

AI and the Network Generation: Theological Discussions with ChatGPT on Historical Theology

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Growing up in Silicon Valley in the 1980s and 1990s ingrained in me the impact of technology on young people, especially with the internet's rise in the early 2000s. This also coincided with the beginning of my faith journey at UCLA, where I transitioned from a non-believing student studying technology to a follower of Jesus Christ. I believed passionately that God would use young people, with the help of technology, to change the world for his kingdom. Decades later, with the advent of mobile phones, social media, and now AI, the impact of technology remains significant. AI's potential for transformative change, as even the White House (2002) notes, could impact "productivity, growth, inequality, market power, innovation, and employment." This potential extends to missions and ministry with innovative uses of AI tools becoming a crucial frontier for advancing God's kingdom.

This paper analyzes how the "network generation" uses ChatGPT in biblical-theological discussions, based on observations from a historical theology course at Olivet University. The study examines the benefits and limitations of using AI in theological conversations, offering insights for missions, ministry, and education. While the research was limited to a small group of thirteen students, the paper aims to enhance understanding of how AI can enrich theological discussions and highlight potential challenges in its adoption. For this paper, I am using the term "network generation" to encompass Millennials and GenZ, since both generations share a constantly changing technological landscape.

An Overview of AI and ChatGPT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to technology that can perform tasks typically requiring human intelligence, such as speech recognition and decision-making. AI has recently gained significant attention, particularly with OpenAI's ChatGPT, a form of generative AI that OpenAI (2023) described as a "language model trained to produce text" and optimized for dialogue. Generative AI represents a groundbreaking frontier, capable of creating text, images, and music by mimicking patterns in existing data. It works together with Large Language Models (LLMs), which Minaee et. al (2024) describes as "large-scale, pre-trained, statistical language models based on neural networks." The key innovation behind ChatGPT is the transformer, first studied by researchers Vaswani et. al (2017), and uses a self-attention mechanism to weigh words in a sentence relative to each other, enhancing natural language processing and improving the model's ability to understand and generate language. This process is crucial for predicting missing words and generating the next word, enabling the model to learn language structure and nuances through pre-training.

Pre-training AI uses a self-supervised learning approach with vast amounts of text data to help models predict missing words (or "masked language modeling") and generate the next word in a sequence, as researchers Devlin et. al (2019) outlined. This allows the AI to understand the full context of a sentence, despite missing words from the user. For example, a user request for a sermon on Matthew 4:18-22 should not be interpreted as a sermon on Matthew followed by numbers but a desire for biblical context and real-life application to the disciples' calling. Pre-

training enables the model to predict the next word using predictive analytics, as researchers Radford et. al (2018) described. According to Brown et. al (2020), this is usually autoregressive, meaning the model is generating text one at a time based on previous outputs. Once trained on a large data set of vocabulary, the LLMs can produce human-like text for tasks like creative writing and conversational responses. Interestingly, past AI models, like symbolic AI, attempted to “think” like humans using problem-solving theories such as those outlined by Newell and Herbert (1972, p. 1), but they failed to produce coherent text efficiently. Instead, this Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (GPT) technology, which simply generates the next word, excelled in its place. That is why ChatGPT is not the AI of movies, where it learns and grows like humans, a process known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI).

ChatGPT perpetually uses current information from the internet to generate responses (OpenAI, 2023). It has various applications including translation, summarization, Q&A, analysis, and more. If a user asks ChatGPT to write a 500-word essay on the Reformation, it will do so with extraordinary efficiency. It received a 1410 on the SATs and a score of 5 out of 5 on multiple AP tests (OpenAI, 2023). According to Choi et al. (2023), ChatGPT has passed multiple different college-level exams and is constantly improving with each upgrade. A survey in January 2023 reported that 89% of students surveyed had used ChatGPT for homework, while 72% of college professors surveyed were “concerned about its impact on cheating,” according to Study.com (2023).

Despite its impressive capabilities, ChatGPT has significant limitations. OpenAI (2023) admits that “ChatGPT sometimes writes plausible-sounding but incorrect or nonsensical answers.” ChatGPT will sometimes sound convincing but generates completely inaccurate information, otherwise known as “hallucinations.” OpenAI (2023) also admits that ChatGPT is “often excessively verbose and overuses certain phrases.” Another issue with ChatGPT is its tendency to steer users towards mainstream perspectives, a bias inherent in the data set it was trained on, as researcher Emilio Ferrara described (2023). This has the benefit of steering users away from extreme viewpoints, but it has the drawback of overlooking minority opinions.

