Artificial Intelligence and Apocalypticism

with Robert M. Geraci and Simon Robinson, "Introduction to the Symposium on Artificial Intelligence and Apocalypticism"; Beth Singler, "Existential Hope and Existential Despair in AI Apocalypticism and Transhumanism"; Michael Morelli, "The Athenian Altar and the Amazonian Chatbot: A Pauline Reading of Artificial Intelligence and Apocalyptic Ends"; Victoria Lorrimar, "Mind Uploading and Embodied Cognition: A Theological Response"; and Syed Mustafa Ali, "'White Crisis' and/as 'Existential Risk,' or the Entangled Apocalypticism of Artificial Intelligence."

THE ATHENIAN ALTAR AND THE AMAZONIAN CHATBOT: A PAULINE READING OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND APOCALYPTIC ENDS

by Michael Morelli

Abstract.   This article explores questions about chatbots in particular and artificial intelligence (AI) in general from a Pauline, that is, a Christian theological perspective. It does so in a way that focuses on a particular scene in the New Testament: Paul in the Athenian Areopagus, considering an altar to an "unknown God," quoting Greek poets and philosophers, and sharing curious theology as he dialogues with Stoic and Epicurean thinkers (Acts 17:16–34). By examining the sociohistorical nuances of this scene and their philosophical and theological implications, this article shows how the altar Paul considers philosophically and theologically becomes the focal point for an important dialogue about apocalyptic ends, or ideas about who we are, where we are going, and who or what is responsible for that whoness and where-ness. In turn, this can teach us how to ask practical questions, which can uncover the unsuspected apocalyptic ends represented by, or even contained within, common technological objects such as chatbots.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; cosmology; divinity; eschatology; ethics; religion; technology; teleology; theology; worldview

Although fully fledged artificial intelligence (AI) technologies remain in research and development phases, there already have been considerable advances in AI. Intelligent personal assistants, commonly known as *virtual assistants* or *chatbots*—Amazon's Alexa, Apple's Siri, and Microsoft's

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Cortana—are examples. The core technology of chatbots is digital speech recognition, a combination of computer science, linguistics, and electronic engineering, which enables a computerized software program to recognize written text and/or verbal speech and perform functions accordingly.

Common usage of chatbots includes performing basic tasks such as making phone calls, sending messages, updating or checking online timelines, ordering items, playing songs, adding meetings or reminders to calendars, and so on. More complex usage of chatbots includes simulated conversation, which many people experience as helpful and entertaining, if not genuinely engaging. For example, *The New York Times* reports, "For celebrities who already use Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat to lend a personal touch to their interactions with fans, the next frontier of social media is a deliberately impersonal one: chatbots, a low-level form of artificial intelligence that can be harnessed to send news updates, push promotional content, and even test new material" (Sisario 2017).

Fan engagement with these bots is substantial enough to spark interest, investment, and research from a variety of individuals and groups. Even if fans are aware that chatbots are computers and the celebrity being represented is not actually talking to them, these bots are programmed to mirror celebrities and they demonstrate just enough linguistic intuitiveness to keep fans engaged. Fans interact with the bot as if the bot is the celebrity individual being imitated. This music industry example, coupled with the highly competitive virtual assistant market just mentioned, provide two examples of the various ways in which chatbots are affecting economics (*Economist* 2016).

There also is an increasing amount of discourse about how chatbots are affecting politics, to the extent that they are changing the way political candidates campaign and are changing how the public is informed—or misinformed—by news media (DiResta et al. 2017). Moreover, with the changes chatbots have affected in social, political, and economic spheres, the religious sphere similarly has been affected by chatbots in particular and AI in general. For instance, of the many ways in which the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation was celebrated, one church marked the occasion by unveiling a robot priest named *BlessU-2* at an exhibition in Wittenberg, the famous birthplace of the Reformation. According to the people responsible for the robot priest's design and display, the exhibition was intended to inspire debate about theological conceptions of AI. *The Guardian* reports, "The robot raises its arms, flashes lights, recites a biblical verse, and says: "God bless and protect you." If requested, it will provide a printout of its words. A backup robot is available in case of breakdown (Sherwood 2017).

Exhibitions such as these stand within broader theological debates about AI and its relationship to the Christian worldview in which thought and dialogue predominantly orbit around whether or not AI is a potential threat

to or ally of Christianity and whether or not Christians ought to welcome or resist AI (Merrit 2017). Accordingly, chatbots, and how they relate to AI, are crystallizing significant questions about worldview, and in some cases are reframing worldviews. As bots begin to affect social, economic, political, and religious spheres, they also begin to alter individual and collective conceptions of human existence and purpose. In this way, these technologies are reinvigorating, and in some cases reframing, enduring questions that religion, philosophy, and theology have attempted to answer for many years.

