Artificial Intelligence and Robotics: Contributions from the Science and Religion Forum

with Gillian K. Straine, "Artificial Intelligence and Robotics: Contributions from the Science and Religion Forum"; Michael S. Burdett, "Personhood and Creation in an Age of Robots and AI: Can We Say "You" to Artifacts?"; Mohammad Yaqub Chaudhary, "The Artificialization of Mind and World"; and David Hipple, "Encounters with Emergent Deities: Artificial Intelligence in Science Fiction Narrative."

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ROBOTICS: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE SCIENCE AND RELIGION FORUM

by Gillian K. Straine

Abstract.   The Science and Religion Forum (SRF) seeks to be the premier organization promoting the discussion between science and religion in the United Kingdom for academics, professionals, and interested lay people. Each year, the SRF holds a conference tackling a topical issue, and in 2019 focused on artificial intelligence and robotics. This article introduces the thematic section which is made up of three papers from that conference and provides a summary of the event.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; robotics; Science and Religion Forum; theology

In April 2019, the Science and Religion Forum (SRF) met for its annual conference at St. John's College, University of Durham, UK. The SRF had its inception in a series of discussions involving scientists, theologians, and clergy which took place in Oxford in the early 1970s. A key figure in the early discussions was Arthur Peacocke who was to become the Forum's first chairman, and later president. Today, SRF exists to promote discussion between scientific understanding and religious thought on issues at the interface of science and religion, and membership is open to people of any religion or none.

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Three years previously, the Forum had celebrated its forty-year anniversary with a conference entitled "Forty Years of Science and Religion: Looking Back, Looking Forward" (Spurway and Hickman 2016). Although there was much to celebrate, there was also some ambivalence expressed about the distance the work of science and religion in the academy had covered and its impact on society.

The topic for the 2019 conference was chosen at the provocative frontline where science meets questions about our humanity: artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics. We encouraged papers on the gamut of ethical, moral, and theological questions that this topic carries. As always with SRF, we aim to be a host for conversation and engagement, rather than a group that adopts a set position. In an invited plenary paper from the 2016 publication, Willem B. Drees, put this SRF orientation thus:

> I would expect the Science and Religion Forum to serve as a platform for an intellectually and socially responsible encounter between our best available knowledge and methods and our values and forms of practical and theoretical human self-understandings present in our situation. (Drees 2016)

And to this, we added "future situation" for the topic of AI takes us on a journey, at times a speculative one, into various future scenarios.

The other key addition to the conference was that it was run in collaboration with the Equipping Religious Leaders in an Age of Science project funded by the Templeton World Charity Foundation (Pritchard 2017). The aim of the project is to aid the engagement of the church with science through supporting senior leadership, carrying out research into attitudes on science and religion, providing advice on complex issues, developing theological training resources, and funding grassroots science engagement in churches. Through this collaboration, we were able to draw into the conversation a strand of church life that augmented the proceedings, firmly combining academia with the reality of faith leadership.

In this issue of *Zygon*, we are very grateful to the editor for publishing three of the papers presented at the conference. In "Personhood and Creation in an Age of AI: Can We Say 'You' to Artifacts?," Michael S. Burdett explores the theological and philosophical questions around how we relate to technology and what that means for the doctrine of creation. Yaqub Chaudhary examines the questions which arise when humans and machines share the same space in virtual and augmented realities in his article, "The Artificialization of Mind and World." Finally, David Hipple uses the insights of science fiction to explore the limits of AI and the public reception of technological advances in the article entitled "Encounters with Emergent Deities: Artificial Intelligence in Science Fiction Narrative."

The conference, which included a mixture of invited speakers and short papers, drew professionals and interested lay people from across the United

Kingdom, with a good mixture of senior church leaders, AI academics, robotics specialists, and theologians. One of the most enriching aspects of the conference, as with all SRF meetings, was that very mix. It is doubtful that these four groups regularly mix and so the conference provided opportunity for the cross-fertilization of ideas.

But, perhaps inevitably, with such fusing of different perspectives there arose a palpable sense of struggle. Many future projections of what AI might lead to were new for many people and this offered a challenge. This was acute when we were considering the fields of autonomous weapons, data storage, the judicial system, and social care. The timeline was also a cause of tension: the uncertainty was surprisingly not so much about the *how* but the *when*. In the science and religion community, we are so used to talking about definitions and responses when the science has already happened; for example, as we retrospectively consider evolution or quantum mechanics through a theological lens. In AI, we are future orientated and have a chance to come up with philosophical, ethical, and theological responses to the questions that AI will raise for human identity questions, ethics, and policy development. Are human beings going to be able to do this sufficiently well and in time for the response to have a positive impact on the direction of travel?

The urgency about AI led to edgy theology made more difficult still in the uncertainty in how AI will shape the future. Certainly, the theological response demands more science, particularly around neuroscience and the mind, but the theological centers onto which much of the discussion gravitated was the Hebraic understandings of the human person, the doctrine of creation, and perhaps more surprising, Christology and soteriology.

But, there was a softer response too which is worth highlighting here—the role of human interpretation as a limit factor of AI. We watched a video in which a child says "I love you" to a robot, and the robot says "I love you too"; only one of them means it. In the Christian tradition, from which I reflect, there is a strong central tenant that Love conquers death; my hope is that love might just meet the challenges of AI too.

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