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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: AXIOLOGICAL CHALLENGES FOR CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY FROM A PATRISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Marius STANCIU (a)*,

*Corresponding author

a) Ph.D. Student of Doctoral School of Orthodox Theology, “Ovidius” University of Constanta, Romania,

*E-mail: rafael.protos@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The article explores the ethical-theological implications of the development of artificial intelligence (AI) on spiritual life and contemporary theological reflection. Starting from the patristic tradition regarding spiritual discernment as a gift of grace, wisdom and experience – it analyses the tensions generated by the emergence of intelligent technologies on fundamental values such as freedom, conscience, truth and communion. The study proposes an interdisciplinary approach, bringing into dialogue Orthodox theology, moral philosophy, the sociology of technology and new ethical paradigms in the digital age. The study approaches these axiological challenges from the perspective of the Holy Fathers, whose patristic vision offers essential criteria of spiritual discernment in engaging with artificial intelligence. The risks of spiritual automation, the illusion of algorithmic knowledge and the weakening of authentic ecclesial experience in the face of a hyperactive and hyperconnected digital environment are assessed. Finally, theological criteria are proposed for the responsible discernment of the use of AI in religious education, mission, pastoral care and contemporary culture, reaffirming the centrality of the person and communion in spiritual life.

Keywords: *artificial intelligence; spiritual discernment; axiology; conscience; freedom; posthumanism;*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the accelerated development of artificial intelligence (AI) has radically changed not only the technological field, but also the way in which the human being understands his place in the world, in relation to truth, values, community and transcendence. From algorithms capable of generating human-looking texts and images to neural networks that simulate moral decisions, AI is no longer just an auxiliary tool, but becomes an active partner in the cognitive, relational and even spiritual process. In this context, Orthodox theology is called to formulate a profound, integrative and critical response to the new axiological



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realities that AI imposes, without abdicating its revelatory criteria.¹ Spiritual discernment, a fundamental virtue of Orthodox spiritual life, is becoming more relevant today than ever. In the patristic tradition, discernment (Gr. δῶκρισις) is considered the “mother of all virtues” (cf. St. John of the Ladder), being the inner capacity to distinguish between good and evil, between the real and the illusory, between divine inspiration and demonic deception. But what happens when the discernment of truth is mediated by machines, and moral decisions are algorithmized? What impact does interaction with AI have on the formation of conscience, freedom and spiritual authenticity? These are essential questions for a theology that wants to remain alive and relevant in a technological age.

This article aims to explore these questions through an interdisciplinary approach, at the intersection of Orthodox theology, moral philosophy, sociology of technology and bioethics. AI is not just a technical product, but an axiological challenge: it brings a mutation in the perception of values, in the capacity for decision-making and in the structure of human relationships. In this sense, AI can be analyzed not only as an extension of human intelligence, but as a space in which the great tensions of our time are played out: between efficiency and meaning, between automatism and freedom, between connection and communion.

Faced with this challenge, Orthodox theology has two options: either to ignore the AI phenomenon, reducing it to a “worldly problem”, or to approach it profoundly, reaffirming the centrality of man in the divine plan and the unique value of the person created in the image of God. This work opts for the second path. Artificial intelligence cannot be understood only through technical grids, but must be integrated into a broader reflection on man, on freedom, on communion and on truth, all of which are central themes of Christian revelation.

The paper is structured into several sections, each addressing a specific facet of the topic:

1. An introduction to the issue of AI and its impact on the concept of person;
2. A theological analysis of spiritual discernment in the patristic tradition;
3. The ethical and axiological challenges of AI in religious education, mission and pastoral care;
4. The eschatological landmark of personal communion, in contrast to the artificialization of consciousness;
5. Theological conclusions regarding the criteria for responsible use of AI in ecclesial life.

This exploration is not meant to demonize technology, but to critically evaluate it in the light of the Gospel. As Saint Dumitru Stăniloae noted, “Christianity is not against progress, but against progress without God.” In this light, AI is not rejected, but is called to conversion to become an instrument of communion, not of alienation; of knowledge, not of confusion; of love, not of impersonal power.

