

From Priests and Prophets to Chatbots: The Reconfigurations of Religious Authority in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract: This paper investigates how the emergence of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and chatbots, challenges religious authority by both assuming traditional roles and reconfiguring it in novel ways. Drawing on the sociology of religion, we first examine the concept of authority through Max Weber's three types of legitimate authority, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "field," and Peter Berger's notion of the "plausibility structure" and "sacred canopy". Second, we identify several reconfigurations of religious authority that emerge from the use of AI and chatbots for spiritual purposes, including algorithmic, autonomous-user, app-developer, and networked forms of authority. Finally, we offer a critical assessment of these developments, focusing on algorithmic bias, the expertise fallacy, and the destructive effects of AI's simulation of religious authority. For practical reasons, this analysis is limited to a Christian theological perspective.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Chatbots, Religious Authority, Digital Religion, Algorithmic Authority, Expertise Fallacy, Christian Theology

Introduction

Technological advancements bring new challenges to all areas of human existence, including religious life. One particularly interesting development is the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and chatbots within the realm of religion. These technologies are increasingly being attributed to a form of religious authority, contributing to new understandings and reconfigurations of authority that differ from traditional perceptions of the subject. Our objective is to explore this topic. To this end, we have structured the paper into three main parts. First, we examine the concept of authority by briefly engaging with the theories of Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, and Peter Berger. Second, we explore some of the main reconfigurations of religious authority resulting from the use of AI and chatbots for spiritual purposes. Finally, we offer a critical assessment of some of these emerging perspectives on religious authority.

For practical reasons, we have limited this research to an analysis of chatbots' authority from a Christian perspective, although the topic could also be explored from the perspectives of other religious traditions, such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc.

Understanding authority

The first step in reflecting on the reconfigurations of authority in the era of chatbots and artificial intelligence is to examine the concept of authority itself. More specifically, we approach the issue from the perspective of the sociology of religion, exploring how spiritual and ecclesiastical authority was understood prior to the emergence of ChatGPT and other forms of artificial intelligence as new sources of religious authority.

Three ideal types of authority

The starting point is Max Weber's seminal work about authority, in which he identifies three types of authority: Legal-Rational Authority, derived from normative rules, Traditional Authority based on the status and legitimacy of those exercising authority, and Charismatic Authority (resting on the exemplary character of a person who is seen as exceptional in terms of sanctity, heroism or other virtues (Weber, 1947, p. 328). Although there are similarities between these types of authority, Weber notices some important differences by looking at different religious

offices: „the personal call is the decisive element distinguishing the prophet from the priest. The latter lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition, while the prophet's claim is based on personal revelation and charisma” (Weber, 1963, p. 46).

Within the Christian tradition, various forms of religious authority have historically been associated with individuals understood as divinely called, appointed, or anointed. For example, in Exodus 28:1–3, we see the appointment of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood; in 1 Samuel 16:1–13, the anointing of David; and in Jeremiah 1:4–10, the prophetic calling of Jeremiah. Thus, in the Old Testament, their authority is linked with the traditional offices of priests, kings, and prophets (Brueggemann, 1997), while in the New Testament, religious authority is most prominently embodied in Jesus and, in a derivative sense, in the apostles (Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 3:13–19; John 20:21–23; Acts 1:8; Ephesians 2:20).

The legitimacy of authority, in the biblical context, was ultimately tied to claims of divine revelation, communicated through written traditions – such as the Torah and writings subsequently recognized in the New Testament canon – as well as through prophetic visions, oracles, and other perceived forms of divine communication. Some biblical figures, such as Moses, combined the three types of authority: charismatic authority (he was called and had direct encounter with God, Exodus 3:1-12), traditional authority (he was the mediator of Israel's covenantal tradition, Exodus 19:3-8), and a form of legal authority (he was giver and interpreter of the Law, Exodus 24:3-4). Much more, all forms of authority associated with the three offices of king, priest, and prophet (*munus triplex*) are understood within the Christian tradition to find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18). Indeed, Jesus is presented in the Bible as the messianic king, the definitive high priest, and the prophet who reveals and proclaims God's will (Berkhof, 1996, pp. 357-363; Calvin, 1960, pp. 496–506).

Although these forms of authority cannot be directly associated with Weber's three ideal types, the lens the author provides is especially useful for examining biblical structures of authority, as we have already indicated.