With this technological phenomenon in view, this article explores questions about chatbots in particular and AI in general from a Pauline—that is, a Christian theological perspective—but it does so in a way that focuses on a particular scene in the New Testament: Paul in the Athenian Areopagus, considering an altar to an "unknown God," quoting Greek poets and philosophers, and sharing curious theology as he dialogues with Stoic and Epicurean thinkers (Acts 17:16–34). By examining the sociohistorical nuances of this scene and their philosophical and theological implications, this article will show how the altar Paul considers philosophically and theologically becomes the focal point for an important dialogue about apocalyptic ends, or, ideas about who we are, where we are going, and who or what is responsible for that who-ness and where-ness. Then, as this article explores Paul's dialogue, it identifies revealing analogical connections between the "Athenian altar" and the "Amazonian chatbot," which help to pull the veil off of veiled apocalyptic ends. Then, finally, this article will conclude with Paul's own discussion of apocalyptic ends to develop, as it were, a Pauline reading of questions about AI and the apocalypse.

With regard to the terms *apocalyptic* and *apocalypse* as they are used throughout this article, I define both terms in the literal sense as *unveilings of the end*. For this reason, the critical question I want to ask and answer in this article is: What insight and wisdom can the Apostle Paul provide in respect to current questions, hopes, and fears with regard to AI and the apocalypse? To frame this article's thesis and the development of its examination of Acts 17:16–34, I can provide two preliminary answers at this point. First, I think the Apostle Paul can teach us how to unveil and to close the conceptual gaps we tend to form today (usually unconsciously) between religion, politics, economics, and technological objects. Second, as we learn from the Apostle Paul how to unveil and close these conceptual gaps, I also think he can teach us how to ask practical questions, which can help us uncover the unsuspected apocalyptic ends represented by, or even contained within, common technological objects such as chatbots, which, though relatively common and inconspicuous, are, at a deeper level, densely, complexly, powerfully, and even threateningly, networked in our technologically globalized world. As I will suggest and show in this article, then, this Pauline approach to answering questions about AI

and the apocalypse based on this historical scene in Acts 17:16–34 is as constructive as it is critical for today because it can help us uncover hope rather than fear when we consider potential apocalypses from the vantage point of the places and times in which we presently live.

FROM ZEUS LET US BEGIN

As already mentioned I define *apocalypse* in its literal sense throughout this article as an *unveiling of the end.* This is for two reasons. First, it levels the academic playing field and helps relieve us of any social imaginary baggage that has shaped the way in which we envision the apocalypse; second, this is what Paul does in the Areopagus. Paul is in a particular place at a particular time and he is moved thoughtfully to explore his setting. He is like many people today in that his thinking is shaped by his own worldview—his social imaginary—but, unlike many people today, his thinking in this scene begins at a very localized rather than an immensely globalized level.

Paul engages with what he experiences, exactly where he stands, in the city of Athens. This is a bustling meeting place of culture, commerce, politics, and religion. As he explores this networked city's streets—its markets, political institutions, and its places of worship—and as he converses with its people—Jews, Epicureans, and Stoics—he experiences directly what is important to the people who live in this prominent and powerful city (Acts 17:16–18). He learns about what they believe. He watches what they do. He tries to understand how it is that they see the world. Then, he ends up "in front of the Areopagus," on pseudo-trial and engaged in classic Socratic dialogue (Acts 17:22).

Some scholars think Paul was on trial here because the Areopagus—meaning *rock of Ares* or *Mars' Hill* in honor of the Greek god of war—functioned as a high court that often tried anyone speaking in Athens about foreign divinities (Cross and Livingstone 2005; Wood and Marshall 1996). This is a reasonable reading of the text because it describes the coincidence of the Areopagus meeting in the following way:

> Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with [Paul]. Some said, "What does this babbler want to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities." (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the Resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means." Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. (Acts 17:18–21)

My sense is that this is a sort of "soft trial" in which the Athenians genuinely are curious to hear from and dialogue with Paul. But, at the

same time, there is a possibility that the conversation could pivot into a "hard trial" if Paul misspeaks and the Athenians are offended. However, this scene is read though the Areopagus, as a mixture of high courts, cultural spaces, economic exchanges, and religious temples, is a meeting place of power in Athens. As such, an *axis mundi* is represented here—the *polis*, the city, as the center of the world—in which society, economics, politics, and religion connect with each other, form a powerful network, and powerfully confront each other. Consequently, Paul stands in the center of this complex network of social spheres, and this is where the Areopagus dialogue begins.

