Is Religiosity Giving Way to the Artificial Intelligence Cult? An Investigation[1]

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Abstract

From the beginning of human civilization, a principal belief governing the behavior of humans is the belief in a supernatural being (or beings) called God (gods). This led to formation of religions associated with certain codified instructions for behavior and worship. These instructions laid out what was right and wrong, and humans were spared the cognitive burden of making distinctions. Energies could therefore be devoted to domestic and professional tasks. In the 19th century agnosticism emerged as a significant school of thought pointing to the lack of evidence for the existence of God. As a consequence, there was a weakening of religious beliefs held by humans. This led to human autonomy regarding choice of values and behaviors becoming stronger, a trend captured by the emergence of humanism as a philosophy. Humans now began to exercise autonomy in deciding between right and wrong. While this exercise is time consuming, certain new developments have come to the rescue of humans. In particular, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence -- with its ability to retrieve, collate and process information and carry out tasks – has served to lighten the cognitive burden on humans. But there is a darker side: it has destroyed jobs, exerted downward pressure on wages and dangled the temptation of chatbots and avatars as a means to get respite from economic misery. Government regulation of robotization and the use of chatbots and avatars is called for.

Introduction

Humans function largely on the basis of their beliefs and values. These influence the choices that we make and our interactions with others. A very important belief that humans have held almost since the species originated is belief in a supernatural being called God (monotheistic system) or more than one supernatural being called "gods" (polytheistic system). Under the monotheistic system God is the supreme being, creator and the principal object of faith (Swinburne, 1995). Under the polytheistic system a god is a spirit or deity responsible for creation of part of the universe[3]. The mentioned belief has led to the practice of religion becoming very significant among human beings. A religion consists of a set of organized beliefs and practices and significant among these beliefs is the existence of a supernatural being(s). These beliefs play a very important part in shaping human interaction and behavior in several spheres of life: almost every religion lists the commandments of God which have to be obeyed. Religion also involves the time-consuming worship of God or gods, with the belief often held that worship is for the benefit of the worshipper. This worship provides the stage or the basis for interaction at the level of the community. What is being argued in this article is that

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religiosity has tended to decline in recent times. And this decline has left a vacuum in people's lives as religion was the fulcrum for the functioning of individuals and society for a very long time. When an existing fulcrum dies out a new fulcrum is needed and it is argued here that this fulcrum may be Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI will not only shape the technologies employed by entrepreneurs but will also shape the ways in which individuals will spend their leisure time and create self-images as well as make economic and other decisions.

I. The Decline of Religiosity: Why and How

German 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche declared that "God is dead", in a book he authored in 1883 entitled _Thus Spoke Zarathustra_ (Nietzsche, 2006). Through this statement Nietzsche was pointing to the gradual decline of traditional religious values. Nietzsche observed that he was writing at a time when the Western World was departing from the popularity of Bible based ethics: good manners and morals, honesty and integrity, unselfish and altruistic behaviour, generosity and consideration for others. This departure, according to Nietzsche, was associated with the rise to prominence of science, reason, and secularism. The idea that the universe was governed more by physical laws rather than divine providence had become mainstream (Hendricks, 2022). With the importance of God and religion diminishing, humans now began to create their own values as individuals and a meaning of life for living.

The departure from religiosity has been associated with the rise of humanism, best described by a statement of the _International Humanist and Ethical Union_, founded in Amsterdam in 1952 which affirms that human beings should have the liberty and responsibility of giving shape to their own lives and to do so by employing reason and free inquiry while eschewing supernatural views of reality (IHEU, 1996).

According to the American Humanist Association[4], **"**Humanism is a rational philosophy informed by science, inspired by art, and motivated by compassion". It considers the dignity of each human being to be important and supports the maximization of individual liberty and opportunity subject to the meeting of social responsibility. It is in favour of governance through participatory democracy and the upholding of human rights and social justice. It is in favour of the view that the social, religious, ethical and political values held by humans have their origins in human experience and culture and that humanity must take responsibility for its own destiny.