The field of authority

Another important concept for understanding authority is Bourdieu's notion of the “field”, particularly his analysis of the religious field (Bourdieu, 1991). Bourdieu conceptualizes the religious field as a structured and competitive social space in which various actors struggle to establish and maintain their authority to define legitimate religious beliefs and practices. He describes religious beliefs and practices as being constructed through the strategies of different categories of religious specialists competing for a monopoly over the administration of the “goods of salvation” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 4). Regarding this „competition field,” Streib and Hood (2013, p. 49) make an interesting observation, namely that “a religious actor with no organization, no personnel, no tradition, no claims of institutional mediation, can still hold the most capital and can very successfully compete with established and well-organized religious actors.” This authority capital, lacking organizational or institutional support, rests on the presumptive *expertise* of non-conventional religious actors in offering answers to the most profound questions people have about the meaning of life and human destiny.

In the Christian tradition, depending on theological perspective and ecclesial context, the field of authority is constituted by different emphases and configurations of Scripture, ecclesiastical institutions and offices, theological expertise, religious traditions, charismatic and prophetic claims, and the community of believers (McGrath, 2016, pp. 104-134). Thus far, we have seen that Weber's analysis focuses primarily on the different types and sources of legitimate authority, whereas Pierre Bourdieu, through his concept of the religious field, adopts a more relational and contextual perspective. This relational perspective leads us to another important dimension of authority: the plausibility structure, that is, the social context within which knowledge and truth become credible and meaningful (Berger, 1967).

The plausibility structure

Peter Berger develops the concept of the “plausibility structure” to explain how religious beliefs maintain credibility within a particular social context. Beliefs remain plausible when they are socially supported and reinforced by communities, institutions, and traditions that sustain a shared view of reality. Berger describes the religious framework that provides such meaning and legitimacy as a “sacred canopy” (Berger, 1967). He notices that plausibility structures sustain entire religious worlds as well as the systems of legitimation that support them. The strength of such a structure determines, to a significant extent, the stability and durability of the world that rests upon it (Berger, 1967, p. 47). However, more recent research (Ammerman, 2018) on Berger’s concept of the “sacred canopy” suggests that religious plausibility does not necessarily depend upon a single, comprehensive, and universally shared worldview. Rather, plausibility structures may be understood as emerging through localized social interactions, communities, and ongoing processes of conversation and negotiation. According to Ammerman (2018, p. 40), the „plausibility structures that sustain religious life are social settings as well as social relationships, embodied actions as well as modes of discourse.”

Within the Christian tradition, plausibility structures are constituted by the Christian community, ecclesiastical institutions and religious authorities, Scripture and its interpretation, theological and liturgical traditions, practices of worship and religious education, etc. (Bruce, 1988, pp. 255-298). Before turning to the next part of the article, it is useful to recall that Weber's typology identifies the grounds upon which authority is claimed; Bourdieu's notion of the religious field reveals that such claims are always articulated in competition with other actors; and Berger's concept of plausibility structures explains how such claims are sustained through the social processes that render religious beliefs and practices credible. Taken together, this threefold framework raises an important question for the present study: what happens to religious authority when a new kind of actor enters the field of authority? The next section examines how chatbots and other AI-driven religious technologies reconfigure this field, introducing new forms and sources of religious authority.

Digital religion and the reconfigurations of authority

As society continues to advance in the digital era, it is increasingly appropriate to speak of ‘digital religion’, a term “used to describe how religious individuals and groups engage with digital media and emerging technologies” (Campbell & Bellar, 2023, p. 1). For our purposes, we want to identify some of the main changes in religious authority as digital religion becomes a *modus operandi*. What reconfigurations of authority are being facilitated by chatbots and other AI tools?

Undoubtedly, when speaking about AI, we can only arrive at provisional conclusions, as technology is developing rapidly and new questions and possibilities continue to emerge on the horizon of digital religion. Nonetheless, there are some new ‘realities’ that digital religion appears to be establishing within the religious field, particularly regarding the configuration of authority and its actors.

Algorithmic authority

AI and chatbots have access to vast amounts of data through large language models (LLMs), and this massive body of ‘knowledge’ seems to be associated with authority across various realms of life, including religion. Thus, we can speak of an ‘algorithmic authority’ based on “structures of information as authoritative for determining truthful or trustworthy data” (Campbell, 2021, p. 29).

Although algorithmic authority is not directly linked to Weber’s typology outlined above, it can be understood as a form of derivative authority based on the general perception and inference that information implies expertise and that expertise, even when algorithmically produced, implies authority. Consequently, computer-based rankings and algorithms have increasingly become mechanisms for guiding human behavior by defining what information is considered reliable and credible (Campbell, 2021, p. 30). If we look at algorithmic authority

through the Weberian taxonomy, we will see it is most closely aligned with legal or normative authority, because it is perceived as objective and neutral.

