life raises critical questions about whether it enhances engagement or reduces spirituality to mechanized, algorithmic interactions. As a left-hemisphere-driven system, AI excels in data processing, analytical reasoning, and personalization but lacks intuition, relational depth, and transcendence. Nevertheless, AI offers accessibility, tailored support on the spiritual path, and theological insights. This article examines AI's impact through the three dimensions of spirituality—personal-experiential, communal-institutional, and rational-reflective—outlined by Platovnjak and Svetelj (2024), incorporating Sheldrake's (2014) integrative approach to spirituality.

AI-driven prayer apps, chatbots, and automated religious education tools have expanded participation in spiritual practices, facilitated interfaith dialogue, and provided immediate pastoral care. However, potential risks include depersonalization, algorithmic bias, misinformation, and the commercialization of spirituality. AI remains unable to replicate embodied rituals, lived faith, and human spiritual discernment, which are essential for holistic spiritual development. Thus, while AI can serve as a supplementary tool for spiritual engagement, its ethical integration re-

quires discernment to preserve the depth, relationality, and transformative power of spirituality. Ultimately, spiritual wisdom and transcendence remain uniquely human experiences, grounded in contemplation, communal worship, and embodied faith.

Keywords: digital religion, embodied faith, algorithmic engagement, integrative approach, spiritual typologies.

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Introduction

We are living in an era in which Western society has undergone a profound cognitive shift—from the predominant influence of the right hemisphere to the increasing dominance of the left hemisphere over the past few centuries (McGilchrist 2009). This transformation has fundamentally shaped modern life, privileging rationalization, abstraction, systemization, and mechanistic thinking, often at the expense of holistic perception, intuition, and embodied experience. Artificial intelligence (AI), arguably the ultimate expression of left-brain cognition, exemplifies this

trajectory. It operates through data processing, symbol manipulation, and computational reasoning, mirroring the left hemisphere's preference for certainty, efficiency, and control (McGilchrist 2024).

The term Artificial Intelligence was coined by John McCarthy in 1955, who defined it as "the science and engineering of making intelligent machines" (McCarthy, as cited in Manning 2020). Today, IBM defines AI as a technology that simulates human learning, reasoning, creativity, and autonomy (Stryker and Kavlakoglu 2024). Despite its impressive development, the question of whether AI constitutes true intelligence remains contested. Žalec (2023, 814; 2024, 758–759) questions whether AI possesses the core attributes of intelligence, while McGilchrist (2024) argues it merely processes information, lacking depth, value orientation, and contextual understanding (see also Crespo 2024).

Christman and Prichard (2024) suggest that certain historical lifestyle changes have further entrenched left-hemisphere dominance: shifting from standing to sitting, outdoor to indoor living, communal to solitary activities, and analog to digital environments. These trends have displaced right-hemisphere functions associated with embodiment, intuition, and community.

However, this cognitive imbalance has not gone unchallenged. As a counterbalance to the rational-technical dominance of late modernity, contemporary society has witnessed a spiritual turn—a renewed search for meaning, interconnectedness, and self-transcendence. Brumec (2024b) argues that the core attributes of late-modern societies have shaped specific tenets of contemporary spirituality, molding it into a form that reflects the defining features of our age. Spirituality, then, is not opposed to social transformation but deeply embedded within it, shaping how individuals conceptualize transcendence and purpose.

This multidimensional spiritual revival is echoed in holistic science, which combines integrative theoretical approaches with the collective validation processes of scientific communities to legitimize emerging understandings of reality (Pohar 2023). Empirical support for this trend comes from Houtman and Aupers (2008), who describe a "spiritual revolution" that gained momentum in the final decades of the twentieth cen-

tury. Their analysis of World Values Survey data (1981–2000) revealed a significant societal shift away from traditional religious institutions toward individualized, self-directed forms of spirituality. In a context marked by the decline of institutional authority and moral frameworks, spirituality has come to serve as a key resource for existential orientation, moral reflection, and personal fulfillment (Brumec 2024a).

