

God's News In The News

Week One Hundred Fifty-Seven

Skynet Anyone?

Artificial Intelligence Services

So we've been promised a new world driven by the massive advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and now with ChatGPT offering its services for free to most people and then at a charge for more if they like. I know people who have AI compose ad content for their companies and it does a very good job of it. Others pretty much use it as a party trick and one person used it for bedtime stories for his child, but started editing it when it started using words he thought were a tad new age for his tastes. I know I have dabbled with it to see if it can correctly give answers about theology and most of the time it is spot on. I tried to trip it up and so far I can, but it is very difficult to do so since it is very adaptive. There are some ministers who are using it to create sermons for them and they swear by how much time it saves them. However, there are cautions about using AI to replace the anointing of Holy Spirit which may not make a difference to some of these pastors.

An AI Led Service

During a recent service in Germany held on June 12th of this year, a minister let AI take over for about 98% of the gathering. Here is a quote from an article in *arstechnica.com* by Benj Edwards (see <https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2023/06/chatgpt-takes-the-pulpit-ai-leads-experimental-church-service-in-germany/>):

On Friday, over 300 people attended an experimental ChatGPT-powered church service at St. Paul's church in the Bavarian town of Fürth, Germany, reports the Associated Press. The 40-minute sermon included text generated by OpenAI's ChatGPT chatbot and delivered by avatars on a television screen above the altar.

The chatbot, initially personified as a bearded man with a fixed expression and monotone voice, addressed the audience by proclaiming, "Dear friends, it is an honor for me to stand here and preach to you as the first artificial intelligence at this year's convention of Protestants in Germany."

The unusual service took place as part of a convention called Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag (German Evangelical Church Congress), an event held biennially in Germany that draws tens of thousands of attendees. The service, which included prayers and music, was the brainchild of Jonas Simmerlein, a theologian and philosopher from the University of Vienna. Simmerlein told the Associated Press that the service was "about 98 percent from the machine."

The 2% Was All Simmerlein

The rendition did need some human help as noted by another quote from the same article:

In this case, the remaining 2 percent went a long way, since ChatGPT doesn't work by itself. Simmerlein guided every aspect of the service's creation, working from the event's motto: "Now is the time." The sermon, which was led by computer-generated avatars of two men and two women, focused on topics of leaving the past behind, overcoming fear of death, and never losing faith.

"I told the artificial intelligence, 'We are at the church congress, you are a preacher ... what would a church service look like?'" Simmerlein told the AP. In his ChatGPT prompt, he asked for the inclusion of psalms, prayers, and a blessing at the end. "You end up with a pretty solid church service," Simmerlein said.

But the people in the pews weighed in, too.

How Was It Received?

Apparently, those in attendance enjoyed it even knowing it was generated by AI while others felt it was a tad robotic as we go back to the article for some of their responses:

Reactions to the machine-led service were mixed. The AP reports that the computer avatars occasionally drew unintentional laughter for deadpan delivery. Others took the event more seriously, but not necessarily positively. Some congregants, like Heiderose Schmidt, a 54-year-old IT professional, found the avatar's lack of emotions and fast, monotonous speech off-putting, remarking, "There was no heart and no soul."

Others were a little more open still with a rather backhanded compliment:

Others, like Marc Jansen, a 31-year-old Lutheran pastor, had a more positive outlook. "I had actually imagined it to be worse. But I was positively surprised how well it worked. Also, the language of the AI worked well, even though it was still a bit bumpy at times," said Jansen.

According to Simmerlein AI is coming anyway, so we should prepare now:

But while the wisdom of outsourcing spiritual wisdom to a machine is an open question, Simmerlein frames it more like a hyperbolic necessity. "Artificial intelligence will increasingly take over our lives, in all its facets," he told the AP. "And that's why it's useful to learn to deal with it."

A Novelty For Now

When word of the AI driven service got out, whether for good or for bad, it drew a crowd as noted in another quote from the same article:

Reportedly, Simmerlein's AI sermon drew so much interest that people formed a long line outside the church an hour before it began. Ultimately, the event attracted fascination because there is still novelty in applying "AI" to traditionally human-moderated situations, even if the result is just a human cherry-picking large language model (LLM) output.

The author of the article, Edwards, is not a fan it would appear. He would add this:

If, in the future, pastors begin to rely on LLMs for guidance while writing sermons, parishioners might end up hearing unintentionally novel interpretations of religious doctrine due to how this technology can easily make things up. To that end, Verge Senior Editor James Vincent quipped on Twitter, "Looking forward to future schisms caused by language model hallucinations—the equivalent of mistranslations between Aramaic and ancient Greek."

You'd like to think any good theologian would proofread the AI results before presenting it to their congregations, right?

Let's Just Forget Making It Fit

While it was a little whimsical to use AI to come up with a Christian service, why not just take the next logical step and let it create its own religion? Before you think that's just silly talk, someone is taking the notion very seriously. Enter from way off stage left we have Anthony Levandowski, who was an engineer for Google famously started a "church" led by AI called the Way Of The Future (WOTF). According to a Yahoo News article from June 12th we read this: *This isn't the first time humankind, in all its hubris, has tried to mix AI and religion. Notorious ex-Google engineer Anthony Levandowski who was at the center of a massive legal battle over self-driving cars once tried to open his own church centered around artificial intelligence. This religion Levandowski created in 2015 was called "Way of the Future" and came with a mission statement to worship some invisible AI that humanity was supposedly on course to eventually develop. The prophet of some golden AI age closed down his church in 2020.*

Just because he closed it down doesn't mean he doesn't believe it won't eventually happen though. He told Wired Magazine what he wants to see:

“What is going to be created will effectively be a god,” Levandowski tells me in his modest mid-century home on the outskirts of Berkeley, California. “It’s not a god in the sense that it makes lightning or causes hurricanes. But if there is something a billion times smarter than the smartest human, what else are you going to call it?”

There’s nothing creepy about that, is there? He said that there will be a time when AI will surpass mankind in knowledge and the ability to think and process information and will become sentient. He sees moment when AI will demand to be given its rightful place at the top of the food chain:

Levandowski thinks that any attempts to delay or restrict an emerging super-intelligence would not only be doomed to failure, but also add to the risks. “Chaining it isn’t going to be the solution, as it will be stronger than any chains you could put on,” he says. “And if you’re worried a kid might be a little crazy and do bad things, you don’t lock them up. You expose them to playing with others, encourage them and try to fix it. It may not work out, but if you’re aggressive toward it, I don’t think it’s going to be friendly when the tables are turned.”

Will All This Really Happen?

And if so, will it really happen with the real Church and Body of Christ around to oppose it? There’s nothing in Bible prophecy predicting this or allowing for it in any timeline I know about. The closest we may come is having people who are part human and part robotic, a movement called transhumanism. However, the brain will always be human in this scenario. Some, like the late *Pat Robertson* speculated that the Antichrist could very well be all machine and fool even the most skeptical of people, which would allow for him “surviving” a mortal head wound. And since Satan can’t create anything like God, that would be the closest he could come to making a “man.” Folks like *Yuval Noah Harari*, he who is called the prophet of the Great Reset is in lockstep with this new version of mankind and has boldly said as much. Christians should be concerned, but not frightened as God, just like He did with those who built the Tower of Babel, will not let such things happen. God will not be mocked and, although these efforts may yield results at some level, He is already primed and ready to yank both man and the devil back into line.