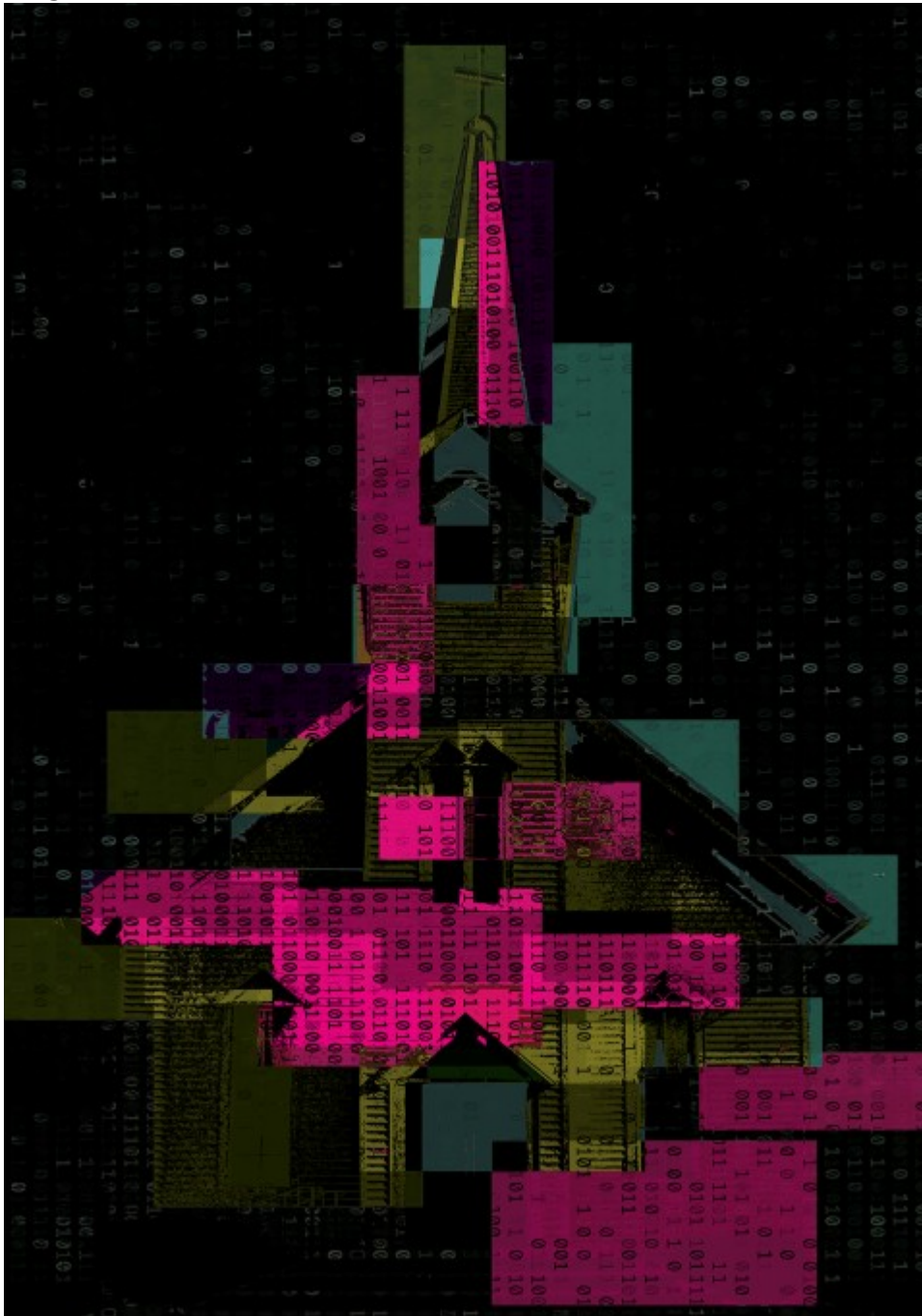The priesthood of all chatbots?