Humanism's historical origins lie in the Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero's concept of _humanitas_[5]_,_ coined around 1st century B.C. and popularized by scholars of the Italian Renaissance in the period between 13th and 16th century A.D. which saw the rediscovery of Classical Greek and Roman texts. Humanitas meant the development of human virtues to their fullest extent: not only the gentler virtues of understanding, benevolence, compassion and mercy emphasized by religions but also more forceful characteristics such as courage in adversity, judgement, shrewd management of resources and persuasiveness in speech and writing. Any possessor of Humanitas not only had to be a scholar but a human who led an active life based on physical exertions. Thus, Humanitas called for a fine balance of action and contemplation. It involved the progressive education of the young, the thorough scrutiny of history and the use of lessons learnt to shape the future. Debate, criticism, rhetoric, aspirations all were given pride of place in a society based on Humanitas, which drew inspiration from the rediscovery of Classical (Greek and Roman) literature and thought which was not bound by

[4] **https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/definition-of-humanism/**
[5] This discussion of humanism is based on Grudin (2024).

the constraints of medieval Christian spirituality. Humanism spread from Italy to the Catholic and then the low countries (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg) of Europe and then to England and Germany (Kristeller, 1978)

Karen Armstrong (1994), writing in her book, *A History of God*, points out that the idea of God has been reformulated across generations so as to retain its relevance to human needs. Till the modern age the concepts of God and religion have dominated human life though not always in a beneficial manner with values such as the dignity of men, so dear to humanism, often not being upheld. Authors have also pointed out how *God* has been an instrument of the ruling classes to further exploitation. Writing in *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy* Karl Marx (1978) opined, "Religion is the opium of the people. It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of our soulless conditions". Marx felt that religion was not only an instrument of oppression but was also akin to a drug which dulled the pain from oppression that would otherwise have induced workers to revolt against capitalist exploitation. Religion according to Marx was a creation of man to give him relief from oppression; the abolition of religion he felt would replace this illusory happiness with a search for real happiness.

Two other telling examples of the use of religion to further exploitation can be listed. In the United States, slavery came to an end after the American Civil War (1861-65), which was preceded by violent disagreement between Northern and Southern Baptist Churches as well as between the Northern and Southern Methodist Churches over the issue of slavery[6]. These were large churches and therefore the dispute was significant: in 1844 Methodist membership numbered 1,068, 525 with total adherents estimated to be 4,500,000; in the Baptist churches there were 704,926 actual members and 4,000,000 total followers. The Southern Churches endorsed slavery using quotations from the Bible and the Northern Churches opposed it by again quoting from the Bible. It is clear that slave owners in the Southern States of the United States of America benefitted a lot economically from slavery; religion was just being used to promote economic ends.

The source of the disagreement between the Northern and Southern Churches was the anti-slavery crusade which originated in the North and was induced by the view that slavery was antithetical to the democratic cause. The pleas of the abolitionists (activists operating outside the Church who called for an end to slavery) were successful in influencing the Northern clergy to oppose the support given to slavery by the Southern clergy. In 1844, the Boston Convention of the Methodist Episcopal Church put forward the position that "slave-holding is sin and every slave holder a sinner". There were calls to suspend the clergy who were slave owners in the South, with the Southern Churches siding with the attacked clergy. The Baptists soon followed the divisive ways of the Methodists, with some Southern clergy drafting a resolution that abolitionism was unscriptural.

In regard to India, Derrett (1968) and Kane (1953) point out that for centuries it was widely maintained that the entry of the lowest castes would render the temples and particularly the images within them terribly polluted; thus, through much of recorded history Hindu temples were instruments of discrimination by upper castes against the lowest who were not allowed to pray inside the temple premises.

Both the American and Indian examples illustrate how those powerful in the society and economy have used the concepts of religion and God, an endorsement of what Armstrong has

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[6] See Heyrman, 1998 and Carden, 1986 for an account of the dispute between Northern and Southern Churches.

said. It is therefore no surprise that with the spread of education among the masses as well as the ideas of liberty and freedom, religious beliefs would yield ground to humanism.

