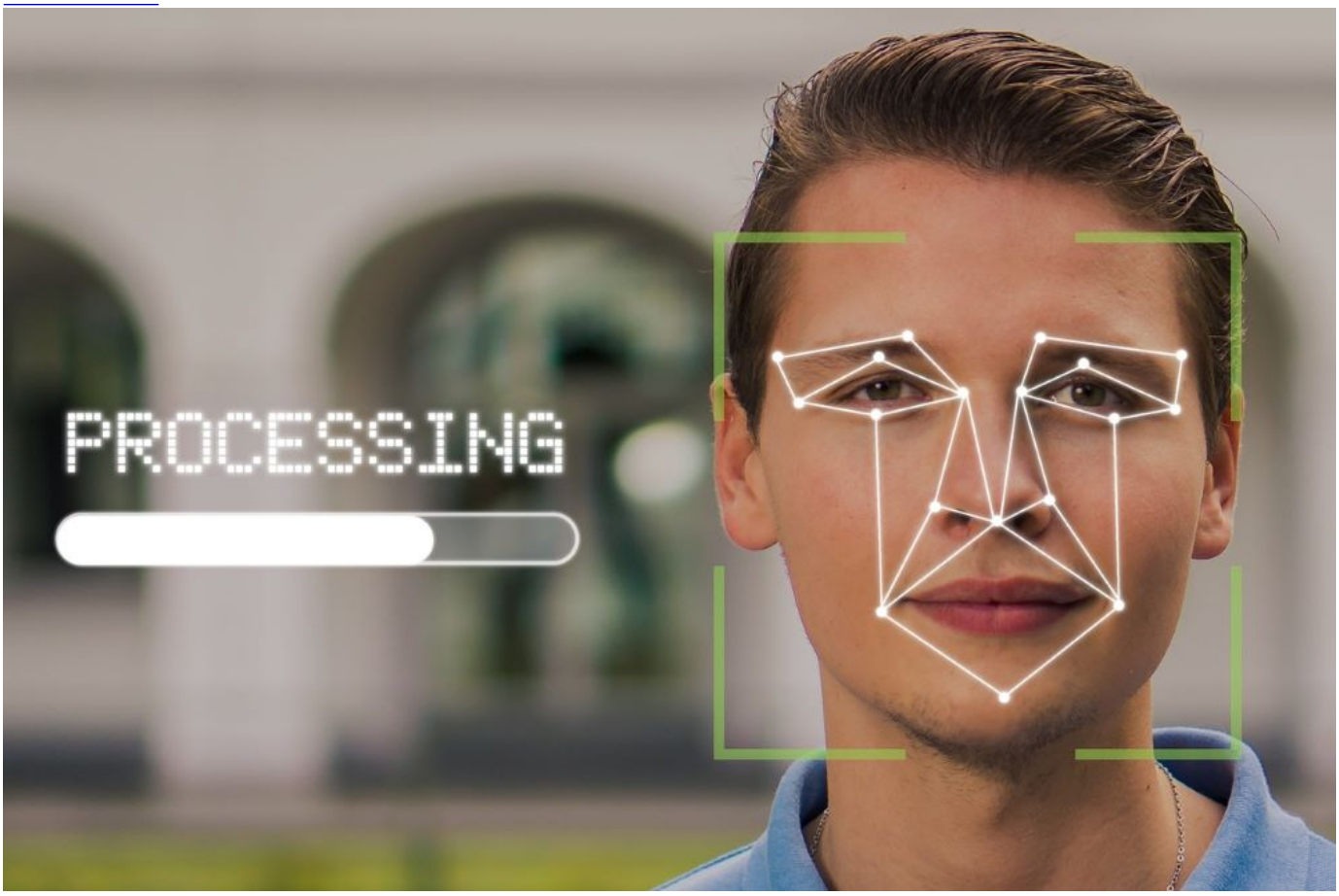
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by Scott Hurd

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***Editor's note**: This is the first of a two-part series on* Laudato Si' *and artificial intelligence. You can read the second part here.*

I am a major league catastrophizer. I have an uncanny and unsettling tendency to anticipate disaster at every turn. I see glasses half-empty, plan vacations with detailed spreadsheets and arrive at my departure gate two hours early. Risk management is my superpower. If you or your organization need someone to forecast worst-case scenarios, I am happy to help, and I charge on a sliding scale.

It should come as no surprise, then, that I am an "AI doomer" — I see generative artificial intelligence as an existential threat, in spite of the saturation-level hype surrounding its potential. And I am not alone.

Apparently Silicon Valley water cooler chat these days focuses on one's "p(doom)" — the percentage chance one thinks that super-intelligent and super-powerful robots will wipe out humankind. Some say the threat is "total." As a person of faith, I'm not sure I can go that far. But on some days I come close.

There are good reasons to be concerned, if today's headlines are to be believed. Because according to certain experts, we'll all either end up worshiping robots, be annihilated by robots, become unemployed by robots or be fused with robots until our consciousnesses are uploaded into the cloud.