Considering the Network Generation

As mentioned, the term “network generation” encompasses both Millennials and GenZ, two generations that share a constantly changing technological landscape, as Pew Research president Michael Dimock (2019) outlined. The hallmark of the network generation has been the internet, which has created a globalized society with readily available information and instant communication. This is a generation of digital natives with a heightened sense of interconnectedness, more aware of diverse cultures and perspectives than ever before due to social media, according to researchers (Allen et al., 2014). The information overload also created challenges like echo chambers, which reinforce pre-existing beliefs, as researchers Cinelli et al. (2021) describe. Members of the network generation are early adopters of all technology, including AI, outpacing previous generations in usage (Nejame et al., 2023). They are integrating AI more swiftly into their everyday lives than older generations can anticipate or react to.

Beyond technological influences that the network generation can see are hidden influences of postmodernism from past generations. Stanley Grenz (1996, pp. 167-174) identified it as a generation that is post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, and post-noeticentric of

modernist ideals. For this generation, Ronald Michener (2007, p. 162) sees the need for an approach that is “whole-person, relationally centered, dialogue-based apologetic which appeals to reason, human sensibility, emotion, and imagination.” Grenz’s framework and Michener’s analysis highlight the need to consider the postmodern influence on the network generation, where the relationship between the individual and the meta-narrative is nuanced. Unlike the modernist focus on the rational self within a fixed meta-narrative, postmodernism encourages individual self-discovery with metanarratives adapting to the individual. However, believers cannot ignore the overarching biblical-historical framework. For the network generation, faith involves balancing personal self-discovery with the metanarrative of God’s kingdom, emphasizing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ within the community of believers while acknowledging individualism within the broader story of the Kingdom.

These considerations of the network generation are fascinating in examining how ChatGPT inherently addresses these characteristics for theological discussion. As digital natives, the network generation seamlessly integrates ChatGPT into their lives. ChatGPT enables individualized and nuanced discussions while drawing from the existing body of theological knowledge. It provides well-informed responses based on Christianity’s history and tradition, facilitating personal engagement within the broader context of faith, the Church, and God’s kingdom. Thus, ChatGPT may serve as an intuitive bridge connecting the unique characteristics of the network generation to theological discussions.

Background on Student Conversations with ChatGPT

In Spring 2024, I taught a historical theology course to thirteen students at Olivet University, an institution of biblical higher education. The historical theology course covered the period from the early Church to the Reformation, and I tasked the students with having four one-hour conversations with ChatGPT. The subject matter was ideal for AI since there was ample information available on the internet. Students were instructed to have their conversations after listening to my lectures and doing required readings. Afterwards, I provided the students with suggestions for conversations with ChatGPT. I also told students to take conversations in whatever direction they wanted.

The following is a sampling of suggested guidelines I gave to students:

1. Ask ChatGPT to give a comprehensive summary of key topics from Lecture 1 (Hellenistic philosophy, Gnosticism, the Apostolic Fathers, and the Logos Doctrine). Use ChatGPT to seek further clarity for anything that is unclear.
2. Why was Gnosticism considered a threat to early Christian doctrine? How did the Apostolic Fathers respond to Gnosticism, and what measures did they take to protect the integrity of Christian teachings?
3. Can you provide biblical substantiation to support Augustine’s theology in response to Pelagius? Please use the Bible to ensure theological accuracy and analyze how these Bible verses relate to the analysis.
4. Ask ChatGPT to provide a list of questions for personal self-reflection on the Trinitarian debates that impact your faith and theological understanding. Then, reflect on these questions and get feedback from ChatGPT.

5. Ask ChatGPT to provide a list of questions to ascertain whether you are more closely aligned with Bonaventure's or Aquinas's approach to knowledge. Answer those questions and ask ChatGPT to analyze with whom you are mostly closely theologically aligned and why.
6. Ministry Application: Provide ChatGPT with background information on your current or future ministry work and ask for advice on how to incorporate the insights from Lecture 4 into improving your ministry, keeping in mind the historical challenges and developments in Christian thought.
7. Sermon ideas: Ask ChatGPT for sermon ideas, including Bible passages for preaching, based on concepts and ideas that resonated with you during the lecture.