One of the reasons for the emergence of humanism was the rise of 'agnosticism': humans are unable to provide sufficient reason for justifying the belief that God exists or the belief that God does not exist. It is argued that humans do not have the tools to access the realm beyond their physical senses, rendering ultimate reality or God forever out of reach (Russell, 2001). The term was coined by the English biologist, Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869 but has its origins in the heterodox *Ajnana* school of Indian philosophy which flourished around 6th century B.C. Interestingly, the Rig Veda (Chapter 10), the oldest known Vedic Sanskrit text also projects an agnostic view and stresses in its verses that it is impossible to know whether God exists or not. Huxley believed that it was wrong to claim certainty for propositions such as "There is a God" without offering adequate evidence (Harvey, 2013). Note that such certainty was being claimed by clerics to argue that it was morally wrong not to belief in God. Arguments such as those put forward by Huxley ushered in humanism and the decline of belief in religion.

The rise of the agnostic school has had a significant impact from the late 19th century onwards. A 2012 study by Pew Research found 16 percent of the global population to have no affiliation to any religion. (Goldstein, 2012). Another survey in 2012 by the Pew Research Center found the following proportions of population in various age groups to be religiously unaffiliated in the United States: one third of people under 30, 21% of people between the ages of 30-49, 15% of people between the ages of 50-64 and 9% of people over the age of 65. A 2004 survey by the BBC in 10 countries (BBC News, 2004) showed the proportion of population that "did not believe in God" to lie between 0% (Nigeria) and 39% (United Kingdom). The 10-country average was 17%.

But with the importance of religion weakening, especially in the developed world, are people really exercising their freedom in choosing the lives they want to lead? One can argue that this weakening has left a vacuum in people's minds, quite open to being occupied now by the new influence of an external force. I argue that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is that force, that opium which will make people's lives appear much more tolerable but make their brains wither away, unless it is regulated.

II. How Artificial Intelligence Can Potentially Be Used to Create and then Dull Misery

The threat posed by automation to employment has been pointed out by various scholars including Keynes (1931). Wassily Leontief (as quoted in Curtis, 1983) predicted that more and more workers will be replaced by machines. In recent times Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2014) and Ford (2015) have raised concerns that advances in robotics and artificial intelligence will lead to massive job losses.

Researchers such as Daron Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo (2018) point out a powerful displacement effect: AI and robotics replace workers in tasks they had previously performed. This displacement effect can reduce the demand for labor, wages and employment. They however point out a productivity effect: as the cost of producing automated tasks declines, the economy will expand and increase the demand for labor in non-automated tasks. This is because of the complementarity between automated and non-automated tasks in production. Further, because capital performs tasks more cheaply than the labor it displaces it reduces the prices of the goods and services whose production processes are being automated, making households effectively richer and increasing the demand for all goods and services. This too has a positive impact on the demand for labor. Further, capital accumulation triggered by increased automation will also raise the demand for labor. However, Acemoglu and Restrepo

find that even with these countervailing influences, automation increases output per worker more than wages and reduces the share of labor in national income.

AI can increase the productivity of skilled workers and creative people while acting as a substitute for unskilled labour. With robots displacing unskilled workers, the income share of owners of capital might go up; so, will as we have mentioned the incomes of creative and skilled workers. With unskilled workers crowding into sectors not yet touched by AI or subsisting though crumbs provided for the unemployed by the welfare state, a large part of the population would be likely to stagnate at low levels of income and consumption expenditure. Their morale will thus take a severe beating. We can well imagine these workers seeking relief from their painful existence and their lost self-esteem by communicating with seductive/attractive and empathetic chatbots and avatars. In their case, AI will thus provide the 'opium' which will help dull their misery; it will also do their shopping, make their financial decisions and unburden their children of the responsibility of doing their own homework. In other words, there is a real chance of brain development being impeded for a large section of the human population.

A chatbot is a computer program capable of simulating and processing human conversation (either written or spoken), thus giving humans the facility of interacting with digital devices as if they were communicating with a real person. A drawback in the case of chatbots is the absence of emotion. This makes humans reluctant to converse it, at least in the way they communicate with each other. A virtual avatar gives a bot a face, a voice and emotions; avatars are capable of facial expressions such as a smile and a batting of the eyes; thus, a human conversing with an avatar can hope to match the quality of the conversation he could have with a fellow human or exceed it, given that the avatar is programmed to give his or her needs full attention[7].