I'm sure there are good uses for AI in our churches. Prayer and preaching aren't among them.

by Zac Koons
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Recently I received an email with an exciting opportunity to be introduced via webinar to an Episcopal-specific AI chatbot that promises to "supercharge my ministry." I signed up. My intentions were not pure.

I am an Episcopal priest, an aspiring Luddite, and a hypocrite. My iPhone has an app-less, grayscale superiority complex, but the truth is I check Instagram on my laptop ten times a day, with YouTube constantly open in the background, pressuring me to watch cycling highlights. Still, I have been suspicious from the start of using AI and have mostly maintained, with Melville's Bartleby, that I would prefer not to.

But this email invitation broke something in me. It whispered menacingly: *The call is coming from inside the house.* And dear reader, I spent an hour screaming silently at my laptop. I considered selling my house and investing the proceeds in a time machine to take me back to George Herbert, who could hold me and tell me everything is going to be OK. To the Episcopal Church, my mother, my rock, to whose service I have devoted my life, to my colleagues in ministry, who I love and whose good intentions I do not doubt, I gently ask: What are we *doing*?

This, of course, is not unique to the Episcopal Church. The Baptists have an AI chatbot. Nondenominational bots are legion. A Catholic AI can be found, hilariously, at magisterium.com. I held out hope that Orthodox Christians, at least, have managed to resist—but alas, Ioann the OrthodoxBot is live and at your service. If your church doesn't have one yet, it's coming. Below I'd like to introduce you to the Episcopal AI bot in particular, trusting that the services offered by other denominational droids differ in shade more than in color.

I'm sure we can find good uses for AI in our churches. What I want to explore is the extent to which our humanity is theologically inextricable from the various tasks and vocations of the church and of individual Christians. Which things do we need to fight to hold onto ourselves? Which can we, with clear consciences, hand over to the robots, for the good of the church and our overbooked calendars? And what filter ought we to use in trying to tell the difference?

Let's start with prayer.

This is how the webinar began, actually. Our Wonka for this wonder webinar tour was a brother priest—I'll call him Fr. Larry. "I think we should do all things always in prayer," he said, but then—you can already see it coming—he proceeded to ask his screen-shared AI chatbot to compose a prayer on our behalf for this occasion.

Her name was Cathy 3.0, a name chosen not for the reason I hoped—a self-deprecating allusion to a bygone era when the popularity of the name Cathy peaked at the same time as that of the Episcopal Church—but rather as a self-serious acronym: Church-y Answers That Help You. (We were encouraged to consider using the feminine pronoun when referring to Cathy, because it is "important to center women's voices in the tech space." If there are any feminist dissertators out there who would like to take that one up, I offer it as a free gift.)

After a moment of silence to prepare our hearts, up popped Cathy's prayer, which Fr. Larry immediately began praying aloud on our behalf—not even taking a moment to screen it first, such was his trust in this never-before-prayed prayer's quality, appropriateness, and orthodoxy.

The near instantaneous and unqualified trust placed in AI has been astounding to witness, across all sectors of our common life—especially given that the loudest voices of concern have been people deeply embedded in its development. But admitting AI into our prayer life seems another level of intimacy altogether, especially for a first date. It's a threshold that warrants more careful consideration in crossing than the "isn't this neat" spirit in which it was introduced to me.

The prayer itself was fine, by the way—a bit vague, a bit lacking in poetic resonance and exacting syntax, but fine. Even with my hermeneutic of suspicion filter turned up to 11, I spotted no heresy. It followed the traditional shape and rules for a collect from the Book of Common Prayer. It even asked for the Spirit's guidance to use these technologies with an eye toward the common good, in English that was borderline Cranmerian. But it's not AI's capacity to write appropriate, orthodox, or even soaringly beautiful prayers that most concerns me. I assume Cathy will only improve over time and may indeed eventually make even the writing of Thomas Cranmer, who created the first BCP, sound sophomoric. But even if what we receive from AI are the most well-crafted prayers the world has ever heard, we ought to ask what we are giving up in return.

