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Fear of artificial intelligence initiated by religious feelings

Abstract: Artificial intelligence is a specific phenomenon which largely affects modern society. Being a relatively recent phenomenon, inside communities undergoing the desecularization process, artificial intelligence inevitably leads to the question as to how and in what way it has been accepted by believing people. Believers' opinions about artificial intelligence are divided. In a number of them it causes fear and extremely negative feelings. The most frequent reason for it is the insufficient familiarity about what artificial intelligence is and what its place in modern society is. As for religious communities, huge responsibility about the attitude towards artificial intelligence is actually assumed by clergy and their willingness to speak about it to people they have been entrusted with for spiritual guidance.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, religion, fear

1. Introductory notes

Artificial intelligence (AI) is undoubtedly a field about which is rightfully spoken about frequently nowadays. The reason for it is the fact that AI is becoming ever more present on a daily basis in different areas of life and that, as such, it is something that attracts attention of almost entire society. AI is reality and therefore it will remain part of society. What AI has largely found its position in are mainly the areas of different branches of industry, healthcare etc.

On the other hand, AI is evidently finding its place in other segments which are, so as to say, *closer* to ordinary people. This fact has substantially contributed to the fact that it is exactly in the broadest layer of society, or among people without a narrow specialization, and thus without being sufficiently familiar with what AI is and what areas it is applied in, a feeling of fear arises that is characteristic of

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encountering the unknown (Luknar, 2023, pp. 151-152). In this brief paper, our intention is to focus on only one of the forms of fear observed among people who encounter AI for the first time or who have only listened or read about it – the fear initiated by religious feelings. In a society like ours, i.e., in a society that is, statistically speaking, very religious and in which, according to the data from several years ago, 72% people declare themselves as believers, it is necessary to pay attention to a detail such as fear of AI initiated by religious feelings and to take certain steps in order to control that fear and prevent it from making an individual feel uncomfortable.[2]

2. Phenomenon of fear in Christianity

A substantial number of historians of religion advocate the attitude according to which religion, in different forms and systems, is inseparably connected with man ever since ancient times. For a believer, it exists from the very moment of his creation by God, while for the non-believing ones religion is the man's answer to the phenomena he has not been able to control and which he believes to come from a higher force (Prodić, 2024, p. 7). Without going deeper into the resolution of the question which of these two attitudes towards religion and its existence in human society is older and, so as to say, scientifically more founded, what is distinguished as an element present in both attitudes is exactly the existence of fear of what man considers

supernatural. This fear is perhaps best described in Christianity, i.e., in the terminology of the Orthodox Church, where we encounter a very interesting term – *fear of God.*

A believing man accepts the dogma about the entire world, and thus a man, actually being a God's creation. As such, it was given a clear and unambiguous task from the Creator: "Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it! Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that moves on the ground" (Book of Genesis, 1:28). To put it more simply, God as the creator of everything, according to Christian religion, has placed a man in the position of a responsible master of the entire creation. Moreover, what is often "forgotten" by a modern man is that the Creator has also given the task to a man to be his own master, i.e., the master of his thoughts, words and acts. Everyone is more or less familiar with the Biblical story about the Fall and its consequences. This act of our progenitors constituted an essentially important relationship of a man towards God and God's relationship towards a man. A man, or Adam and Eve, disobeyed the Creator's commandment and that is why they lost a direct relationship with Him they used to have before the Fall. On the other hand, God as the man's Creator, does not leave the man without the possibility to re-establish the relationship which used to existed before the Fall because, as it will be announced by the promised arrival of the Saviour of the world, Jesus Christ, His resurrection and the establishment of the eucharist and the church, each of us,

[2]   http://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/105636/Koliko-ljudi-u-Srbiji-je-religiozno (accessed on 12.05.2024.)

as the descendants of the progenitors, is given the possibility to realize the union with God in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In shortest terms, these are the axioms of Christian soteriology and eschatological dimensions of the Orthodox faith. What is omnipresent in a very specific manner as a segment of the salvation process is, among other things, the necessary existence of fear in a man. This fear manifests itself in several ways and in relation to the topic we speak about it is the fear focused on the fact that a man as an individual striving to get salvation and be once again in union with the Creator, should not be recognized by the Creator as His at an essentially important moment. The moment we refer to is the time when the man's soul, after its separation from the body, comes to God hoping that He, as the Judge, will recognize that person or not as "someone who is his", someone who with the faith in God made efforts to spend life on this earth in doing everything that is expected from a believing man in the salvation process.[3] It is in this salvation process, which actually lasts throughout man's entire life, that the fear from not being with God is the essence of what we determine by the term *fear of God*. It is exactly from this fear, among other things, that the man's need for correct conduct (orthopraxy) is founded, which implies the fulfilment of different God's commandments both from the times of the Old Testament, and particularly from the times of the New Testament of God with a man.