Paul begins by stating he notices the Athenians are "extremely religious [in] every way" (Acts 17:22). The evidence for this, he says, is, "I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship." Then, he mentions one object in particular: "I found among [these objects] an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). After this, Paul begins to represent his own theology but he also quotes Greek poets. As suggested earlier, this reveals important nuances in his philosophical and theological engagement with the altar he mentions, in that he says the following:

> From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring." (Acts 12:24–26)

The first quote is from the sixth century BCE Cretan seer Epimenides. Not much is known of Epimenides; his biography is nebulous in a fascinating, mythical way. He is credited with various religious, poetic, and mystical works, and is mentioned by Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch. Most famously, Epimenides is said to have purified Athens in 500 BCE with the sacrifice of sheep at the Areopagus. This signals a possible Christological allusion in Paul's quoting of Epimenides here because, as Paul speaks at the Areopagus, the significance of Jesus Christ as the purifying sacrificial lamb likely is being read prophetically by Paul into Epimenides's own purifying sacrifices. Also, Diogenes Laertius recalls that unnamed altars were placed at the location of each sacrifice at the Aeropagus to mark and to celebrate what took place there. So, this suggests that Paul knew of this historical detail, and that he factors it into his speech when he mentions the altar he sees in the city.

As for Epimenides, some scholars connect him to early Orphic and Dionysian religion, but this is mixed with other mythical accounts of him living for hundreds of years, sleeping for fifty-seven years in a cave while tending his father's sheep to awake with the gift of prophecy, and

experiencing various incarnations and wanderings outside of the body (Diogenes Laertius 1925, 115–21; Ramsay 1938). In the Book of Acts, Paul cites a line from a poem called *Cretica*, of which only a fragment remains. Here is a translation of the remaining pieces of *Cretica's* poetic verses:

> The Cretans carved a tomb for thee, O Holy and High!
> Liars, noxious beasts, idle gormandisers!
> For [you do] not die; ever [you live] and [stand] firm;
> For in [you] we live, and are moved and exist. (Ramsay 1938)

As a whole, this poem is about Zeus. It laments that the Cretans built a tomb for Zeus, whom Epimenides believed to be immortal, and consequently believed that appropriate worship of Zeus did not honor him with a tomb for the dead. This determines the last two lines of *Cretica*, because, to paraphrase those lines: "Zeus is not dead, Cretans, he lives forever. Because of that, we—*the Cretans*—live because Zeus lives and sustains the world and his people. We don't move and live unless Zeus permits it."

Zeus was a dominant figure in the Greek Olympian pantheon, the cloud-gathering god of the sky and thunder in the Homeric epics, hence the well-known image of Zeus grasping a thunderbolt in his raised right hand. Paul acknowledges, then, how Zeus represented an enduring and energizing source of life for the Greek people and their world. He identifies an overlap with his own understanding of an everlasting God who created and sustains creation and the creatures within it, and as such also does not live in tombs or shrines. Essentially, he points out similarities between his God and the gods of the Greeks in order to develop an opening defense against those who receive him as a babbler and as someone talking about a wholly foreign God. Then, Paul pushes the dialogue deeper with his second quote.

Eventually Paul references a second poem, *Phaenomena*, by the late third–early fourth century BCE Hellenistic stoic philosopher Aratus. *Phaenomena* attempts to poeticize the technical scientific language of Aratus's time, and as such it is a remarkably nuanced poem (Gee 2013). Beginning at the poem's opening will help contextualize the lines that Paul quotes in Acts:

> From Zeus let us begin; him do we mortals never leave unnamed;
> Full of Zeus are all the streets and the marketplaces of men;
> Full is the sea and the heavens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus.
> For we are also his offspring; and he in his kindness unto men
> Giveth favourable signs and waketh the people to work, reminding them of livelihood.
> He tells what time the soil is best for the labour of the ox and mattock.
> (Callimachus 1921)

Again, Paul pulls from a poem addressing Zeus. Here, he adds further philosophical and theological nuance to the first poem. Whereas Paul uses

the first poem to set the cosmological scene because Epimenides writes that everything in the world is sustained and energized by immortal Zeus, this cosmological theme is complemented by Aratus's lines in the second poem, "Wherefore him [Zeus] do men ever worship first and last" (Callimachus 1921). Essentially, Paul uses the second poem to move the discussion into more nuanced territory when he uses Aratus to highlight the connection between the Greeks and their gods, their understanding of the cosmos, and their city's economy. To paraphrase the lines just read, then: Zeus is everywhere. The streets—the network of the city—and the marketplaces—the economy of the city—are full of Zeus's energizing power. So much so, Zeus energizes people, who are his offspring, to wake up for work and gives signs to them when it is time to till the soil and sow seed. This is the energy that connects and powers everything from the natural world, to the networked streets, to the busy marketplace.