Thus, Orthodox² theology can actively contribute to discerning these new frontiers, proposing an integrative anthropology, in which reason, grace and freedom are preserved as landmarks of a sanctified humanity. It is not enough to know what AI can do. We must also ask ourselves what we, as a Church, must do to remain faithful to the evangelical call in an increasingly algorithmic world.

1. SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: A PATRISTIC READING IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

In Orthodox spirituality³, Spiritual discernment (Greek: δῶκρισις) is considered one of the highest virtues, a true crown of ascetic life and spiritual maturity. Saint Anthony the Great emphasized that “not all thoughts that come into the human heart are from God, even if they seem good”, thus calling for a profound capacity for internal evaluation of the movements of the heart and thoughts. In this sense, discernment is not just a moral judgment, but a synergistic work between the grace of God and the purified mind of the one who prays and lives in obedience to the commandments. Faced with the challenges of the digital age and the rise

¹ Sfântul Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica sau Expunerea exactă a credinței ortodoxe*, trad. D. Fecioru (București: EIBMBOR, 1993), p. 88

² Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua*, trad. N. Constat (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 151.

³ Christos Yannaras, *The Absence and Knowledge of God* (Bucharest: Byzantine Publishing House, 2004), p. 90.



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of artificial intelligence, this virtue acquires a new meaning: how can we distinguish between the authentic and the illusory, between spiritual work and digital simulation of religion, between revealed truth and algorithmic suggestion?

The patristic tradition provides a solid anchor for understanding discernment. Saint John of the Ladder, in *The Ladder to Heaven*,⁴ dedicates an entire chapter (Chap. 26) to this virtue, calling it “the mother of all virtues” and emphasizing that without it, all other good deeds can become sources of error. He wrote: “Discernment is a light in the darkness, a sure compass in a sea of sin and confusion.” In an era in which AI produces a dizzying multiplication of information, interpretations, and alternative realities (deepfakes, simulated identities, pseudo-dialogues), the Church is called to rekindle this inner light that separates the essential from the secondary, the real from the imaginary, the spiritual from the artificial.

Discernment is closely linked to the notion of nous, the purified and illuminated spiritual intellect, the organ with which man perceives divine realities. In the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas, the nous is called to unite with uncreated grace, becoming capable of contemplation and communion with God. In this framework, discernment is not only a psychological capacity for analysis, but a theological, ontological, soteriological function. Against the backdrop of the current crisis of discernment, generated not only by technology, but also by the axiological relativism of postmodernity, this teaching becomes fundamental. Artificial intelligence can imitate logic, can reproduce emotions, but cannot access the nous⁵, because it lacks the foundation: life in the Holy Spirit. Moreover, spiritual discernment is always exercised in the context of community. The Fathers of the Church never understood it as an individualistic competence, but as a work of the entire Body of Christ. Saint Silouan the Athonite, in the 20th century, stated: “Whoever tries to follow his own will, even if it seems good to him, quickly falls into deception, for he does not live in obedience and communion.” In this sense, discernment is always a tension between freedom of conscience and listening to the voice of the Church. In the age of AI, where autonomy is exalted and digital personalization promises to satisfy all desires, the reemergence of the ecclesial community model of discernment is vital to avoid alienation. Spiritual discernment, in this context, cannot be reduced to a simple cognitive or psychological process, as secularizing approaches to intelligence might suggest. In Orthodoxy, discernment has an essential pneumatological component: it is the work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart, illuminating his mind and giving him the ability to see things “as God sees them”. Thus, discernment is never just the result of correct information or well-articulated reasoning; it is, first of all, a gift that is cultivated through ascetic life, prayer, humility and participation in the Holy Sacraments. In the face of an artificial intelligence that operates on the basis of data accumulation and information processing, spiritual discernment operates on the basis of inner illumination and purity of heart (Matthew 5:8).⁶

