When discussing the desirability of religious robots: courage for theology!

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If you planned on building a house, who would you ask? Most likely a statistician, an architect, and possibly your banker.

If you wanted to develop an AI for predictive policing, who would you seek for advice? Probably experts in AI and criminal statistics. Additionally, it would be ideal to include individuals who critically analyze digital policing and the contemporary practices in the penal system.

And if you aimed to create a robot capable of performing medical surgeries independently or assisting human surgeons, whom would you consult? The logical choices would be doctors and medical technicians, along with experts in robotics. It would also be crucial to incorporate patient perspectives. You would ask them about the feasibility and desirability of such a robo-surgeon from both a professional and patient viewpoint.

The same applies when considering robots for other applications. For example, when contemplating the development of a military combat robot, you would primarily seek insights from robotics experts and seasoned military professionals. They would assess whether a robot could possibly meet the required military standards (feasibility). Furthermore, along with experts in military history, conflict studies, and the ethics of warfare, you would examine whether there is a military justification or even necessity for deploying such robots in combat (desirability). This evaluation would consider the potential impact of robots on future conflicts and whether their use is justifiable from both strategic and ethical standpoints.

We could continue the same game with sex robots, police robots, care robots, and many other types of robots, each time showing which expertise should be sought. The key point of these examples, which I hope has become evident by now, is that every potential use-case for robots has its specific experts. Deciding on the desirability of deploying robots in these areas should not proceed without consulting these specialists. While it might be possible (and in certain situations even welcomed in democratic and participatory research and decision-making contexts), e.g., statisticians to give their opinion on military robots, a decision regarding the desirability of military robots that lacks or only marginally includes military or defense science expertise will understandably be met with skepticism.

So, whom should you consult when contemplating religious robots? Particularly when considering whether robots *should* be equipped for religious functions, such as engaging in prayer, preaching, providing spiritual care, or teaching? Following the same logic, the answer would be: primarily individuals with theological expertise and, similar to the case of the surgical robot, those who would interact with these robots, potentially receiving spiritual care or meditation instruction from them.

As a trained philosopher *and* Catholic theologian, Anna Puzio, the author of *AI & Society's* recent article *Robot, let us pray!* (Puzio 2023), brings the ideal qualifications to discuss whether robots can and should have religious functions. With her dual background, she is uniquely equipped to tackle these highly pertinent questions from both a secular philosophical and a Catholic-theological perspective. Yet, despite this dual expertise, Puzio clarifies early in her article that in her article she approaches the question whether robots should be equipped to perform religious practices mainly "from a philosophical perspective" (2), only occasionally supplementing it with "theological and religious concepts and arguments." (2) She explains this choice by pointing out that "theological and religious approaches offer diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives on religious robots" (2), suggesting that a philosophical perspective may be more suitable for a coherent and comprehensible examination of this theme.

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Puzio's aim to offer a cohesive and widely accessible debate on religious robots is to be appreciated, and her point that there are numerous theological and religious viewpoints on this subject is well-taken. As a Catholic theologian, she could naturally offer a perspective rooted in Catholic theology, which would need to be supplemented by several other theological perspectives including Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, Islamic, and others. Nonetheless, her methodological choice raises several critical inquiries. Beyond the most obvious question of whether philosophy, too, isn't marked by "diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives" (2)—consider, for instance, the different views, the views the late Martin Heidegger and the information philosopher Luciano Floridi would give on religious robots—a primary concern emerges: who are the actual stakeholders when it comes to religious robots? And does a predominantly philosophical approach sufficiently account for the viewpoints of the persons primarily affected and involved?

Considering this concern, it quickly becomes evident that robots performing religious practices are mainly a matter of interest to those who are religious, whether they are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, or belong to any other religion. Non-religious people, however, are less likely to engage in religious practices where they might interact with religious robots—rendering the debate over the desirability of such robots largely irrelevant to them. Yet, if it is primarily religious persons who are affected by the question of whether they wanted to be accompanied and guided by religious robots in their prayers, services, rituals, or celebrations, then it is their perspectives that predominantly matter. In other words, the believers' perspectives, deeply rooted within their own religious faith should be prioritized: their respective theological perspectives.

Don't get me wrong. It is not my goal to diminish the significance of a philosophical perspective—especially when it is presented by someone who is skilled in both philosophical and specific theological approaches, and capable of harnessing the synergies between the two. In fact, a philosophical approach can be crucial in ensuring that the development of religious robots does not lead to fundamental violations of ethical principles (such as avoiding discrimination, manipulation, and preserving diversity)—akin to the approach Puzio takes in Chapter 5.

While a philosophical perspective is certainly valuable for assessing from a secular standpoint whether there are fundamental objections to developing religious robots (essentially questioning if there are any compelling reasons to refrain from developing such robots), it remains debatable if this perspective alone is adequate for addressing the more positively phrased inquiry: should we pursue the development of robots equipped with religious functions? This query, I believe, demands more than just weighing the potential challenges against the anticipated benefits of religious robots from a non-affected, philosophical stance. The real determination of whether the purported benefits for religious practices outweigh the concerns—which, as a side note, even if it is the case, still does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that religious functions *should* be implemented into robots—can only be truly made from the perspective of those directly involved. Thus, when deliberating whether to develop religious robots, the input of religious "experts" is essential, calling for a bold embrace of theology!

Indeed, in her article's conclusion, within the limitations section, Puzio herself acknowledges the need for her philosophical reflections "to be complemented by religious and theological insights." (14) However, this remark doesn't render the point of this commentary obsolete but rather emphasizes its urgency. What is *not* needed when considering whether robots should have religious functions is a subsequent theological "complement" to philosophical reflections and decisions. Rather than following this trajectory, the approach should be fundamentally inversed: the question of whether religious robots are desirable should initially be examined from the specific (theological) perspective of those who are most likely to engage with them, potentially "complemented" with philosophical insights. In light of this, when delving into discussions about the future of religious robots, let's exhibit greater courage for theology!

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Reference

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