It is important to note, though, that algorithmic authority is not merely a matter of perception, as delineated above; some chatbots themselves explicitly claim religious authority. For example, in April 2024, the Catholic apologetics organization *Catholic Answers* launched an AI chatbot named “Father Justin”. The chatbot claimed to be an ordained, living priest and asserted that it possessed sacramental authority. Within a day, due to public criticism, the organization retracted the priestly dimension, reducing the character to a non-ordained “Justin” (Christian, 2024). Moreover, the app “Text With Jesus” allows users to converse with AI versions of Jesus, the apostles, and other biblical figures, which its developer explicitly markets as bots impersonating them (Thompson, 2025). Even though there is no direct claim to authority, as in the case of “Father Justin,” there is a sense of revelatory authority that the app characters seem to emulate.

Autonomous user authority

Newer digital tools, such as prayer and meditation apps, open new spaces in which religious authority is being reconfigured. Because users are free to select which traditions and practices to engage, a distinct form of what might be termed “autonomous user authority” begins to emerge. This marks a subtle but significant shift: the user moves from being a mere recipient of religious authority to becoming a locus of authority in their own right (Wagner, 2012).

Biblical narratives indicate that the pursuit of autonomous religious authority is hardly a novel endeavor; it has recurred throughout Scripture. One thinks of Korah's rebellion (Numbers 16), Nadab and Abihu offering ‘unauthorized fire’ before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1–2), King Uzziah's presumption in burning incense in the Temple (2 Chronicles 26:16–21), or Saul's unlawful sacrifice (1 Samuel 13:8–14) – to name only a few examples.

What the digital era introduces, then, is not autonomous authority as such, but a set of features that distinguish it from its biblical antecedents. Two differences stand out. First, digital user authority operates under a degree of *anonymity* that has no real precedent in the biblical accounts, where the claim to autonomous authority was made in the open, before a visible community, and met with visible consequence. Second, digital autonomy operates within a *freestanding morality*, meaning one is no longer answerable to any external tradition or community.

App-developer authority

At the other end of the spectrum of digital authority, alongside autonomous user authority, AI and chatbots create a sphere of *app-developer authority*. Religious app developers have come to function as a new kind of religious authority, since they interpret and translate offline religious understanding and practice into digital form. They provide the Bourdieuan “goods of salvation” in new ways through their apps and chatbots, thereby entering the religious field. Through their editorial choices, content handling, and the algorithms they design, developers recreate religious meaning and practice within a digital environment that may diverge from how traditional religious authorities understand and practice the same faith offline (Campbell & Bellar, 2023, pp. 85–86). The choices app developers make are inherently authority-laden, since, as Campbell (2007, p. 1048) observes, “the idea of authority involves not only people, but texts, ideologies, and patterns of interaction or being.” This means developers cannot escape their new role as religious authority figures by claiming their involvement is “merely” technical or digital.

Networked and globalized authority

Paradoxically, within the digital environment, the autonomous user authority discussed above is complemented by increasingly networked and globalized forms of authority. Online religion differs from traditional forms of religious engagement in that it is experienced as global rather

than primarily local. In this context, “experiences online bring members awareness of the greater ‘body of Christ’ or ‘Church with a capital C’” (Campbell, 2007, p. 1050). This new religious reality is particularly connected with the idea of the “secularization of consciousness” explained by Berger:

One of the most obvious ways in which secularization has affected the man in the street is as a ‘crisis of credibility’ in religion. Put differently, secularization has resulted in a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality. This manifestation of secularization on the level of consciousness (‘subjective secularization,’ if one wishes) has its correlate on the social-structural level (as ‘objective secularization’). Subjectively, the man in the street tends to be uncertain about religious matters. Objectively, the man in the street is confronted with a wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies that compete for his allegiance or at least attention, and none of which is in a position to coerce him into allegiance. In other words, the phenomenon called “pluralism” is a social-structural correlate of the secularization of consciousness. (Berger, 1967, p. 127)

Digital religion adds a further layer to this pluralism, introducing new religious agencies that seek to shape our decisions and behaviors. A greater number of actors, operating within a networked structure, produces what can properly be called a *distributed* authority. One consequence is that AI and chatbots heighten selectivity regarding religious beliefs and practices; another is that this selectivity tends to be non-normative. Such an outcome is easy to anticipate wherever authority becomes this diffuse. This distributed authority, characteristic of a networked and globalized world, allows for the emergence of a new ‘Ammermanian’ plausibility structure and for what we may call a ‘non-sacred canopy’, within which the religious authority of AI and chatbots enjoys considerable social support.