Following their ChatGPT conversation, students wrote reflections and engaged in a one-hour discussion with me on the benefits, limitations, opportunities, and risks of using ChatGPT in theological discussion.

Reflections from the Network Generation

Students reported several significant strengths of ChatGPT in their conversations, particularly its ability to simplify complex information and provide clear, accurate summaries of course topics, which was especially helpful for non-native English speakers. Some students found ChatGPT's responses easier to understand than even my own lectures or challenging reading assignments like Paul Tillich's (1968) "A History of Christian Thought," given this book can be hard to navigate. Additionally, ChatGPT demonstrated the capacity to handle a diverse range of student backgrounds, accurately referencing specific cultural and theological contexts from America, China, Korea, and India. It also effectively addressed ministry application questions, offering personalized self-reflection prompts tailored to each student's unique background. For instance, a Chinese student received questions related to traditional values, familial ties, and persecution in China. ChatGPT was also capable of integrating various topics, such as blending philosophical concepts like Plato's realism with Medieval Church history, while providing biblically rooted support. This versatility is likely due to the vast amount of information available on the internet, allowing ChatGPT to excel in personalizing content to meet individual needs and preferences across a wide array of topics.

Nonetheless, students also observed weaknesses in ChatGPT. As previously discussed, "hallucinations" by ChatGPT led to occasional inaccuracies on specific facts. For example, when discussing Tillich's historical theology book, ChatGPT consistently attributed material that was not in it but did align with Tillich's systematic theology. This is likely because there is significantly less information available on the internet about Tillich's historical theology, as compared to his systematic theology. Compounding this weakness is the fact that ChatGPT did not readily acknowledge inaccurate information. Instead of simply saying it does not know, ChatGPT constructed persuasive responses that students could not tell were inaccurate. Students believed Tillich wrote things ChatGPT said he did and did not realize he did not until I told students to re-read those sections in Tillich's book. In some other cases of "hallucinations," traditional internet searches were helpful for quickly distinguishing fact from fiction.

Looking forward, students agreed that AI and ChatGPT will play an important role in theological education. ChatGPT offers a highly accessible tool for substantive discussions, especially for

those hesitant to burden others with their theological inquiries or those who find it challenging to express their thoughts in English. One student noted that ChatGPT provides a conversational experience without the embarrassment or time constraints of involving others. Another appreciated its ability to simplify complex theological topics, boosting their confidence. Additionally, ChatGPT promotes critical thinking and deeper theological reflection by asking introspective questions, helping students refine their beliefs and understand diverse perspectives.

Students also recognized ChatGPT's potential limitations, particularly its inability to replace genuine human interaction in theology. The AI lacks empathy, personal beliefs, and a moral compass, which are essential for meaningful theological discussions. As one student noted, ChatGPT cannot replicate the authenticity of a professor sharing his or her own theological journey and struggles. Additionally, students found ChatGPT's factual inaccuracies concerning, as the AI's persuasive tone made them initially trust its information. This experience highlighted the importance of approaching ChatGPT critically and verifying facts with external sources.

Analysis

AI appears to be a positive development for the network generation, particularly in theological discussion. As digital natives, they easily integrate AI into their lives and theological growth, using it to navigate the vast sea of information available online. Mark Graves (2023) noted that “these technologies can provide new tools for scholars to access and analyze vast amounts of theological literature,” allowing them to focus on key research aspects. Mushtaq Bilal (2023) advised treating AI as “a research assistant not a supervisor,” a view echoed by University of Pennsylvania professors Mollick and Mollick (2023) who are studying how AI can be “a supportive tool.” In theological education, AI can similarly serve as an assistive tool to enhance learning.

AI also aligns with the postmodern influence of the network generation, particularly in addressing individual nuance within the grand metanarrative. James Hutson (2023) noted that “AI algorithms, with their ability to ideate, scrutinize data, and discern patterns, can streamline the creative process,” enhancing exploratory creativity. In theology, this means helping diverse and individualized believers find their place in the Bible's metanarrative of God's kingdom. Tools like ChatGPT enable individuals to articulate, defend, and substantiate their theological views while discerning counter-arguments, fostering self-discovery and a more well-rounded theological understanding.