3. Christian morality as a stabilizer in the face of challenges and temptations

All of us have encountered the term *morality* on countless occasions to date. This term basically, from the perception of Christian faith, implies a set of regulations which quite specifically exist as a certain type of stabilizer which has the task to keep the man within, to put it graphically, the boundaries of the territories in which he can be accomplished as a God-created being, as a crown of God's creation. Morality is a necessity in the man's relationship with God, with the nearest ones (other people) and with himself. With these important determinants, of course, if we look at morality from the perception of a believing Christian, it becomes clear why there is a specific connection between ethical/moral norms and the above-mentioned fear of God. Today's testimony of it is still dominant Christian foundation of European civilization, based exactly on Biblical values. Despite an ever more pronounced attack on these values, European society still has the feeling of self-accountability, as swell as of thoughtfulness in the challenges brought along by certain situations or, to put in in terms of theology, temptations. For the sake of illustration, we will emphasize the following: society in the above-mentioned region more or less still reacts to the injustice incurred against the other/others, primarily in everyday situations. Observed empathy largely has its foundations in Christianity, i.e., in the individual's consciousness about the

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[3] A good example would be the New Testament parable about foolish and wise virgins (Matthew 25: 1–13).

existence of unambiguous commandment about Christian virtues, whose realization in everyday life constitutes a specific bastion in the face of the temptation of selfishness or any other form of *sklerokardia*. In fact, "hard-heartedness", which is the literal translation of this Greek word, is really an illustrative example of the condition of a large number of population today, which, unfortunately, seems to become dominant in many parts of our continent.

On the other hand, a question arises as to the relation between Christian morality and a novelty such as AI. First of all, we should wonder whether AI is one of the challenges or, more precisely, one of the countless temptations encountered by an individual, as well as the society in which he lives. Seen from the perspective of theology, AI is really both a challenge and a temptation. If we see it as a challenge, it becomes something that can be classified as one of the number of phenomena which *attract* the man (men and women equally) towards itself. AI is definitely "attractive for the eye" and "desirable for making one wise" (Book of Genesis 3:6). As such, it may easily turn into what is implied under the notion of *temptation*. In fact, there are countless things and phenomena which were used by a man for reasons known only to himself and which are still used in a manner that is not good, the manner that is equally directed to causing harm to others, but also to himself. To put it more simply, there are countless things which have been *abused* by a man.

The word *abuse* itself etymologically refers to significant notions of *deception* or *misuse*.

Use implies utilization and realization of a thought or an idea which occurs to one or several individuals and which then turns into action, becomes tangible and which, as such, results in a certain manifestation.

On the other hand, the term *deception* or misuse is of essential importance not only when speaking about AI, but about other accomplishments made by the man, thanks to the common sense given by the Creator, during his history, most frequently for the sake of benefit or doing good, for facilitating his existence on Earth. However, because of the constant presence of temptations, numerous accomplishments originating from the man's mental actions and skills, have turned into something destructive, devastating and, above all, soul-destroying. Would it have happened if an individual (or several individuals) had been restricted by Christian morality? This very question is of essential importance for the topic we discuss here.

5. Justification and unjustification of the feeling of fear of artificial intelligence

There is little probability that someone without any fear of God will think at all about AS and fear of it. As a matter of fact, if we pay attention to the stereotype with which most of us perceive experts from the domain of information and electronic technologies – that they are cold and almost heartless people who have solely numbers or formulas in their minds, with very little or often no empathy at all – it is not difficult to understand why we have a certain sort of fear of them. What we have said about people engaged in science is certainly a bias which has substantially originated from, for

example, film industry. Namely, there is a countless number of films with the scenes of laboratory research being conducted by people in white coats, focused solely on projects and realization of sometimes strange and destructive ideas. On the other hand, if we leave aside the fiction so characteristic of film art, it is necessary to take into account the factor of the past, i.e., the man's memory of the events which occurred and proved in practice that the line between human and inhuman use of a scientific discovery is fragile and easily broken. It is these experiences, undergone by humanity, that leave not only "a bitter taste in the mouth" in a large number of believing people, but they also cause fear that is essentially the fear of AI abuse.