In his *Systematic Theology*, Robert Jenson tries to identify where precisely in our humanness the image of God is located. "Our specificity in comparison with the other animals is that we are the ones addressed by God's moral word and so enabled to respond—that we are called to *pray*," he writes. "If we will, the odd creature of the sixth day can after all be classified: we are the praying animals." Again and again, the presenters of the webinar emphasized that the goal in creating an Episcopal AI bot was not to replace human jobs. The truth might be even worse: AI, in writing our prayers for us, is replacing our very humanity.

Imagine the following scenario: I am about to enter what I expect to be a tense and difficult meeting. I am feeling anxious. So I decide to pray. I have some options. I could simply take a few moments of silence. I could say an extemporaneous prayer. But maybe I haven't been schooled in the way of contemplative prayer. Perhaps extemporaneous prayer is not a comfortable mode for me, or I simply can't find the right words right now. I might instead thumb through the BCP, or some other collection of written prayers, to find one that suits the moment.

Or I could fire up the laptop and ask Cathy to compose a prayer, giving her as much or as little instruction as I can muster, and—voilà.

When trying to differentiate these options theologically, there are at least two relevant points of doctrine to consider. The first pertains to the Trinity. What is actually happening when we pray? Even Cathy knows the answer, dutifully ending each of her prayers with some variation on the historic Christian formula: We pray *to* the Father, *through* the Son, *by* the Spirit.

The question of humanity matters here, and in two respects. First, our prayers are pressed inevitably *through* the humanity of the Son; second, and more relevant to our purposes here, we pray *by* the Spirit because it is within the human heart that the Spirit of God is pleased to dwell, planted there in our baptism. The Spirit of God intercedes for us from there with sighs (or silences) too deep for words. The Spirit of God bears witness with our spirit crying, "Abba, Father." Prayer is, theologically speaking, always coauthored by the Spirit. So when we pray *by* the Spirit, we are always caught up into the never-ending, intra-trinitarian dance itself. When we pray, we are at the heart of it all.

Is a prayer written by Cathy truly coauthored by the Spirit? Instead of spending a few moments of silence for the Spirit to search the intricacies of the human heart, a

supercomputer combs through terabytes of internet cave scrawl. In some way, AI may be functionally *replacing* the role of the Spirit.

Perhaps this is not entirely fair. The Spirit is free to blow where it will, including through the zeroes and ones whizzing through the server farms transforming rural landscapes around the globe. The Spirit, of course, is free to make use of an AI-generated prayer for the good of the gospel.

But there is a difference between what the Spirit is free to do and what God promises the Spirit does in fact do. And when compared to extemporaneous prayer, or even to contemplative silence, is what Cathy is offering here really an improvement in any way? Is a more articulate, more accurate prayer inevitably better than the subtle and near silent groans of the Spirit? Which prayer do you think would delight God more to hear?

The second point of doctrine pertains to the communion of saints. What is the difference between adopting a Thomas Cranmer prayer as one's own and doing the same with one of Cathy's? Again, Cathy is pretty good at writing prayers. I asked her to compose prayers for the opening of a town hall meeting, for a cake-baking competition, and for a country that has just entered into a new war, and she did so each time with startling theological nuance. As the person praying, reading these AI-generated prayers can feel almost identical to reading one of Cranmer's prayers out of the prayer book: You are asking the Spirit to make someone else's words into your words. Are these two things genuinely different? After all, if it's the humanity of the prayer that really matters, isn't what Cathy is doing simply aggregating and synthesizing prayers originally written by humans?

Yes—but I would argue that what we lose in all the aggregating and synthesizing is the communion of saints. Cranmer's humanity matters. The humanity of the psalmists matters. Your pastor's humanity matters. Their humanity matters not only because of the Spirit's presence in their hearts in the original composition of their prayers, but also because in adopting their words as our own, we are communing with siblings in Christ across time and space. The same Spirit indwells us and binds us together within the same body of Christ. An AI-generated prayer fails completely in this respect, because it is written precisely by nobody. AI pillages human-written prayers from the past but dissembles their human origin in the process, such that there is no particular Christian soul with whom to commune.