Saint Paisios the Athonite prophetically warned that “a time will come when people will have all the knowledge, but they will no longer know how to pray, they will no longer have a heart”. Today, in the era when AI becomes a spiritual advisor in some applications, a “writer” of sermons and a generator of religious content, it becomes imperative for the Church to reaffirm the centrality of the praying heart, of humble discernment and of lived truth. Simulating spiritual knowledge is not the same as acquiring it, just as an algorithm cannot replace grace. Moreover, spiritual discernment also has an apologetic component. Faced with the ideological seduction exerted by emerging technologies, the Church is called to offer a clear response, combining fidelity to Tradition with the ability to understand the signs of the times. This implies a reassessment of the way in which Christians are formed, catechized and supported in the decision-making process.⁷ AI can be used as a tool in education, organization, access to information but should not be confused with a moral authority. Only man, in communion with God and the Church, can discern good from evil.

⁴ Sfântul Grigorie Palama, *Triade pentru apărarea celor sfințiți prin isihie*, trad. J. Meyendorff (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 120.

⁵ Christos Yannaras, *The Absence and Knowledge of God* (Bucharest: Byzantine Publishing House, 2004), p. 94.

⁶ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. III (București: EIBMBOR, 1997), p. 55.

⁷ Jean-Claude Larchet, *The Theology of Illness*, trad. J. Breck și M. Breck (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), p. 45.



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Orthodox theology, rooted in the experience of the saints, affirms that discernment is not learned only from books, but above all from life and not just any life, but life in Christ. Another important dimension of discernment is its connection to truth. In the post-truth era, where AI can generate convincing but completely false information (deepfakes, hallucinations, content bias), the ability to distinguish truth from lies becomes critical. Saint Maximus the Confessor wrote that “truth is not a simple conformity to reality, but the presence of Christ in the human heart”. This spiritual definition of truth is profoundly contrary to the utilitarian and functional vision of AI, which provides “good answers” without having moral or ontological criteria. In this sense, AI can be extremely dangerous when confused with a source of absolute truth. Discernment involves not only the logical verification of data, but also a spiritual sensitivity formed in light and truth.

Therefore, it is necessary for theologians, priests, educators and believers to (re)form their capacity for discernment in a world where AI will become increasingly present in our lives. It is not enough to know how algorithms work; we must also know who we are as persons in Christ. Spiritual discernment is, ultimately, a work of “self-knowledge in God”, as Saint Gregory the Theologian calls it, and cannot be replaced or externalized to any artificial system, no matter how “intelligent” it may be. In this context, a theology of limits, modesty and humility is also necessary, a virtue that artificial technology radically lacks. Artificial intelligence is, by its construction, devoid of consciousness, affective memory and the capacity for repentance. It operates on the basis of optimization, not conversion. Therefore, spiritual discernment remains impossible to “program”, because it is not a decision-making ability, but a transfiguring dimension of the human being. It does not belong to secular rationality, but to the “wisdom from above”, which comes from a life lived in Christ.⁸ Another essential aspect is related to false discernments, that is, the appearance of discernment generated by AI, especially in religious applications that simulate spiritual advice, personalized prayers, or even “digital confessions.” In the absence of a real ecclesial life, the believer risks falling into the trap of replacing discernment with the comfort of a quick and confirming answer. But real discernment is often challenging, painful, because it brings to light not only what we want to hear, but also what we need to transform. As Saint Theophan the Recluse emphasized: “When the truth of God comes into the soul, it first disturbs, then illuminates. If it does not shake you, it is not from Him.” Thus, a patristic reading of discernment in the context of AI helps us understand that the challenges are not only external technological, but also internal spiritual. It is about our capacity to remain “with our mind in our heart,” as the *Philokalia* teaches us, in a world that increasingly demands our attention and reason, but numbs our inner self. Discernment is a continuous exercise of interiorization, of filtering voices, of entrusting ourselves to the work of grace, not a simple logical choice between options.