In pioneering psychiatric case reports of gaming disorder (GD), Allison, Von Wahlde, Shockley, and Gabbard (2006) described the case of 18 year old Mr. A. Mr. A's addiction to the cyberspace was related to the opportunity offered to him by a game called Diablo II to create an ideal version (avatar) of himself. Thus, one can argue that the loss of self-esteem suffered by many workers due to the job-displacing use of AI in business processes might lead them to avatars who might treat them in ways which would cosmetically enhance their self-esteem or create very respectable self-images. In this way chatbots and avatars are ways to push to the background, at least for some time, the harsh realities of the real world and create an image of oneself that does not exist in the real self.

Thus, AI would be likely to induce loss of self-esteem through job displacement, a loss which it would then make good through the opportunity to generate attractive self-images through avatars.

The vacuum left by religion receding from people's lives is thus being filled by AI. And like religion in many cases, it is serving the interests of those who intend to dominate the economy and society. This is because AI is controlled by the rich and powerful, for example big business which owns the technology to generate chatbots and avatars as well as undertake robotization of production processes.

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[7] https://www.iamdave.ai/blog/avatars-making-digital-conversations-more-human-like/

III. Conclusion

For a very long time, religion provided the basis for the functioning of human society. It gave rise to a set of codified instructions. While these instructions limited freedom, they also led to a saving of mental energy in choosing actions and in that way made life easier. However, starting from the 19th century the principal belief in religion came under attack because of lack of evidence: this was the belief in a supernatural being or supernatural beings as the supreme creator(s) of the universe.

Criticisms of religion also surfaced: it was a kind of opium which kept the common man happy even when he was being exploited and subjugated by powerful people such as the upper castes, propertied people, slave-owners and the like. It was felt that religion was a roadblock to the full attainment of human potential and freedom.

As the importance of religion receded, other schools of thoughts such as humanism came into being: while the softer human virtues like benevolence and sympathy continued to be considered as desirable other virtues such as courage, judgement and shrewd management of resources were considered as worthy of cultivation.

With belief in religion collapsing the set of instructions codified by religion seemed to be irrelevant. There was more freedom but at the same time more decisions to be made by humans about what was right and what was wrong in actions and thought. This could be mentally draining. Humans were thus looking for mechanisms which would conserve their energies. That mechanism came in the form of AI.

AI was not concerned with the distinction between right and wrong, the domain of religion. However, it helped humans conserve cognitive resources by storing, retrieving and collating information and by providing computational assistance. Humans had more time to debate on what was right and wrong and more and detailed laws and regulations came into being. But AI also has displayed a dark side: it has rendered people unemployed and often forced them to take up less paying jobs. With self-esteem taking a beating, AI came up with avatars and chatbots to relieve humans of their pain. These could however be addictive (Green et al, 2020)

The effectiveness of the human brain is conditional on its use. Thus, there is a certain optimal level of use of the brain: departures from the optimum in the upward or the downward direction are both harmful. When a human brain is assigned too many tasks it might lead to stress and psychological problems; on the other hand, undertaking intellectually stimulating tasks helps build up the capacity of the brain in regard to cognition, attentiveness and creativity. If AI is recruited to do most of our cognitive tasks the performance of human brains can decline significantly. This is not a happy situation, either in terms of psychological consequences or the survival of the human race.

What is the answer to AI assuming the role of a Leviathan? First, it might be necessary to ensure the regulated use of AI in educational institutions. This would involve long screen free hours in schools and universities, with students using the conventional instruments of pen and paper along with access to offline instruction. This would promote attentiveness and creativity, and therefore the nourishment of the brain. The use of tablets and mobile phones should be limited to certain times of the day.

It is up to the government to regulate the use of AI in other spheres as well. First, regulation of cyberspace to prevent addiction to avatars and chatbots might be advisable. But this is easier said than done. What can more easily be done is to tax the use of robots in certain lines of production so that employment of humans still remains attractive.

Humans would also need to be warned about having their daily lives being run by AI butlers as this might be a way to promote certain commercial interests. As mentioned, people might get addicted to interaction with seductive chatbots: this can cause problems with focus, memory, and learning as well as decision-making and judgment. Creating mass awareness of this danger might be necessary.

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