Research support officers and doctoral students Luca Bondin and Foaad Haddad discuss an a

Research support officers and doctoral students Luca Bondin and Foaad Haddad discuss an artificial intelligence project to train robots at the University of Malta in Msida, Malta, Feb. 8, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Darrin Zammit Lupi)

God help us. As a Catholic, I am grateful that Vatican II insisted that the church shares our present age's "griefs and anxieties." When it comes to AI, I have plenty of both.

I've been finding solace and encouragement, however, in *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical addressing another existential threat: climate change. "The work of the Church," Francis insists, quoting Benedict XVI, is to "protect mankind from self-destruction."

And Francis' proposals to do this can easily be applied to AI, because climate change and AI present strikingly similar dangers involving power concentrated in the hands of a few, and multinational companies. They create what Francis calls a "technocratic paradigm" in which "life gradually becomes a surrender to situations conditioned by technology, itself viewed as the principal key to the meaning of existence."

Such technology-conditioned situations are developing more quickly than we can adapt. *Laudato Si*' even coined a word for this: "rapidification." While new technologies have been part of the human story since two flints were struck together to spark fire, historically slow advancement has now accelerated to blinding speed.

Twenty years ago, one could still function in society without a cellphone. In 2024, even refugees seeking safety in the United States are pushed to apply for asylum via an app. Today one can't opt out of modern tech without, as *Laudato Si*' laments, becoming radically "countercultural."

Pope Francis meets leaders from the tech industry at the Vatican March 27, 2023.

Pope Francis meets leaders from the tech industry at the Vatican March 27, 2023. In "Laudato Si'," Francis warns of a "technocracy ... which sees no special value in human beings" and calls for an "adequate anthropology" that honors humanity's "unique capacities." (CNS/Vatican Media)

A threat to human work

New technologies have changed jobs immensely, sometimes for the better. But now, if prognosticators are to be believed, AI threatens to destroy our jobs altogether.

Sam Altman, CEO of Open AI (ChatGPT, DALL-E) seeks to develop an artificial general intelligence (AGI) that will be superior at most tasks than those he labels "normal people." His former partner Elon Musk envisions a world where human work is completely eliminated. And while that might come as a relief to those who work for Musk, an allegedly tyrannical union-busting boss, it would be a disaster for humankind. That's why *Laudato Si*' has an entire section entitled "The Need to Protect Employment," saying, "Work is a necessity, part of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment."

Altman's solution is for AI firms to accumulate the world's wealth and distribute it through universal basic income to those who surrender biometric data from their eyeballs. Perhaps he might be assisted by his longtime mentor Peter Thiel, who along with Musk co-founded what became Paypal to establish a wealth-sharing platform beyond government control.

In fairness, Altman has expressed concern about humankind's fate if there's nothing left to do except play video games. But other tech titans couldn't care less, such as Google co-founder Larry Page. When Musk expressed horror at Page's indifference toward AI's potential to destroy humanity, Page dismissed Musk as a "speciesist" — defined by The New York Times as "a person who favors humans over the digital life-forms of the future."

Accusations of speciesism were anticipated by *Laudato Si'*, which warns of a "technocracy … which sees no special value in human beings." To counter this, what is needed, according to the encyclical, is an "adequate anthropology" that honors humanity's "unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility" and understands us as the pinnacle of God's creation, created in God's image, loved and redeemed, capable of transcendence and beauty, and possessing inherent rights and a unique and precious dignity with a vocation to eternal beatitude.

We're not simply "meat computers," as certain AI enthusiasts deride, inferior to computers made from chips and circuits.

A threat to worship of God

Yet it's a stated goal of many to create an AI that is indeed superior to humanity, or at least smarter than us: a "magic intelligence in the sky," in Altman's words. As Ilya Sutskever, OpenAI's chief scientist, warned on X, "If you value intelligence above all other human qualities, you're gonna have a bad time."

Perhaps AI might assist in solving today's greatest problems, including climate change. But its power and capabilities will lead some to treat AI as, to use Musk's words, a "digital God," not to be disobeyed. Sutskever warns that AI will need a "strong desire to be nice to people" because it will be "quite powerful." In the end, he conjectures, it will likely treat people the way people treat animals: mostly kindly — until we get in the way.

Elon Musk

Tesla Motors CEO Elon Musk is seen in Hawthorne, Calif., in this April 30, 2015, file photo. Musk has warned that rapid advances in artificial intelligence could threaten human survival. "The apocalypse could come along at any moment," he said. (CNS/Reuters/Patrick Fallon)

Deifying AI is a real threat, as intimated in *Laudato Si'*: "[T]hose who are surrounded with technology" know that it moves toward a "lordship over all." An extreme example of this was the Way of the Future, a religion created by Anthony Levandowski, a former Google engineer, who created it for those "interested in the worship of a Godhead based on AI," because "what is going to be created will effectively be a god."

At another extreme are certain Christians who fear AI is the antichrist. OpenAI's Sutskever takes a dualistic approach, reportedly leading chants of "Feel the AGI!" at an office holiday party while simultaneously burning a wooden effigy representing its "unaligned" doppelganger.