This evolving spirituality is broad and fluid. Ursula King (1998, 96) defines it as "a general label for the search for direction, purpose, and meaning in relation to the deepest dimensions of human existence." Today, many individuals prefer spirituality to religion because it is less institutional, more open-ended, and adaptable to personal experience (King 1992, 16). Similarly, Knoblauch (2006, as cited in Rensing 2008) emphasizes its subjective, interpretive nature and its role in fostering a coherent and holistic worldview.

Sheldrake (2007, xi) further argues that spirituality has become a defining concept of our era, encompassing fundamental values and perspectives through which individuals seek meaning (2014, 6-10). He identifies three broad expressions (2014, 12-20): classic religious spiritualities grounded in doctrine and practice; esoteric spiritualities that blend religious, philosophical, and ethical elements; and secular or non-religious spiritualities oriented around existential exploration and personal transformation.

McGilchrist's (2009) The Master and His Emissary offers a compelling neurological framework for understanding these developments. He argues that true spirituality emerges from the transcendent integration of both hemispheres—balancing reason with intuition, analysis with connection, and individuality with universality. Spirituality, in this view, resists the reductive tendencies of the left hemisphere and affirms the holistic, relational qualities of the right.

Given this interplay between AI and evolving forms of spirituality, it becomes crucial to assess whether AI can support or undermine spiritual life. Can AI, as the embodiment of left-brain intelligence, facilitate genuine spiritual engagement—or does it risk reducing spirituality to mechanized, algorithmic abstraction?

This article explores these questions by analyzing AI's influence on spirituality through three core dimensions proposed by Platovnjak and Svetelj (2024, 167-180): the personal-experiential, communal-institutional, and rational-reflective. It also draws on Sheldrake's (2014, 12-20) integrative typology of spirituality—encompassing religious, esoteric, and secular forms—to evaluate whether AI acts as a tool for spiritual growth or a driver of further fragmentation in an already left-brain-dominated world.

1. Artificial Intelligence and Spirituality: Three Dimensions of Influence

Spirituality is a multifaceted phenomenon that unfolds across three interdependent dimensions: the personal-experiential, the communal-institutional, and the rational-reflective (Platovnjak and Svetelj 2024, 167–180). Each dimension contributes uniquely to spiritual life—through individual experience, communal belonging, and theological or philosophical reflection. If one of these dimensions is diminished, the others risk becoming disoriented: without the personal-experiential, spirituality may become detached from lived reality; without the communal-institutional, it risks isolation and individualism; and without the rational-reflective, it may lack critical depth and coherence.

An integrative approach to spirituality recognizes that these dimensions are not isolated but interwoven, each enriching the others. McGilchrist (2009) argues that the right hemisphere is particularly adept at holding together paradox, ambiguity, and relational meaning, aligning closely with mystical and contemplative traditions. The left hemisphere, by contrast, favors clarity, categorization, and linear reasoning—often reducing complex realities to binary oppositions. In spiritual discourse, this can result in reductive "either/or" framings—spiritual versus material, rational versus mystical—rather than embracing a more holistic "both-and" orientation. As Platovnjak and Svetelj (2024, 170–171) emphasize, spiritual maturity in the Christian tradition involves transcending rigid dualisms by integrating reason and intuition, doctrine and experience, structure and openness, and prayer with action.

AI interacts with each of these three spiritual dimensions in distinct ways. It offers unprecedented tools for accessibility, personalization, and theological analysis, yet it also raises critical concerns about authenticity, embodiment, and reductionism. The following sections explore AI's influence within each spiritual dimension, analyzing both its potential contributions and its limitations.