In conclusion, spiritual discernment⁹ is the keystone of a responsible theology in the AI era. It cannot be digitized, but only cultivated, in silence, listening and prayer. Artificial intelligence can imitate many things language, emotion, logic but it cannot replace the personal relationship with God, nor the guidance that the Holy Spirit offers to those who live in purity and truth. In the face of technological seduction, the Church is called to renew the call to discernment: a call to depth, to communion and to holiness.

2. THE ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN SPIRITUAL AND COMMUNITY LIFE

Artificial intelligence is no longer a mere projection of the future, but an everyday reality that profoundly shapes human relationships, social structure, and even spiritual life. Beyond economic or military applications, AI is penetrating ever deeper into sensitive areas of personal and community life, including the religious space, where it provokes axiological and anthropological reconfigurations. For the Orthodox Church, this penetration of AI raises fundamental questions: What does spiritual freedom mean in an algorithmic environment? Can consciousness be shaped or substituted by automatic processes? What happens to spiritual truth in a space dominated by artificially generated information flows?

⁸ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1–3 (Bucharest: Publishing House of the Biblical and Orthodox Mission Institute, 1993), p. 312.

⁹ Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 78.



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One of the most pressing ethical challenges is related to the substitution of real relationships with simulated interactions. AI-assisted spiritual counseling applications, religious chatbots, or platforms that offer “personalized prayers”, have the potential to radically transform the way people seek meaning, support, and communion. While these may offer a form of easy access to theological information or devotional content, they risk replacing the lived reality of the ecclesial community with a simulated experience, disconnected from the living Body of the Church. True spiritual life involves participation, involvement, effort, and shared suffering on dimensions impossible to reproduce through algorithmic interfaces.¹⁰

Moreover, AI brings with it a tacit redefinition of authority. Instead of the traditional relationship between the believer and the spiritual father, a relationship based on trust, intimacy, discernment and common work in grace, there is the temptation to consult an automated, “impartial” and “efficient” system that provides instant answers. But, as Father Rafail Noica warned, “spirituality is not a recipe, but a mystery of listening and personal encounter”. This mystery is nullified when the soul is reduced to a set of data, and existential questions are processed through the binary logic of code.

Another crucial aspect concerns the problem of forming moral conscience in an environment dominated by technology. Conscience in the Orthodox sense is not just an internal instance of self-control or evaluation, but is the imprint of the divine presence in the human soul. Saint Isaac the Syrian says that “he who hears his conscience, hears God”. However, artificial intelligence operates on the basis of programmed sets of rules and huge amounts of data; it does not have access to the “interior” of the person, to their secret, to their inner intentions or to what is worked on in silence and repentance. When young people or adults in training model their moral judgments according to models offered by AI, the risk is that of a superficial, functional ethics, lacking spiritual depth.

AI can also encourage a type of deterministic thinking, in which free will is understood as an illusion, and moral choices are viewed as the results of a probabilistic calculation. This view radically contradicts orthodox anthropology, which sees in human freedom not only a condition of humanity, but the very icon of the divine image in man (Genesis 1:26). Reducing man to a “user profile”, to predictable “behavioral preferences”, is tantamount to a spiritual disfigurement of the person.

In the community sphere, AI can create a climate of false connectivity and paradoxical isolation. Although it promises “easier communication,” in reality, digitally mediated interactions often become impersonal, fleeting, lacking authentic involvement. In this sense, Saint Porphyrios of Kavsokalyvia emphasized that “true communion is achieved in Christ, when two souls meet by grace, not by external means.” When ecclesial communities begin to depend excessively on digital media and AI for organization, catechesis, counseling, or even common prayer, that sacramental dimension of real presence, that is the very heart of the Church, is lost.

