Religion & A.I Show Notes and Main Questions

To what extent are metaphors and images taken from religious studies helpful in illuminating what is at stake in the growing presence of A.I. Conversely, where might they include more than they illuminate? Does the religious studies classroom provide a particular type of case study in how A.I might helpfully be present in the students experience and in scholarly experience? How does terminology, like the soul, spiritual, or spirit, factor into this analysis of A.I and its possible human futures?

Question 1: There are two modes of thinking one being, "nothing new under sun" becomes dismissal, or an overexuberant, every generation thinks it is the end of the world. The answer might be somewhere in-between. How do we describe where we are with the new technology? Ideas on precedence and continuity.

Katherine: Continuity, what is continuous about what we are doing now or dealing with now, since we started playing with computers, we have wondered what more they can do, so something there about how we approach it. Data sets, how we can better collect and use data. Interaction with computers, how we know them, are used to them, and use them. We are not having new shifts. What could be new, and unsettling is the move beyond data set like basic GPS towards a generative one. Linguistic metaphors of generation and creation, the way we use metaphors and linguistic metaphors.

- AI hallucinating: pattern recognition and pattern generation, when it hits a block, it guesses. When predictive text gives you something untrue, created something that does not exist, it predicts on what it can find.

Kristel: The escapism, wanting to leave our bodies is a precedent. Omnipotence that we project, and omnipotence used for certainty. Pattern recognition, helpful for patients, what a lot of A.I is doing, it has value but needs to be used the right ways.

Jon: Something different is happening, maybe the newness is overwhelming, we can say a similar thing about the car, what we can do with it. The shock value, we can escape in television shows (Black Mirror). I utilize Black Mirror to look at that shock value, it is something that in that world the technology is not crazy or new, we are in a period of gestation, and I think that is what is happening and what is a main part of it.

What is new about the ways in which we are responding to it, a more existential way, and cultural ways in which we respond.

Question 2: What does religious studies academia bring to this society wide debate? The talk of A.I and the discourse around it often function as invitations to employ language that religious studies scholars are familiar with, talk of the soul, human distinctiveness, etc. To what extent are religious language helpful in illuminating what is going on or what is at stake here, and when can the language that is most familiar to us religious studies scholars or practitioners, when does that run the risk of obfuscating more than illuminating?

Jon Ivan Gill: This is something I think about often. The possibilities of religious language, secularizing religion (Andrew Whitehead) using this idea to bring language out of academics. The possibilities of A.I. This language allows us to struggle with that which is the most beneficial in the consciousness. Things can get obscure with language, forces us into a space where we need dialog. The terminology produces language and dialog.

Katherine G. Schmidt: Something about the task of theology that we are used to playing with terms and it seems to me that we are always aware that language is failing us. What concerns me is how people are not understanding metaphors as metaphors; public discourse takes them literally. The existential questions, what it means to be human and where are we going with it. What is the purpose, where are we going, interesting to look at.

Kristel Clayville: I am thinking about all the metaphors and the extent to which students do not think they are using metaphors. Rationality, religious language allows for conversations around rationality. How we think about education, as a data processing system. Data is given to you by someone else, you process it and send it back out on a test, the ability to process.

Rob Saler: ChatGPT as therapist: some say the A.I platform is missing some human element. But a therapist has gotten data and is now processing it to the patient

- Kristel: "my therapist can suffer," that is something that could be missing from these advanced tech
  o What her experience (background in religious studies but focus on tech now) has taught her: computer science less enthusiastic about ai. Harnessing ai for good, what they can do with it. Social justice orientated, in some of her classes, really interested in history of ideas.

Question 3: As educators, researchers and more, what are thoughts on A.I in the classroom, student use of A.I, or teacher use of A.I.

How the panelists use, or do not use, A.I in the classroom, and teaching:

- Katherine G. Schmidt: Put forward a model of education that is not purely utilitarian. The use of ai and things like ChatGPT is just a logical conclusion of how we have been talking to students about what college is for. We have been framing it in capitalist terms, and we are then somehow surprised when they try to find the most efficient way to get through college to get the job. In some ways the students cannot be blamed because they have been told education is a particular kind of thing. Open a discussion about what we are doing here and what we are doing when we are learning.
- Jon Ivan Gill: Open to using devices and technology in the classroom when it is there for what we are there for. Use our resources like A.I to find ideas, encouragement, or inspiration, but not to create laziness. Use it to create interests and help you find ideas.
- Kristel Clayville: Try to have my class be a space to discuss what education is for. Do not necessarily want them to use ChatGPT but the department is more computer based so it has accepted it as a tool. Now that this tool exists, you must be better than it is, writing is harder now. Have them use ChatGPT