1.1. Personal-Experiential Dimension of Spirituality and AI

A growing body of research indicates that spiritual experiences are primarily associated with the right hemisphere of the brain (Trimble 2007; Devinsky and Lai 2008; McNamara 2009). In contrast, artificial intelligence—operating on functions typically attributed to the left hemisphere—cannot directly experience spirituality. However, AI can simulate aspects of spiritual practice through tools such as guided meditation apps, AI-assisted prayer platforms, and religious chatbots. The right hemisphere governs embodied meaning, intuition, and spiritual transcendence—whether understood as an encounter with the divine or as an expanded awareness of existence—while the left hemisphere is responsible for analysis, categorization, and mechanistic processing (McGilchrist 2009).

While AI presents new opportunities for spiritual engagement, its role in the personal-experiential dimension introduces both advantages and challenges, especially in reconciling the right hemisphere's deeply lived spirituality with the mechanized simulations generated by left-hemisphere-style systems.

1.1.1. Potential Positive Impacts

One notable benefit of AI in personal-experiential spirituality is enhanced accessibility. AI-powered applications for prayer, mindfulness, and meditation help eliminate barriers such as the lack of physical religious spaces or spiritual guidance. By offering spiritual resources anytime and anywhere, these tools enable broader participation. For instance, Hallow, a Catholic prayer and meditation app, integrates AI-powered recommendations based on user preferences. Since its launch in 2018, Hallow has

grown rapidly, reaching over 18 million downloads in 150 countries, with around 40 percent of its users identifying as non-Catholics—underscoring its broader appeal and inclusive potential (The Rio Times 2024; Hallow n.d.).

AI also offers tailored spiritual support. These systems can adapt to individual users' spiritual needs by offering personalized prayers, meditations, and reflections, based on preferences, emotional states, and prior interactions. Replika AI, for example, is a chatbot designed to foster deep personal reflection and emotional connection. Its interactions mimic chaplaincy practices such as active listening and non-judgmental presence. Replika units are imbued with human-like traits and values, enhancing their role as emotionally supportive companions (Brown 2023). As of August 2024, the platform had surpassed 30 million users worldwide (Patel 2024).

In addition to personalization, AI can support mental and emotional well-being. AI-powered tools often serve as companions in times of distress, offering affirmations, meditations, or prayers that promote inner peace and resilience. Brown (2023) observes that AI designed to emulate pastoral care can provide users with a comforting space for emotional and spiritual support, particularly for those who may lack access to human spiritual guides.

Furthermore, AI-driven spirituality frequently transcends traditional denominational boundaries. By exposing users to multiple religious or spiritual traditions, AI fosters interreligious and cross-spiritual exploration. For example, although Hallow is rooted in Catholic tradition, its widespread use among non-Catholics suggests that AI can contribute to spiritual inclusivity and broaden interfaith dialogue (Hallow n.d.).

1.1.2. Potential Negative Impacts

Despite these advantages, integrating AI into personal spirituality poses significant risks. One major concern is the risk of superficial spirituality. While AI can simulate spiritual practices, it lacks consciousness, emotional depth, and the capacity for genuine transcendence. This may lead users to engage in shallow, transactional interactions rather than pursue

transformative spiritual experiences. From a hemispheric perspective (McGilchrist 2009), this reinforces left-hemisphere dominance, reducing spirituality to mechanized habits instead of fostering right-hemisphere transcendence and holistic meaning-making.

Another issue is detachment from authentic community and embodied spirituality. Spirituality is often nurtured through human interaction, ritual, and shared presence—dimensions AI cannot replicate. Simulated interpersonal engagement through chatbots or virtual prayer tools may create a false sense of connection and even contribute to spiritual isolation (Trothen 2022). While the right hemisphere processes deep relational and communal experiences, AI operates on abstraction and algorithmic logic, thereby bypassing the subtle, embodied aspects of spiritual life.

Moreover, AI lacks an intrinsic connection to the transcendent. It cannot participate in or mediate sacred presence, nor can it evoke the kind of spiritual reciprocity that arises in authentic encounters between human and divine. While a person may experience God through silence, sacrament, or contemplative union, AI remains external, devoid of spiritual awareness. The risk is that technological spirituality may replace true transcendence with simulation, drawing seekers away from embodied, grace-filled practices.

