Remaining Profoundly Human

Sam Cliff challenges us to use AI responsibly

Thermal drone imagery of unpermitted turbines operating at xAI's power plant in Missouri *Photo credit: Evan Simon/Floodlight*

In the very early days of its public facing presence, Artificial Intelligence (AI) seemed to be a charming novelty. It could be used to generate a very narrow band of quaint oddities: surreal art lacking definition, prose which was incoherent and odd, music literally lacking rhyme or reason. As a technology, it flew under the radar. Yet in the last several years its reach, capabilities and integration have seeped into every nook and cranny conceivable. One can hardly throw a stone without hitting some tech start-up promising AI as the solution to any given issue.

As the sector's reach has grown exponentially, the conversation around the technology has been almost entirely seized by its proponents. Eager to draw investors, it's being touted as a solution to the climate crisis, to war, to famine and so on. Yet, as Ecclesiastes reminds us, "*God made mankind upright, but they have sought out many schemes*" (Eccl. 7:29), and a closer inspection reveals that we need to approach AI with a healthy amount of scepticism. In fact, I would claim that excessive use of AI is incompatible with the flourishing and sustainable future God desires, and that, as Christians, we ought to give due consideration to Pope Leo's call to be bold advocates of *Magnifica Humanitas*.[1]

Let's turn first to the United Nations for an assessment of what the development of AI use looks like for the Earth.[2] By the end of the decade, it is predicted that the data centres which power AI could consume 945 terawatt-hours of electricity each year – a greater amount of energy than Japan currently produces annually. You might think that this concern could be

1. Pope Leo's encyclical: *Magnifica Humanitas* (May 2026) vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html
2. AI's environmental costs threaten water, land and climate (*UN News* 2026) news.un.org/en/story/2026/06/1167658

addressed by an increasing use of renewable energy, but this isn't the direction the industry is moving. xAI for instance, an AI start-up near Memphis, Tennessee, recently installed new gas-powered turbines to power their data centres and is now one of the largest greenhouse gas emitters in the area.[3]

Even if we assume that by 2030 all AI data centres are powered entirely by renewables (which seems unlikely), energy consumption hardly scratches the surface of the environmental threat. Water is consumed voraciously by data centres, for cooling, and in a world already racked by fears of water scarcity, it is anticipated that the water required by AI might be on par with the domestic needs of around 1.3 billion people by 2030.

The burdens and benefits of AI-driven technologies will not fall evenly either: the global south will be the main recipients of around 2.5m tonnes of e-waste annually by 2030, whilst also taking on the yoke of the environmental degradation and toxic by-products caused by the large-scale extraction of raw materials such as lithium, cobalt and rare earth elements.[2] This runs contrary to the golden thread woven throughout the Bible: justice for the poor, freedom for the oppressed and accountability for those who profit from exploitation.

The situation seems precarious; and beyond the environmental concerns (which are massive), the potential for AI to be an instrument of destruction, injustice, exclusion, or the reducing of humans to mere data, is terrifying. Yet, in Pope Leo XIII's call to *Magnifica Humanitas*, we are offered an elegant approach which acknowledges AI's inevitable role in our future, its potential to bring positive benefits, whilst challenging us all to be open-eyed about its worst predations.

One obvious element of the technology we might challenge is private LLM (Large Language Model) inference, which drives roughly 80-90% of AI energy consumption. An LLM is likely what you think of as AI: ChatGPT, Copilot, Grok; these are programmes that emulate human text not by understanding ideas, but by predicting the next word you want to see. They appear creative to the user by recombining billions of exemplar texts into sequences that seem plausible.

But how do they know what is "plausible"? In answering that, we encounter the human cost that often underlies the "training" of LLMs. Each instant reply represents scores of workers employed to engage in the monotonous tasks of teaching the machines what we do and don't want – often at great psychological cost, being exposed to frightening and illegal content that internet filters couldn't catch, for miniscule pay. These workers are mostly young, precariously employed, and drawn from the poorest regions of the world; its a far cry from the seamless and immaterial picture of AI sold to investors.

In view of the extreme environmental and human costs, we should seriously consider shifting consumption away from energy and labour hungry LLMs, discouraging the casual outsourcing of trivial searches to these bloated models. After all, do we need to consult a global database to set an alarm or ask which bus to take? Purpose designed, judiciously deployed models *have* been developed in recent years by researchers, conscious of the need for minimal energy consumption, noting also the huge energy demands for AI-generated images and video. These are perfectly adequate for routine requests.

The most powerful systems surely must be reserved for genuinely humanitarian work: the study of complex protein structures, sophisticated climate modelling, and other projects that demonstrably serve the common good. *Magnifica Humanitas* celebrates this sort of good and wise use of technology: "*Technology has the power to heal, connect, educate and protect our common home*" but warns that technology is never neutral. *Magnifica Humanitas* uses an apt metaphor, the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, which "*reveals the limits of any effort that, however grandiose, arises from self-affirmation, sacrifices human dignity for efficiency and aspires to reach heaven without God's blessing*."

On the other hand is the call to humanise daily life: sending an impromptu (AI-free) email to congratulate a colleague; lingering over the chance for learning; supporting craftspeople, artisans, and thinkers whose work bears the imprint of a human soul rather than that of a machine. Can we celebrate our human vocation to love and worship? Exodus reminds us that God can fill people with skill and wisdom: "*I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts*." (Exodus 31:3) Our labour can glorify the Creator when it is skilled, humble, and thoughtful.

These acts are by no means trivial. They are acts of resistance against the costs that come from rampant LLM use. Choosing the human led and creation oriented becomes, in this light, a clear act of courageous ministry. ■

Sam Cliff is a University of Warwick law graduate now working for the Church of England, with a passion for rewilding projects, advocating for the criticality of a green faith, and a fascination in exploring the intersection between technology and theology.

3. *What direct risks does AI pose to the climate and environment?* (2025) Grantham Research Institute lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/explainers/what-direct-risks-does-ai-pose-to-the-climate-and-environment/