The historical record of Christianity does not lack written prayers. Nor do we lack living Christians to compose new prayers for new occasions. AI is not an improvement upon this great cloud of witnesses; it's a tool that pours gasoline on the fires of isolation and loneliness in the modern world. I picture Cranmer at his desk in that beautiful balcony nook adjoining the Lambeth Palace Chapel, where he is said to have composed many of the collects for the very first BCP while gazing down at the altar below. And before me I gaze upon the icon of Cathy 3.0, whose blinking ellipses tell me she is thinking—or praying? These two things are not the same.

After praying—"praying"—Fr. Larry showed us how we can use Cathy to write our sermons. We might consider using this feature, he explained, "if you didn't go to seminary; or perhaps you did go to seminary but you had a very busy week." Then we watched him enter the following prompt: "Based on Luke 9:51–62, generate a three-point sermon outline with biblical references, a modern-day application, and have it relate to this week's collect." Go, Cathy, go!

Cathy's default is to produce a sermon in outline form, but she'll gladly transform it into a full manuscript if you ask—shortening or lengthening, adjusting rhetorical style, even suggesting hymns to go with it. The hope here, Fr. Larry explained, is that we will never again have to sit in front of a blank piece of paper thinking, *I have no idea where to begin*. Read: The hope is that preachers will never again have to understand themselves as writers.

Before us, Cathy first spits out a lowest common denominator, churchy word-salad sermon titled, "Following Christ: The Cost and Call." "Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem is a picture of Jesus' determination. We must follow Jesus with a similar determination. But it is hard. Amen." Boring to the point of tears, though some might say that's par for the course these days anyway.

But then came something truly shocking. Fr. Larry asked for another iteration of the sermon, prompting Cathy to give him a new interpretation. (I went back and rewatched the webinar to make sure I didn't get this next part wrong, because it was so deeply distressing.) Cathy obliged: "Certainly!" Then she generated another sermon, this one called, "The Journey of Transformation." These are direct quotes:

Jesus setting his face towards Jerusalem symbolizes a deliberate journey of transformation, much like AI systems evolve and learn over time.

Encourage the congregation to view their spiritual journey as an ongoing practice of transformation, where each step is a conscious decision to grow closer to God, akin to the learning process of AI.

The call to follow Jesus without hesitation can be likened to the rapid developments in AI, where embracing change and innovation is crucial for progress.

That is, Jesus is like AI. And if we want to be like Jesus, we ought to be like AI, too.

Clearly we should be concerned about the quality of these sermons. Fr. Larry even warned us that we would regularly find mistakes—"hallucinations"—in what Cathy produced: "We know that about 10 percent of the time she is simply making things up," including, he was quick to add, completely fabricated quotations.

The other obvious practical issue with AI-generated sermons—as with many other areas of creative work—is intellectual honesty. The clergy manual in my diocese has an entire section on the subject. Congregations, it states, "expect the preacher to invest his or her prayer, study, and time in the work of preparation for preaching." Therefore, people listening to sermons "receive them as the original work of the preacher, unless directly informed [otherwise]." Nor is the problem solely about copyright infringement: "Even the use of open source or 'okay to copy' sermons and other materials without attribution violates the standards to which we expect preachers in the Diocese of Texas to adhere."

A mentor of mine once said that you can tell a lot about the culture of preaching in a parish in the few seconds of silence between a preacher taking the pulpit and beginning to speak. Is that silence filled with earnest expectation? Fear and trembling? Hopeless resignation? Imagine the effect on a room for those who dutifully begin: "May these words from Cathy 3.0 and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen." (Actually, it's probably time that I tell you that Cathy has been rebranded and relaunched as EpiscoBOT. This change occurred during the webinar.)