Conversely, the network generation seems either naive or justifiably unconcerned about AI's dangers, depending on one's perspective. AI's false information has led to calls for more transparency, leading to legislation such as the EU AI Act (2023). These concerns appear valid for the network generation, who struggle to discern accuracy. But these concerns might also be limited in impact. Historically, false information has often caused disruptions but eventually faded as truth prevailed. James McGrath (2023) noted that an error-prone AI will result in companies to “pay the price.” This reflects the biblical truth that what is false will be judged and what is true will endure (Eccl. 12:14; 2 Cor. 5:10). The network generation appears to accept corrections and seeks accurate information, particularly in theology. They also value genuine learning, understanding the risks of cheating and plagiarism. Therefore, educators should consider responsible AI guidelines, as promoted by KU Leuven (2023).

The more significant limitation is AI's ability to replace genuine human interaction. In its current form, AI cannot offer genuinely original ideas as humans do. Ted Peters (2024) explored asking ChatGPT existential questions and remarked: "Existential questions are so personal they beleaguer us with puzzlement, dread, and fear." This lack of genuine creativity limits the depth of discussions with AI. Future AI may better mimic humans, but it will always be artificial and devoid of a genuine human experience. This is especially true for complex and nuanced theological subjects, which require a cultural, historical, or deeply personal understanding. ChatGPT may be adequate as a theological discussion tool, but there is no one who believes it is genuinely an actual human.

Finally, ethical concerns surrounding AI are complex, with a key issue being the tendency to "play god" (Lennox, 2020, p. 208), as people increasingly rely on AI rather than turning to God. AI's autonomous decision-making raises significant theological questions about the boundaries between human creativity and divine authority. Jason Thacker (2021, 8.60 Calibre) warns that AI could become "our new golden calf," highlighting the risk of idolatry as AI mimics human behaviors and capabilities. The ethical framework guiding AI should align with our Creator's values, as Dennis Hollinger (2021, p. 32) emphasizes the need for AI to respect human dignity and biblical teachings. However, John Lennox (2020, p. 24) questions how an ethical dimension can be built into algorithms lacking heart and soul, raising concerns about AI dehumanizing individuals. Society at large must consider the importance of trustworthiness in AI, as Beena Ammanath (2021, p. 73) notes that trust will be crucial in our future with AI. The danger exists that over-reliance on AI could reduce humans to mere machines, risking humanity's well-being. That is why Jason Thacker (2021, 15.64, Calibre) cautions against viewing AI as a savior.

Conclusion

AI has made a tremendous impact on society, education, and theology, yet it remains a tool limited as we humans are. As Dorian Scott Cole (2023) notes, "Artificial intelligence knows nothing more than what humans have given it." Therefore, it is crucial to view AI from a God-centered perspective rather than a human-centered one. AI may evolve to mimic or surpass human intelligence, as Brenden Lake (2023) suggests. But it will never know God who is beyond us, since the Bible teaches us that God is love, fully incarnated in Jesus Christ, and only humans, created in God's image, can truly know and form a relationship with him (Isa. 55:8-9; John 1:14; Gen. 1:27). Thus, while AI is a powerful tool, it will never replace the unique spiritual relationship humans have with God.

This paper explored the intersection of AI and theology, focusing on how the network generation can use ChatGPT for theological discussions. It highlighted ChatGPT's strengths in facilitating meaningful conversations but also acknowledged its weaknesses, such as factual inaccuracies and the lack of a human touch. The study faced limitations, including a small sample size and a focus on less controversial theological topics, which did not fully test ChatGPT's capabilities. Furthermore, the paper did not assess learning outcomes, suggesting that future research could compare traditional and AI-assisted discussions. As ChatGPT continues to impact higher education, its potential to shift pedagogy towards a more discussion-centric model is evident, but it also brings challenges, including bias, privacy concerns, and the risk of overshadowing

minority theological opinions. These issues require further exploration and scrutiny, particularly in the context of theological education.

Looking ahead, ChatGPT will likely play a transformative role in theological discussions for the network generation. To fully harness its potential, it is essential to balance AI's capabilities with the need to protect individual perspectives, privacy, and theological diversity. The impact of tools like ChatGPT goes beyond academia, promoting meaningful dialogue and thoughtful inquiry within God's kingdom. However, it is important to remember that while AI can enhance our conversations, it is our shared faith in God through Jesus Christ that ultimately makes these discussions fruitful and meaningful.

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