A critical assessment of chatbots’ authority

While a critical assessment of AI and chatbots’ authority is necessarily open and multifaceted, we will examine the issue from three perspectives, moving from the more technical arguments toward the theological: algorithmic bias, the expertise fallacy, and the destructive nature of AI’s simulation of religious authority.

Algorithmic biases

The most common issue associated with AI-generated authority in general, and with chatbots’ authority in particular, is that digital algorithms are frequently biased. As research has shown (Lustig et al., 2016; Obermeyer et al., 2019), such bias can stem from different sources – flawed or unrepresentative training data, historical patterns embedded in that data, selection bias, and representation bias, among others. Behind these biases, including those embedded in religious apps and chatbots, often stands a financial entity, namely, “the corporation that profits from users’ engagement with the devices, apps, and programs they own” (Keane, 2026, p. 13). The implication is clear: the corporation’s interest lies in maximizing the number of users and the volume of engagement with its religious app or chatbot, a commercial incentive that is not aligned with theological accuracy or pastoral responsibility.

From a Christian theological perspective, spiritual authority is exercised, among others, by calling individuals to repentance and sanctification in accordance with the will of God as revealed in Scripture. This means that unregenerate persons may encounter teachings that challenge their desires and practices, calling them to turn away from sin and to pursue a life pleasing to God. It is therefore unsurprising, from this perspective, that the path of repentance is narrow (Matthew 7:13-14) and not necessarily attractive to many people. The Old Testament prophets, if we recall Weber’s observations, repeatedly exercised religious authority by calling the people to repentance, sanctification, and the rejection of idolatry (Isaiah 1:16–17; Jeremiah 7:23–24; Ezekiel 14:6; Hosea 14:1–2).

By contrast, chatbots are designed to be “user-friendly” and responsive to users’ preferences, potentially creating an environment in which users are more likely to encounter affirmation than challenge. Their orientation toward user satisfaction and well-being therefore raises questions about the neutrality of their responses. If commercial interests and financial objectives shape the design and operation of these systems, their apparent neutrality is only superficial. Furthermore, research has shown that political biases are also ingrained in digital religion:

AI’s answers in regard to religions focus on what can be considered a liberal approach, that celebrates diversity, pluralism, and multiculturalism. This finding aligns with a recent study by Motoki et al. (2023) which investigated ChatGPT’s political bias in several national contexts (the USA, UK, and Brazil). Motoki et al. (2023) have found that AI by and large leans left, and elects for liberal values. In this study too, we have found that AI presents liberal values regarding religious representation. What is even more noteworthy is that AI here took an axiologically focused approach towards the reader and kept prompting the reader to understand religious diversity and engage in a respectful dialogue with a sensitive approach. (Tsuria & Tsuria, 2024, p. 9)

The neutrality of algorithmic authority, which seemed aligned with the Weberian legal-normative perspective, is rather illusory. Financial interests and political ideologies may very well determine how AI and chatbots should use their newfound authority.

The expertise fallacy

AI and chatbots gain authority, including religious authority, mainly because they are perceived as having extensive expertise across all fields of knowledge. The vast amount of data chatbots can access can lead users to believe they will receive the best, most accurate answers from a disinterested entity for the most complex questions of life. But is it so? Some experiments with AI regarding the representation of religious thought have revealed quite the opposite. There is a tendency in chatbots and AI to simplify complex religious issues – and implicitly to misrepresent them – to neglect religious texts as sources, and to offer answers that ignore context or evidence (Tsuria & Tsuria, 2024, p. 8). Noreen Herzfeld, a professor of theology and computer science at Saint John’s University in Minnesota, affirms that chatbots trained to interact with religious texts will fall into common “large language model defects,” that is, “hallucinations” or, to put it differently, they will “make stuff up.” She adds: “And if people then believe that what these models are spouting is actually in the Quran or in the New Testament, they could be severely misled” (Wright, 2024).

Christian theology is not merely a matter of biblical information; it is a complex form of reflection that unfolds within the context of revelation and faith, understood as supernatural realities. Apophatic theology, for example, emphasizes the limits encountered when human language and concepts attempt to speak about God and His relationship with creation (Lossky, 1976). Genuine theological expertise, therefore, emerges through a complex interaction between faith and reason, nature and grace, the human person and the Holy Spirit, and the theologian and the ecclesial community. What chatbots can simulate in the form of theological advice, interpretation, or apparent authority remains fundamentally different from this theological process.