A lot of what I've already said about prayer applies as well to preaching, and that overlap alone may be sufficient to defeat this robot's attempt to grab the pulpit away from human preachers. Is the Spirit's coauthorship not a constituent component of a sermon, too? Part of preparing a sermon, of course, is the research and the writing, but isn't discerning the living, breathing voice of the Spirit just as important a part of its composition? By virtue of its genre, isn't a sermon a living word, something categorically different from a research paper, magazine article, or press release?

EpiscoBOT, of course, is not the intended deliverer of the sermon (though who knows—perhaps that too is around the corner). The question is whether preachers have the authority to employ EpiscoBOT's assistance in producing their sermons.

Authority is the key theological category here. Anyone can pray; in my tradition (and many others), not everyone is allowed to preach. The pulpit in an Episcopal parish belongs as first right to the local bishop. That preaching authority is extended to the senior pastor, who in turn can choose to share it with other qualified preachers. But to what extent does the pastor's borrowed authority extend to robots? To what extent can an AI bot meet the criteria other preachers are required to meet: a communally affirmed sense of call, a morally upright life, formal theological training of some kind? We need some guidance from our bishops and other church authorities here. Our current statements on intellectual honesty do not go far enough. EpiscoBOT presents itself with an implicit stamp of institutional approval, yet we have a limited ability to control what it produces.

We also might ask the people in the pews what they think. Even in a tradition where some of the authority to preach comes from the top down (from the bishop), there is a less formal but very real authority that comes from the bottom up (from the pews). This is the kind of authority that one can feel in the air of a room—because preaching is an intimate space of mutual trust. Where else do people choose to submit their attention span for ten minutes or more to another person, who can say whatever they want? How dare we discharge this precious opportunity to a robot.

The creators of EpiscoBOT argue that in a time of shrinking, under-resourced parishes that depend more and more on lay leaders who lack formal theological training, EpiscoBOT can help fill the gap. But if a preacher lacks the ability to write a decent sermon in the first place, don't they also lack the ability to evaluate one written by a bot? Especially if that bot is fabricating 10 percent of what it puts on the

page?

Even without formal training, a lay preacher from the congregation has an obvious advantage over any AI-generated sermon: they know the people they are preaching to. They read the same news. Listen to the same podcasts. They know the awful thing that happened to the Thompsons last week. They have their finger on the pulse of the coming local election. They know what it's like to lose a sister to cancer. This is the authority that comes from mutual trust and relationship. Again—it's the humanness that matters. G. K. Chesterton once quipped, "Anything worth doing is worth doing badly." Sermons ought to be like love letters: It's more important that they're yours than that they're good. Offer people a choice between a sermon by someone with sophisticated training but no human soul and the earnest thoughts of an untrained saint whom they live among and trust, and my guess is that 99 times out of 100 it will turn out we already had everything we needed before EpiscoBOT showed up.

Here is what I believe: The rapid creep of AI into every nook and cranny of life represents a golden opportunity for our churches to grow and flourish. All we have to do is *not use it.*

Again, I don't mean we ought to practice complete abstinence, as tempted as I am by that route. I am open to finding ways that AI can make some work more efficient within my own church staff. But I can think of a thousand things I would try AI on before praying or preaching—before the practices that lie so close to the heart of the church's ministry and identity. How about creating bulletins? How about mail merges and attendance records? Kitchen and office resupply? Facilities management? Vacation tracking? How about summarizing the relevant points from the 15-page finance report I receive every month before a vestry meeting? Take care of that stuff for me, and I might actually have time to write a sermon!

The engine driving EpiscoBOT comes from Ecclesia.ai, a company that makes it easy for churches to customize their own AI chatbot and encourages them to embed it on the church home page. The company's tagline is, "Foster Spiritual Growth Through AI Agents." Of all the things a pastor or lay leader might want help with, is spiritual growth really something we want to outsource to a computer?