In short, Paul connects Greek philosophical polytheism with the Athenian economy as he speaks in the Areopagus, a meeting place of Athens's social, political, economic, and religious circles. Then, curiously, he concentrates all of these analyses with precision on the altar "to the unknown God." For Paul, the altar is marked as a concrete and conceptual node in the city's network. It is an entry point into the complex religious, economic, and political network of Athens that collectively is energized by the power of the gods, especially Zeus. This, I want to suggest, can be read analogically as a proto-Internet. Exchange the words *altars* with *devices* or *bots, streets* with *fiber optic cables*, and *Zeus* with *power* and . . . there you have it. The Internet. In both cases, thunderbolts, whether they are flashes of lighting held in the hands of Zeus, thrown from the heights of Olympus, or thunderbolt cables clutched in the hands of contemporary consumers, plugged into computers, which are connected to a global network of power, both images analogically represent a substantial amount of energy flowing in and through a complex and powerful network of communication and information exchange.

Note, however, that while Paul acknowledges similarities between his own theistic God, the polytheistic Greek god Zeus, and the ways in which both are worshipped, he does not completely placate the Greeks philosophically or theologically. Paul is direct about his theological position. He believes and states that his God is greater than the greatest Greek god Zeus but he also performs subtle linguistic moves in his mentioning of the altar and quoting of the poets. This indicates the sharp thrust of Paul's critical query. He focuses on this one altar among the many in Athens because its inscription "to an unknown God" signifies its status as a sort of catch-all altar. Which is to say, Paul highlights how the altar honors any god who has not yet been named or known so as not to offend that god. Otherwise, bad things could happen. Crops might not grow, items might not be sold, the city might be plunged into chaos, people might die, and so on. In the

process, Paul simultaneously uses the example of the placeholder altar to create space for the possibility that his God is the unknown God being referenced, and that this God is close and kind, and not a God who requires a placeholder altar in order to be close and kind.

Finally, and most crucially, Paul pulls the veil off the altar and asks: to whom is this altar directed and to what end—religious, economic, political, social, or cultural? A mixture of some, or all? Paul's communicative work here hints at his own preliminary answer. Actually, Paul implies, one cannot know the end—the purpose—of the altar if one does not know to whom or to what the altar is dedicated. The most that can be said, Paul concludes in light of this veiled purpose, is that the altar covers a bit of each of these spheres without a precise direction. It exists to appease the unknown god or gods so that the crops grow, the city retains its order and power, people live, and so on. With this point of Paul's in view, then, another important analogy emerges.

Communicative Altar, Communicative Chatbot

Although analogical connections between the Athenian altar and the Amazonian chatbot could initially appear tenuous I want to suggest that, as functioning objects designed for the purposes of communication, they are similar. The chatbot might be able to simulate verbal conversation in a way that the altar cannot, but the altar is similar to the chatbot in the fundamental communicative abilities they share. For this reason, I want to explore in this section how Paul teaches us to uncover the similarities between these two objects and to think critically about their similar indeterminate ends.

The altars in Athens are focal points for worship and sacrifice. They enable communication and information exchanges between a worshipper and whom or what he or she worships. In the context of Paul's time and place in Athens, the communication and information exchange at the altar starts in the sphere of religion, but it radiates into all other spheres—social, economic, and political—and radiates back into and through the religious altar. With time, the altar starts to instantiate socially communicative acts—decoration in one's home; politically communicative acts—a representation of Athenian power; or, economically communicative acts—"all altars must go, big sale today!" This account for why the altars are everywhere in Athens rather than only in one place. The altars cover a broad range of social territory that is common and inconspicuous but also densely, complexly, and powerfully networked. This is why, I think, Paul intends to pin down in this conversation at the Areopagus to whom or to what these altars are addressed. Their purposes and intended ends, while taken for granted, actually are of philosophical, theological, economic, and political importance. To see this, however, one has to examine intentionally the

network of power to which the altars are connected. Otherwise, it stays veiled and goes unnoticed.