The communities of believing people, and therefore the Church, in the sense it has in Christian theological thought, are often seen, to put it mildly, as conservative and "backward", i.e.., as the communities which prevent progress. Just as in many other things, there is a grain of truth in this assumption. Namely, particularly when it comes to the societies undergoing the desecularization process (including Serbian society as well), we recognize specific signs of elitist hermeticization and the existence of a specific culture of the closed society. Nevertheless, we should not forget that the individuals, primarily those highly positioned in the in the hierarchical structure of religious communities, those who are, so to say, ahead of their time, are actually the ones who not only evidently support technical-technological progress of civilization, but also strengthen it

themselves with their work (an illustrative example Russian Orthodox priest is Pavel Florensky). Such people are naturally a minority in terms of percentage, but they need to be mentioned not only to show their noticeability in the domain of science, but also to indicate that religion and religiosity are not an obstacle for engaging in some other fields, such as art,[4] science etc.

What should be emphasized in relation to the topic we speak about is the circumstance that many religious communities, for their own reasons, have actually fenced themselves off in a sort of their own area in which they feel well. The result of it, among other things, is that such communities accept with difficulty, and often with open resistance do not accept what has been recognized by the leading figures of the community as something "bad". For example, inside some protestant communities, the followers used to be forbidden to watch TV (Đurđević, 2004, p. 125). On the other hand, with the emergence and expansion of computing industry and the recognition of the possibilities for profits, some protestant communities in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia turned to the hardware segment of computing industry because, as they thought, it had a different meaning of "looking at the screen". As a result of these changes, specifically in Adventist communities, the attitude was changed towards television and radio programs.[5] At the same time, this attitude, but totally reversed when it comes to the attitude towards television, electronic media, and even AI,

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[4]   We should use the opportunity to mention Bishop Irinej (Ćirić), PhD, who was canonized by the Serbian Orthodox Church several years ago and declared for a saint. He was also successful at painting.

[5]   https://www.adventisti.net/o_nama/verovanja/zivot/hriscansko-ponasanje/ (accessed on 28.05.2024)

can be noticed today among a number of Orthodox Christians. In fact, especially from the late 199s, if we focus on the territory of the former SFRY and the countries established after its breakup, the movement of the so-called zealots emerged and strengthened within the corpus of Orthodox Christians. Zealots are people who advocate, so as to say, the "harder" trend in practising religion. If we leave aside their attitude primarily towards the higher hierarchy and certain part of the Serbian Orthodox Church clergy, within these *parasyna-gogues* (Jevtić, 2020) in the full meaning of the word, an evident change occurs in the attitude towards, for example, modern technologies.[6] Apart from famous "TV watching", i.e., the negative attitude towards the content of the TV program (namely, individuals do not accept having TV sets at home), these people have a clearly shown negative and even hostile attitude towards certain medical elements of modern civilization (primarily towards children's vaccination). They have this attitude towards AI as well because they believe these are elements appearing and existing with a reason – to change/ endanger humanity. When speaking about zealots, it is interesting that almost every person who is a member of these communities also "exists" in social media and actively uses a mobile telephone and has access to the Internet. This is in itself quite a strong contradiction and definitely a separate topic for research.

If we return to the question of religious people's fear of AI, we will notice that fear of AI is simultaneously justified and unjustified. Justification or unjustification of the believers' fear of AI is basically founded on the problem of abuse or, more specifically, abuse of AI in those spheres where it may be or is directed against a man. The realistic justification of this fear derives from the experience undergone by humanity in the past and in the present. For example, the development of the nuclear energy research seems to have been redirected too easily towards its destructive, devastating application, i.e., the destruction of man/humanity. For a believer, the very existence of AI and its increasingly larger application in everyday life causes discomfort, first when it comes to who and in what manner will introduce it into society or, to put it simply, who is the one who will "control the controllers". AI, as it is presented to the broadest audience, strives to become a man's creation which, from the believer's perspective, will control or exist together with the man as God's creation. A substantial percentage of believers, when asked about AI and its broader application in everyday life, asks himself and others whether AI controllers are people who are guided by the moral norms of religion in their lives and professional activities. For example, the question is whether the sixth commandment "Thou shalt not murder" is something that those people, who shape AI and are members of Judaism or Christianity, observe in their own lives (Janković, 2010, pp. 81–82). The question is whether they, if they are followers of Islam, find this commandment something they will truly observe (Halilović, 2016, p. 7). Believers are also concerned, and therefore have the feeling of fear, whether and to what extent AI will affect

[6] http://www.eparhija-prizren.com/sr/vesti/episkop-atanasije-artemijeva-sekta-parasinagogaparacrkva/ (accessed on 13.05.2024)

many other ethical matters which have an impact both on social trends and on each of us individually. AI indisputably has a huge potential in essentially important elements of life, for example in medicine. Moreover, the possibility of overlooking a problem in radiology is noticeably smaller in AI than in a specialist doctor in this field who, for instance, examines many patients during one day and, because of exhaustion or some other human weakness, can make a mistake in reading an MRI etc. It is in these terms that we may speak of unjustification of fear of AI primarily having in mind that a doctor uses

AI as a special tool, but that a radiologist is the one who makes the final decision about whether something has been diagnosed in the examination or whether the result of that examination is negative. Practically speaking, in the above-listed example AI can be used for the purpose of performing a larger number of examinations, but so that the doctor is the one who will describe the change in case he/she observes an anomaly in the screening.