Can you not sense the AI exhaustion in our culture? Recently *The New York Times* posted a quiz with ten images and asked readers to guess which ones were real and

which were generated by AI. I got every single one wrong. Have you learned yet to have your guard up when scrolling? How many times have you been forwarded an AI-generated fake news video by a friend you thought knew better? Are the sites that used to provide you some mild modicum of joy now overrun by bizarre, uncanny valley AI slop?

We're already overrun, and it's going to get worse. Much has been written in recent years about the "loneliness epidemic" that is making so many people's lives miserable. Some seem to think this is a problem AI can fix. One guy supposedly "wrote" 97 books with AI in 18 months and made thousands of dollars. Maybe soon, for the right price, you'll be able to get an AI-generated episode of your favorite TV show, tailor-made just for you. Can you not feel the buildup of fatigue and the increasing hunger for genuine, human relationship? For interaction of any kind that is not haunted by artificiality? Do you not feel the swell of souls positively running in the opposite direction?

Well, what if I told you there was a community that you could be a part of that was still committed to the old way of doing things? That is, the old way of being human in community: simply being in the same room with other human beings, without much of an agenda. There is an AI backlash building, and it is priming the world to long for exactly one thing: church coffee hour. That liminal space where kids weave between people with walkers to get to the cookies first. Where you find yourself awkwardly standing beside a stranger long enough to finally cave in: *Hi, I'm Zac. What's your name?* And then seven minutes later you realize that you have a new friend, that someone here of all places works in your same industry, or cares about the same pursuits of justice you care about, or five years ago went through exactly what you're going through now.

Consider all the other rooms you are in with other people over the course of a week or month. It's the office (though, of course, many of us now work from home). It's the gym, where you keep your head down in insecurity. It's the cohort of travel soccer parents you cheer beside but never quite actually talk to every other weekend. It's the country club or the cycling club or the walking club or the book club or some other interest-specific, demographically narrowed (or algorithmically determined!) group that simply cannot compare with the wondrous diversity of what is represented at any given local church. A community of embodied, wonderfully awkward, intergenerational, class-hopping relationships. Where everything artificial has been banished, and you don't even have to prove a certain level of intelligence

to join. In fact, it's free.

It's open to billionaires and bums, tech lords and social workers, government officials and university professors, kids of all ages and volume levels and retirees of all levels of hearing loss. Lots of people in this community believe in God, sure, but you don't need to be overly intimidated by that. Once you get to know these people, you'll realize that they're all doubters, sufferers, and wayfarers just like you, doing their best day by day to figure out a very confusing life. What we can all agree on in the meantime is that having friends for the journey—real human friends—definitely makes the journey easier.

It may turn out that AI is actually lowering the bar to entry and opening new horizons of possibility for the church to be missional. If you're offering space for people to connect in genuine, personal, human ways, you're already part of the solution. This could be a rare moment in which we get an evangelistic leg up by simply doing what the church has done from the beginning: be stubbornly slow in the face of a rapidly changing world. Resisting AI could even be something that bridges theological and political divides between ecclesial communities.

Let's not miss this opportunity. I fear we are so desperate for cultural relevance that we will follow the breadcrumbs of innovative tech to our own obsolescence. We're so desperate to be on the right side of history that we uncritically hail all progress as good progress and throw our resources at it for fear of being left behind. We're so eager to walk in lockstep with the demigods of Silicon Valley that we forget the church has long been at its best when it cuts against the grain of culture, when it offers a compelling alternative that runs along a deeper, more ancient grain. Let's not accidentally sell the farm.

As for that filter through which we determine which work of the church is necessarily human and which work we might assign to AI, the human life of Jesus might not be a bad place to start. After all, what is most special about being human is that it's what God became in Christ. Surely Jesus felt occasionally pressed for time. Surely his calendar felt overfull. What did he make sure he did himself? How did he spend his time? It would be one thing if these proliferate bots set their sights primarily on reducing the administrative load parishes and pastors have to bear. Instead, they're aiming straight for our heart. They are, with unsettling irony, doing what Jesus would do. And I'd prefer that they not.