The chatbot is similar to the Athenian altar, then, because chatbots also are functional objects designed for the purposes of communication and information exchange and, like altars, are also connected to a wider and complex and powerful network which covers a broad range of social territory. Unlike the altar, however, the communicative acts and information exchanges instantiated at the focal point of the chatbot represent a multiplicity of exchanges, which increase the indeterminacy of ends. This is because the chatbot is connected to a global rather than an urban network—the Internet—and the communicative exchanges taking place at the chatbot radiate into, out of, and through all spheres—social, economic, political, and religious—and flow back into and through the economic chatbot. At any given moment, bots could and do represent socially communicative acts—"Siri, schedule a meeting at 9:30 on Tuesday morning" or "Alexa, call so-and-so"; politically communicative acts—armies of bots responding to online content and automatically mass posting news (or fake news) or the NSA/GCHQ using a home assistant as a surveillance device; or, religiously communicative acts—robot priests celebrating the Reformation in Wittenberg by giving out blessings to people and praying for people or the founding of AI churches (Le 2017).

The communicative acts and the directed ends of the chatbot seems obvious to us, then, just as it seemed obvious to the Athenians in the Areopagus, but with serious speculation like Paul's it starts to be revealed that these chatbots are similar to the altars in Athens—which is to say, it is difficult to pin down exactly to what end and to whom or what these chatbots are directed—and for this reason, Paul teaches us how to see through the unassuming presence of the chatbot and to consider its deeper functions and purposes. It is here that the fundamental similarity between the two objects is uncovered with the help of Paul's analyses. Specifically, Paul's analyses help us unveil the truth that whereas the altar is dedicated to *the unknown god* the chatbot is dedicated *to the unknown*.

At this point, Bruno Latour's engagement with Actor Network Theory helps provide further critical insight into the analogous relationship I am forming here between Athenian altars and Amazonian chatbots. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour shows how objects can be considered social and/or actors, insofar as they often form vast networks of information exchange and/or enable social connections which take place behind their façades. In the following paragraph, Latour helpfully uses the example of a supermarket to describe this theory:

> In principle, you could walk into some imaginary supermarket and point at a shelf full of "social ties," whereas other aisles would be stocked with

"material," "biological," "psychological," and "economical" connections. For [Actor Network Theory] the definition of the term is different: it doesn't designate a domain of reality or some particular item, but rather is the name of a movement, a displacement, a transformation, a translation, an enrollment. It is an association between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together. To pursue the metaphor of the supermarket, we would call "social" not any specific shelf or aisle, but the multiple modifications made throughout the whole place in the organization of all the goods—their packaging, their pricing, their labeling—because those minute shifts reveal to the observer which new combinations are explored and which [networked] paths will be taken. (Latour 2005)

With this description of Actor Network Theory in view, then, the Athenian altar and the Amazonian chatbot as objects are shown to be entry points into and representations of the movements, displacements, transformations, translations, and enrollments that Latour describes. By considering the object as Paul does, one is able to consider the diverse combinations of the social spheres and the ends to which these objects are oriented. But, and here is where basic Actor Network Theory becomes theoretically and practically complicated, what happens when the chatbot, unlike the altar, can actively speak? Will the chatbot tell people about to whom or what they address themselves and to what end? Will it require people like Paul to unveil their end? Will it require designers to program understandings of their end? Will it unveil the end on its own? Or will its and our end(s) be unveiled as dialogue takes place between all or some combination of designer, user, and/or chatbot intentions?

These remarkable, complex, and even threatening questions capture precisely why so many people in social, political, economic, and religious spheres are asking questions about AI and the apocalypse—namely, who or what is responsible for unveiling the end, the *telos*, to which the chatbot and similar technologies are dedicated within their vast combinations of networked information exchange and social connections? Does the responsibility for answering these questions fall upon the designer, the user, the intellectual, the chatbot, or, a combination of all or some? The Athenian altar required the designers, the users, and the intellectuals—people—to attempt an unveiling of the end, whereas, in contrast, a point could be reached in which the AI chatbot could attempt its own unveiling of the end without the aid of people. This is where fear and hope enter the apocalyptic imagination, because unknown ends can be met with hope or terror depending on where you stand and how you view a world in which full-fledged AI is a possibility.