Concerns also arise around algorithmic bias and the limitations of personalization. AI systems rely on data inputs and engagement metrics, which may introduce cultural biases or reinforce spiritual echo chambers. Instead of leading users to deep, authentic insights, these systems may prioritize engagement over substance, presenting shallow or emotionally charged content.

Finally, ethical issues such as data privacy and commercialization complicate AI's spiritual role. Many platforms collect sensitive personal data, raising concerns about surveillance, targeted advertising, and commodification of spiritual needs. When spiritual experiences are shaped by profit-driven algorithms and gated behind paywalls, there is a real danger of transforming sacred practices into transactional services, diminishing the depth and authenticity of spiritual engagement

1.2. Communal-Institutional Dimension of Spirituality and AI

The communal-institutional dimension of spirituality highlights that individuals realize their spiritual identity not in isolation but through relationships, shared rituals, and integration within spiritual or religious communities (Platovnjak and Svetelj 2024, 175–177). This dimension reflects a fundamental human longing for belonging, recognition, and mutual support—needs traditionally nurtured through embodied practices, communal worship, and interpersonal care (Shields et al. 2015).

At its core, this dimension affirms that spiritual closeness and emotional connection cannot be simulated by algorithms. While AI may replicate aspects of human interaction, it cannot embody the vulnerability, warmth, or mutuality that arise through lived human presence. The spiritual and emotional resonance of collective experience—so central to this dimension—requires the right hemisphere's intuitive, relational engagement, which is absent in AI.

Nonetheless, AI has become increasingly integrated into both religious institutions and non-religious spiritual communities. Many churches now use AI-driven tools to facilitate online prayer groups, Bible studies, and remote pastoral support (Bettiza 2021). At the same time, esoteric and alternative communities—centered on practices such as astrology, tarot, or energy healing—are using AI for personalized spiritual content, algorithm-based matchmaking, and virtual mentorship. These developments enhance access and participation but also risk substituting embodied communal belonging with algorithmically mediated experiences.

AI-powered chatbots offer faith-based counseling and theological insights in religious settings, while secular platforms support non-religious spiritual exploration focused on gratitude, well-being, and mindfulness. Insight Timer AI Coach, for instance, fosters global spiritual reflection and community in a non-religious but deeply spiritual context (Insight Timer n.d.). Similarly, Hallow, a Catholic app, provides personalized AI-supported prayer guidance to users who may lack access to physical church communities (Hallow n.d.). While such platforms expand engage-

ment, they may also lead to spiritual disembodiment and weaken institutional ties.

1.2.1. Potential Positive Impacts

One of AI's clearest contributions in this dimension is increased accessibility to spiritual communities. By reducing obstacles such as geographic distance, disability, or institutional absence, AI platforms broaden participation. This includes both communities grounded in formal religious traditions and those centered on non-religious or esoteric spiritualities. As Sheldrake (2014, 7–13) emphasizes, this distinction does not deny the spirituality of religious communities but acknowledges the growing diversity of spiritual expression outside institutional frameworks. For example, Hallow facilitates spiritual engagement through personalized prayer content, allowing individuals to remain connected even when in-person participation is not possible (The Rio Times 2024; Hallow n.d.).

AI also enhances pastoral and spiritual support by offering 24/7 theological guidance. Tools like Catholic Answers AI provide instant access to doctrinal resources, helping users navigate complex theological questions (Catholic Answers n.d.). However, while AI systematizes information well, it lacks the intuitive discernment and emotional depth associated with human chaplaincy. Brown (2023) emphasizes that AI cannot replace the spiritual care offered by human chaplains, especially in areas requiring embodied presence, empathy, and moral accountability. Spiritual discernment, in particular, is not simply an intellectual task but a relational and often sacred process—one rooted in community and open to transcendent encounter. Such discernment cannot be replicated by algorithms.