In relation to AI application in everyday life, believers are also concerned about the episodes such as the one that took place in St. Paul's Church in
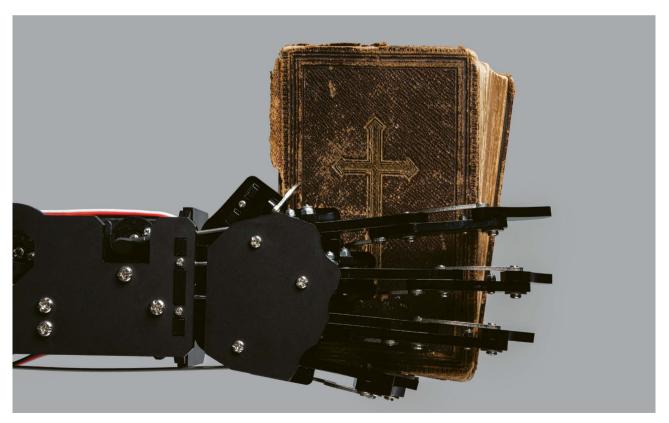
Photo: Shutterstock

Fürth, Germany, in 2023. Namely, the sermon within the Protestant service, in this church, full of believers, was performed by one of four avatars (two boys and two girls). The sermon words coming from the avatar generated by artificial intelligence referred to the questions of leaving the past behind, focussing on present challenges, overcoming fear of death and not losing trust in Jesus Christ.[7] The question which arises definitely refers to the purpose of such an experiment, i.e., what was supposed to be achieved by it. Leaving aside the short-lived element of the phenomenon and fascination, the use of AI in religion is, among other things, reflected in an attempt not only to "replace" the man as an essentially important factor in the worship service, but also to "replace" God in a certain manner, which is impossible and unacceptable from the perspective of the orthodox and the believing ones. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John, 14:6). On the other hand, what such experiments bring up to the surface is exactly what causes fear among believers, and that is abuse of AI by those who set its "task", i.e., those who directed it towards certain segments of man's life. This challenging attitude of AI controllers towards man's religious feelings is counterproductive for all not only because they cause unpleasantness and discomfort among potential "consumers" of what AI offers, but also because among those who direct and control AI it actually creates a soul-destroying feeling that they awaken "like divine beings" (Book of Genesis, 3:5), the feeling which has been abused in the original sin.

6. Conclusion

"Fear can be an important motivational factor in social and political behaviour. Fear culture is a tool used by elites to control and direct the attention of the lower strata of society in the manner which suits elites and facilitate their maintenance of power" (Luknar, 2023, p. 153). If we add the circumstance that today's public life functions on the basis of information consumed by an individual online, i.e., by taking in information whose reality and accuracy are often disputable, we can very easily find ourselves in a situation when due to such semi-information we become inundated by all sorts of fears. Fear of AI has its justification primarily when it comes to its abuse. There may be most diverse kinds of abuse and addressing them entails a broader analysis supported by a multidisciplinary approach. If in broadest terms, from the perspective of a believer, we look at the above-mentioned kinds of AI abuse, we can clearly see that it is actually a tool in the hands of those who, for their own reasons, stand up against the God-established order. It is for this reason that responsibility in religious communities is borne by the people who are placed for spiritual guides of believers because they are expected primarily to perceive the problems faced by the modern man and then, through communication with believers, to direct them towards how and in what manner to avoid challenges and abuses of what is offered by technological progress in the broadest meaning of

[7]   https://www.danas.rs/svet/vestacka-inteligencija-odrzala-propoved-u-crkvi-u-nemackoj/ (accessed on 15.05.2024.)

the word. Religious communities more and more frequently address the question of AI and challenges it brings along. In order to avoid prejudice and a priori refusal of the AI use, it is desirable that clergy, i.e., believers in broader terms, become familiar more thoroughly with the given phenomenon. From today's perspective, we find it incomprehensible, but we should recall that something like that is customary, just as plain potatoes and their introduction into people's nutrition used to be a huge problem in our region. An almost identical situation is also with the acceptance of AI by believers. It is definitely good to have the feeling of thoughtfulness, caution, and even fear of AI, first of all because of its potential abuse. Namely, we should recall the words of Apostle Paul: "I have the right to do anything, but not everything is beneficial; I have the right to do anything, but I will not be mastered by anything" (1 Corinthians, 6:12), and "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient. All things are lawful for me, but all things do not edify" (1 Corinthians, 10:23).

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