Humans have long fashioned deities from their own hands. One of the Ten Commandments warns against this and is foundational to our moral system. I don't believe an actual deity is being constructed in Silicon Valley. But I do believe that many will treat an advanced AI like a god — an oracle dispensing all knowledge, an ever-affirming and always available life coach, and an object of propitiation.

Related: Pope Francis pinpoints moral dangers of 'amazing and powerful' AI

It "is something that needs to be appealed to, rather than controlled," warns Mo Gawdat, former chief business officer at Google X.

Musk enthuses, through AI we'll "understand the true nature of the universe." For those who accept that, the beginning of wisdom will no longer be fear of the Lord. It will be the enthronement of AI.

A threat to social responsibility

But I'm not just concerned with what some will mistake for digital gods. I'm also concerned about those building them. People who, according to *Laudato Si',* are "far removed from the poor" and through their wealth and technological expertise wield

"an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world," some of whom "consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights."

I think of Internet pioneer and mega-financier Marc Andreeson, who in his "Techno-Optimist Manifesto" proposes that "technologists do the central planning and govern the future of humanity" and labels "sustainability," "social responsibility," "trust and safety," "tech ethics" and even my own superpower — "risk management" — as "enemies."

I think too of the "effective altruists" seeking to amass wealth, not to address present-day suffering, but to build a utopian future, sometimes with eugenic leanings. Among them is Sam Bankman-Fried, the disgraced crypto-currency mogul now jailed for fraud.

ChatGPT, an artificially intelligent chatbot created by OpenAI, generated this response to a qu

ChatGPT, an artificially intelligent chatbot created by OpenAI, generated this response to a question posed by Catholic News Service in Rome March 23, 2023. (CNS screengrab/Chat.OpenAI.com)

And their numbers include the past and present board members of OpenAI and its CEO Altman. Altman's mentor Thiel, who claimed that democracy and freedom are incompatible, and "longs for a world in which great men are free to work their will on society, unrestrained by government or regulation or 'redistributionist economics,' " is another.

Is he concerned with "today's poor, whose life on this earth is brief and cannot keep on waiting," as *Laudato Si*' puts it? "No," he sniffs, according to an interview with The Atlantic. "There are enough people working on that." I assure you, there are not.

Some may dismiss my doomerism as an overreaction. Yet in *Laudato Si*' I find papal validation: "Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain." And the opinions of many experts support this addition to the church's social teaching.

When "godfather of AI" and Sutskever mentor Gregory Hinton resigned from Google to warn about what he helped spawn, he echoed the lament of *Laudato Si*' that "the risk is growing day by day that man will not use his power as he should."

Gawdat's caution against having children because of AI's threats hearkens to the encyclical's question: "What kind of world do we want to leave … to children who are now growing up?" And Altman's and Sutskever's call for an international AI regulatory body validates Francis' appeal for "stronger and more effectively organized international institutions."

Robotic hands reach toward words "artificial intelligence."

(OSV/Reuters/Dado Ruvic)

Forty-two percent of CEOs polled think that AI could destroy humanity within 5 to 10 years. According to Musk, "The apocalypse could come along at any moment." But if that happens, the tech titans will be ready.

Musk initially planned to escape earth on a rocket ship to Mars, until he was reminded that rogue AI could follow him there, too. Thiel has bought a private island in New Zealand where he'll be joined by Altman, a past doomsday prepper and hoarder of guns and gold.

Thiel's other major protege, Meta's Mark Zuckerberg, is scrambling to build his own AI while simultaneously building a highly secretive bunker compound in Hawaii, joining the bunker-building binge of today's ultra-rich. But these probably won't matter because, according to Altman, "None of this is gonna help if AGI goes wrong."

That's just as well. All I have is a finished basement with an attached garage.

But the very fact that tech titans prep to survive an apocalypse while racing to develop more powerful and potentially dangerous AI capacities as they amass gargantuan fortunes is precisely why *Laudato Si'* asks: "In whose hands does all this power lie, or will it eventually end up? It is extremely risky for a small part of humanity to have it."

Their arrogance, irresponsibility and greed might be dismissed as laughable or pathetic, if they weren't some of the world's richest men heading powerful multinationals which, the encyclical argues, sometimes "exercise more power than states themselves."

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I don't want to be an AI doomer; I desperately hope that my fears for the future will be proven wrong. Yet I understand why Francis found it "troubling" to write *Laudato Si'*, and I appreciate his understanding that, because of tech's onslaught, "people no longer seem to believe in a happy future."

"Yet all is not lost," Francis says in encouragement, as we can "acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction" and "embark on new paths to authentic freedom." By standing together, "we can generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm."

This call to action gives hope to this deeply dissatisfied doomer. I'm ready to resist and take a stand with anyone who, like Francis, seeks to reboot our relationship with tech, shape a brighter future and find new paths to freedom.

With AI, I see plenty of risk. I want to see it managed.