From a theoretical standpoint, the more globally expansive and interconnected the network of devices and bots becomes, the more each of these

spheres will merge, and demarcations between the economic, the political, and the religious increasingly will blur. This implies that anything that happens in one sphere will significantly affect all the others. In fact, a recent example hints at this possibility. The 2018 news about Cambridge Analytica, Facebook, presidential elections in the United States, and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom provoked serious consequences in all of these social spheres and at a global scale. The private tech company Cambridge Analytica exploited Facebook's user data to build a platform which allegedly influenced presidential elections in the United States and Brexit referendums in the United Kingdom (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018). Two days after *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The Observer* broke their stories about these events, Facebook lost $36 billion of its market value. By the third day, Facebook's value had dropped 10 percent. By the tenth day, it had dropped 18 percent (Riley et al. 2018). Introducing more political elements, all of these events may or may not be connected to questions about and official inquiries into potential Russian interference in the U.S. elections, and, whether or not certain religiously affiliated presidential candidates have collaborated with Russia (Hakim and Rosenberg 2018). Then, all of this comes full circle back to bots, because Russia purportedly used bots as a part of their coercion strategy (Shane 2017).

    These events have not reached an apocalyptic scale, of course, but it certainly can be envisioned how a war of significant proportions could result if more powerful and intelligent bots are introduced and the players in this dangerous power game choose to declare active war based on what now can be, and in some cases are being, considered acts of (cyber and information) warfare (Bennet 2018). So, to return to Actor Network Theory, all of these complex, powerful, and threatening events are represented by and harbored within the common and inconspicuous movements, displacements, transformations, translations, and enrollments instantiated by common bots and chatbots, which are dedicated to the unknown. Accordingly, with these threatening future possibilities considered, what are we to say and do in response? To help answer this question, the next section will provide some constructive responses with assistance from the Apostle Paul's dialogue at the Areopagus.

Poetic and Practical Conclusions

Paul's unveiling of the end at the Areopagus is revealing insofar as there are pluriform responses to his own philosophical and theological positioning in Athens at the Areopagus. Some receive Paul as a babbling fool, some receive him as a religious threat, and some receive him as a curious intellectual worthy of further conversation to the extent that some come to believe what Paul believes. While receptions of Paul today are likewise pluriform,

his version of the end warrants attention in relation to the other possible ends considered here.

Although much of the threatening social imaginaries of the apocalypse have been inspired by or mingled with Christian millenarian visions of the world moving toward destruction, Paul's vision actually is not one of destruction, but one of renewal, revealed in the form of a person. He believes that the unveiling of the end belongs to a person, a strange Galilean speaking to anyone who would listen about a coming kingdom, and strangely, someone whom he believes died and came back to life. This is why Paul says, "We ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals," but a person (Acts 17:29). Consequently, Paul's deity transcends the energized network of altars—and chatbots—"though indeed he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). Paul names and knows, communicates to and with, this deity, through and in a person, Jesus Christ. And, while Jesus himself openly states that he does not know the "time and the hour" of the end, he does say "stay awake" and "watch," otherwise the end will come without us knowing it (Matthew 24:42; Luke 21:36; Mark 13:35; Revelation 21:5).

These conclusions are poetically, philosophically, sociologically, and theologically stimulating, but still, there is more to be said with regard to practical conclusions. Paul's skillful speech and analyses of the Athenian altar at the Areopagus provide practical wisdom in relation to the connections between religion, technology, and potential apocalypses today, because, essentially, he urges us to ask: Who or what builds, powers, and controls our powerful information networks and the many objects and technologies to which those networks connect? Furthermore, if we do not ask these questions, and if the social, political, economic, artistic, philosophical, and religious significance of these technologies are not contemplated intentionally in the way Paul intentionally contemplates the Athenian altar, then the everyday objects and technologies to which we have become accustomed (such as chatbots) will become, like the Athenian altar, placeholder objects addressed *to the unknown*, and quite possibly, oriented toward unsuspected apocalyptic ends.

In a time and place when objects are starting to speak back to their designers and users, Paul's challenges and insights at the Areopagus consequently become important to consider. With this Pauline reading of AI and the apocalypse in view, the apparent gaps between religion and technology that unconsciously and inconspicuously are formed today quickly start to close. It is here, in the closing of the gaps between the divides we implicitly and explicitly erect between social, political, economic, artistic, philosophical, and religious spheres, that an essential unveiling of the end starts to happen, and we ask and start to answer: To whom or to what exactly are these altars and chatbots addressed? As this article has shown,

Paul helps us to ask and to answer this question, and in the process he also helps us to see that the answer to these questions crucially depends on what or who is actively and/or passively thinking and speaking on our behalf.

Note

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