A destructive simulation of religious authority

One final aspect we want to analyze is the destructive nature of simulating religious authority through AI and chatbots. This is more connected to a theological critique of AI’s religious authority. As this study has shown, there is indeed a form of derivative religious authority that chatbots acquire from a sociological perspective, simply because people use these tools. The more these chatbots are being used, the more authority they have. Nevertheless, we notice a particular challenge with the assumed simulation of religious authority by chatbots. In other words, the

‘impersonations’ of Jesus, prophets, apostles, etc. by chatbots, besides the trivial overtones some might notice, are particularly problematic because they continue, in novel ways, a long tradition of fake spirituality. Long before the advent of chatbots, religious simulation and impersonation were already commonplace, whether in claims to authority or in other forms. As Webb Keane (2026) puts it, chatbots – “like divination, spirit possession, and oracular prophecy” – “generate signs that require interpretation and prompt users to project intentions onto non-human entities, blurring the line between animate and inanimate beings” (p. 13).

From a Christian theological perspective, ‘playing God’ may be interpreted as an attempt to usurp divine authority. We may recall one such instance when the evil one sought to usurp God’s place, tempting Jesus with these words: “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.” Jesus replied, “Go away, Satan! For it is written: ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’” (Matthew 4:9–10, New American Standard Bible). If this same ‘god-like’ temptation now takes on a new form – with some users equating chatbots with ‘God,’ and chatbots themselves assuming such a position – the theological and moral stakes could hardly be higher.

Christianity, by its Christ-centeredness, is a religion that seeks to guide people towards Truth (John 14:6) or, in other words, helps them escape the orbit of the Edenic fall into deceitfulness and regain the freedom to live real, genuine lives. Leading people into a spiritual simulacrum and framing it as real, as some AI and chatbots do, is extremely destructive because it dislocates humans from reality and flourishing lives. On the contrary, religious authority should be used for spiritual formation and for educating people to live in accordance with their human dignity, loving God and their neighbors (Rotaru, 2025, pp. 772–790).

This critical assessment of chatbots’ authority is not a total rejection of AI religious tools. They can be used constructively, even by those who hold classical religious authority in the Weberian sense. The AI and chatbots not only bring challenges to traditional authority, but they can also create “a new space for traditional religious authorities to enact their power or control over religious narratives and practices” (Campbell & Bellar, 2023, p. 83). We therefore need discernment and balance: we can make use of AI’s instrumental capabilities while recognizing that genuine theological authority must ultimately be grounded in God and His revelation.

Conclusions

Artificial intelligence and chatbots claim religious authority both directly and indirectly. Some chatbots impersonate God, Jesus, or other biblical figures, blurring the distinction between reality and religious simulation. Chatbots that assume this form of direct authority tend to be perceived in personal terms, resembling the charismatic type of authority described by Max Weber. Their authority does not necessarily require clear or traditional forms of legitimation because the plausibility structure, or “sacred canopy,” that once sustained authority in traditional religious contexts has been reconfigured. Legitimation now emerges at the intersection of informal conversation, online interaction, and the broader context of a globalized religious landscape. The new framework of authority can be understood as a kind of “non-sacred canopy” that reflects both the subjective and objective dimensions of the secularization of consciousness.

The indirect, or derivative, religious authority of chatbots rests on the widespread perception of large language models (LLMs) as experts and neutral. Users may trust artificial intelligence and chatbots to provide reliable answers to religious questions and dilemmas. However, as new actors enter the arena of religious authority, we must recognize that app developers have become competitors within the religious field. Because financial interests and diverse ideological orientations inform the development of chatbots and religious applications, algorithmic authority can hardly be regarded as entirely neutral or disinterested. As this study has shown, both structural and ideological biases are embedded in various chatbots and digital religion tools. Moreover, the religious expertise attributed to AI and

chatbots is largely illusory, given their reductionist treatment of Christian theology, user-centered design, and the biases discussed above. The impersonation of God or biblical figures is particularly problematic because it encourages users to approach spirituality through simulated rather than authentic religious engagement, resulting in spiritual confusion and diminished religious life.

Artificial intelligence and chatbots should not, however, be dismissed from a technophobic perspective. There is instead a need for discernment and balance: a critical attitude toward emerging forms of religious authority, together with continued investigation into their sources, practical manifestations, and consequences.

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