Another benefit is AI's role in strengthening online religious and spiritual networks. Digital platforms now allow seekers from diverse traditions to connect, share insights, and engage in mindfulness practices across borders. Insight Timer AI Coach, for instance, encourages global dialogue across spiritual traditions (Insight Timer n.d.). Yet while this accessibility expands spiritual participation, it may also lead to the dilution

of particular traditions or a diminished sense of deep belonging rooted in embodied ritual and heritage.

AI further supports religious education and collective learning. AI-enhanced platforms for Bible and Qur'an study, interfaith dialogue, or theological discussion promote wider engagement with sacred texts and doctrinal questions. Tools also exist for exploring texts from other traditions, such as the Bhagavad Gita or Tripitaka, providing valuable comparative insights. Still, the experiential transmission of spiritual knowledge—mediated through personal mentorship and oral tradition—remains beyond AI's capabilities.tradition.

1.2.2. Potential Negative Impacts

Despite its promise, AI in the communal-institutional dimension carries several risks. Chief among them is the loss of authentic human connection. AI can facilitate interaction, but it cannot embody the emotional resonance, relational depth, or sacred presence that characterize traditional communities. The right hemisphere, which governs nonverbal communication and communal ritual, remains disengaged in AI-mediated spiritual spaces. As human pastoral care is replaced by chatbots, communities may grow less personal, their bonds more transactional and mechanized.

A second concern is algorithmic bias and fragmentation. AI systems curate content based on user data, which can reinforce echo chambers and limit exposure to differing perspectives. This is particularly problematic in spiritual forums, where algorithmically generated content may entrench ideological boundaries rather than foster dialogue. Instead of broadening communal understanding, such platforms may deepen division and fragment spiritual discourse.

AI also risks spreading misinformation or oversimplified interpretations of sacred texts. Natural language processing tools can misread complex theological ideas, lacking the nuance and contextual grounding of human scholars or spiritual mentors. Without qualified oversight, AI-generated advice may mislead users across religious, secular, or esoteric

traditions. As Jeglič (2023, 954) warns, the digital environment can also be exploited to disseminate extremist religious views.

Finally, there is the danger of depersonalization and commercialization. Many AI spiritual platforms operate on subscription models or sell premium content, raising ethical concerns about the monetization of sacred practices. When spiritual experiences are packaged for profit, there is a risk of turning meaningful engagement into a commodified product, shifting spiritual growth from a communal, sacred journey into a consumer-driven service.

1.3. Rational-Reflective and Studious Dimension and AI

The rational-reflective dimension of spirituality centers on intellectual engagement with sacred texts, theological inquiry, and the philosophical search for meaning. It includes both academic and contemplative practices that seek to understand the transcendent through study, reason, and interpretive reflection. This dimension also encompasses spiritual formation through theological education, scriptural interpretation, and comparative religious study.

Artificial intelligence offers considerable benefits in this domain, particularly through its capacity to process vast volumes of data, identify patterns, and generate structured insights. AI tools are now widely employed in theological research, discourse preparation, and sacred text analysis, enhancing the efficiency and accessibility of scholarly work across religious traditions (Roszak 2023). These tools aid not only in the study of the Bible, Qur'an, or Vedas, but also in engagement with lesser-known esoteric writings. However, AI lacks true reflective consciousness, spiritual discernment, and lived theological wisdom—qualities essential to meaningful spiritual understanding (Svetelj 2023, 98–100).

1.3.1. Potential Positive Impacts

AI's contributions to scriptural studies and theological research are particularly noteworthy. Tools such as Al Quran Companion assist users in memorizing, reciting, and interpreting the Qur'an, making Islamic

scholarship more widely accessible (Al Quran Companion n.d.). Similarly, Logos Bible Software provides extensive linguistic, historical, and theological tools to support sermon writing, exegetical research, and contextual study within the Christian tradition (Faithlife n.d.). Even in Eastern traditions, tools like Hinduism GPT, trained on sacred Hindu texts, are opening new pathways for engagement with Vedantic and Dharmic philosophy (Reddit 2023).

In addition to sacred text study, AI can facilitate philosophical and existential inquiry. For example, YesChat's Philosophy AI Companion invites users to explore ethical theories, metaphysical questions, and the application of classical and contemporary philosophy in daily life (YesChat n.d.). While this may not constitute theological formation in a traditional sense, it can enrich spiritual exploration by fostering critical engagement with meaning and morality.

AI also supports comparative religious analysis. Linguistic tools and pattern recognition algorithms help scholars trace doctrinal parallels and theological divergences across traditions. AI-assisted methods can also support the deciphering and interpretation of ancient manuscripts, contributing to historical theology and interreligious dialogue.

1.3.2. Potential Negative Impacts

Despite these contributions, AI's role in the rational-reflective dimension remains limited by its lack of true spiritual discernment. AI can process and correlate information but cannot engage in genuine reflection, personal encounter with the Absolute, or dialogical engagement with mystery. It lacks both the self-awareness and the spiritual intentionality that characterize theological reflection grounded in lived experience and tradition.

There is also a danger of over-reliance on AI in the preparation of sermons, teachings, or spiritual discourse. This may result in content that is formulaic or lacking in depth, particularly when AI-generated interpretations replace personal theological reflection or embodied pastoral insight. In both religious and non-religious spiritual communities, such reliance can dilute the richness and integrity of faith-based guidance.

Bias in training data poses an additional challenge. Since AI models draw from existing texts and online inputs, they may reproduce theological, cultural, or philosophical biases. As a result, AI-generated content may oversimplify or distort complex doctrines—such as the concept of salvation, eschatology, or divine justice. This issue is especially pressing in interfaith dialogue and areas like moral theology, where nuance, historical context, and lived wisdom are crucial.

Finally, AI risks displacing traditional modes of study and reflection. Practices such as lectio divina, contemplative prayer, spiritual reading, and oral tradition cultivate depth and relational engagement with the divine. When AI-generated summaries and instant answers replace these practices, there is a danger that theology becomes mechanized, spiritual growth superficial, and sacred texts reduced to searchable databases rather than revered sources of wisdom.

Conclusion

Taken together, the three dimensions explored—personal-experiential, communal-institutional, and rational-reflective—demonstrate both the breadth of AI's influence on spirituality and the challenges of integrating digital tools into meaning-making practices. While AI can assist in spiritual learning, provide virtual companionship, and facilitate theological or philosophical reflection, it cannot replicate the depth, embodiment, and relational resonance essential to lived spiritual experience.

Artificial intelligence increasingly mediates how individuals and communities engage with spirituality, whether through prayer apps, guided meditation tools, theological chatbots, or esoteric AI companions. These technologies offer convenience, personalization, and expanded access across religious, secular, esoteric, and hybrid spiritual frameworks. However, as a fundamentally left-hemisphere-based system, AI lacks qualities tied to right-hemisphere cognition—such as intuition, embodied presence, ambiguity tolerance, and the capacity to relate to transcendence, however defined. This raises important questions: Can AI support diverse spiritualities without flattening them into algorithmic routines? Does its

mechanized logic risk reducing reflection to pattern recognition, community to interaction, and spiritual growth to behavioral optimization?

To ensure AI complements rather than replaces authentic spiritual engagement, its role must be critically discerned. Spirituality—whether expressed through religious traditions, esoteric systems, or secular practices—requires openness to transformation, self-transcendence, and relational depth. These are not capacities AI can embody. According to McGilchrist's hemisphere hypothesis, a spiritually mature life must integrate both hemispheres: the left's analytical clarity and the right's attunement to mystery, connection, and lived experience.

If used wisely, AI can serve as a helpful instrument for spiritual exploration, provided that its application remains embedded in human guidance, community participation, and personal reflection. The challenge is not simply whether AI has a place in spirituality—but how to integrate it in a way that sustains the depth, plurality, and human-centered nature of spiritual meaning-making across traditions.

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