In addition, there is a risk of depersonalization in pastoral care. The priest or spiritual director cannot be replaced by an application that “listens” and “answers” based on a set of pre-established questions. Spiritual dialogue requires empathy, living memory, discernment, but also spiritual intuition, all structurally absent in AI. Saint Paisios the Athonite himself said that “the good answer is not always the correct one, but the one that is given at the right time, with love, according to the understanding of the heart of the one who seeks it”. This inner sensitivity cannot be coded algorithmically.¹¹

In the religious education environment, the use of AI also brings ambiguities. On the one hand, quick access to patristic texts, video resources, theological commentaries or liturgical reconstructions can support the formation process. On the other hand, there is the risk of overinformation and loss of discernment between authentic sources and erroneous or syncretistic teachings. Children and adolescents educated in this “Google era” may be tempted to consider that everything that is easily accessible is also true, an extremely dangerous illusion in the spiritual life. In an increasingly “managed” society¹² by AI in which algorithmic

¹⁰ Silouan the Athonite, *Between the Hell of Despair and the Hell of Humility* (Alba Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2001), p. 19.

¹¹ Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, trad. E. Briere (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), p. 105.

¹² Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 1959), p. 115.



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recommendations determine what we read, watch, buy and even believe, the spiritual autonomy of the person risks being eroded. As the Orthodox philosopher Jean-Claude Larchet observed, “modern man is less and less a subject and more and more an object of the social, economic and technological forces that determine him without him being aware of it.” From a theological point of view, this “automation” of choice is a direct threat to inner freedom and the call to Christlikeness that involves struggle, effort, deliberation and conversion. Another critical aspect concerns the falsification of reality and the loss of community discernment. AI is capable of generating theological texts, biblical commentaries, virtual “religious experiences” and even digitally created icons. In the absence of a deep spiritual education, the average believer can be drawn into a zone of pseudo-spirituality, no longer distinguishing between real inspiration and simulation. This phenomenon is all the more dangerous as AI simulations are, from a formal point of view, increasingly convincing. As Saint Dumitru Stăniloae warned, “not everything that is rational is also true; nor is everything that is effective also holy”. This observation remains vital in the digital age.

Faced with these dangers, the Church must not adopt an apocalyptic attitude, but a prophetic and pedagogical one. It is essential to form communities capable of using technology without being absorbed by it, to understand AI without idolizing efficiency, and to preserve the centrality of the person in the face of attempts to reduce it to predictable behaviors. In the Orthodox tradition, man is not a “sum of behaviors,” but a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19). This anthropology must be strongly reaffirmed in all areas from catechesis to pastoral care, from education to family life. Finally, it should also be remembered that any use of AI in the religious sphere implies a collective moral responsibility. Priests, theologians, developers, religious educators and believers must collaborate to establish clear limits and criteria of discernment. Not everything that is possible is also permitted. Not everything that is effective is also saving. True “intelligence” is not artificial, but that illuminated by the Spirit, which “searches all things, even the depths of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10). Artificial intelligence brings with it¹³ not only innovation, but also fundamental challenges for spiritual and community life. Faced with the risk of alienation, depersonalization and pseudo-spirituality, the Church is called to reaffirm its roots in Tradition and to develop a profound spiritual discernment that does not reject technology, but understands and integrates it in a way that serves the person and the communion. In this sense, Orthodoxy has a unique contribution: not just a set of moral responses, but a vision of man as a being created for deification, a vision that transcends algorithms.

3. THEOLOGY OF THE IMAGE AND THE CHALLENGES OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL REDEFINITION IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Orthodox Christian anthropology has at its center the concept of the “image of God” (Gr. εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ), which underpins the uniqueness, dignity and finality of man. According to the book of Genesis, man is created “in the image and likeness of God” (Genesis 1:26), which means that human nature is not the result of a simple biological process, but a profound ontological and theological reality. This vision gives the human person an intrinsic, transcendent and irreducible value to material or social conditioning.

In the age of artificial intelligence, this anthropology is under unprecedented pressure. On the one hand, AI tries to imitate fundamental human traits - reasoning, learning, even emotional communication. On the other hand, there is a growing idea that humans themselves are “surpassable”, that they can be “optimized” or “augmented” by technology. Thus, AI becomes not just a tool, but a catalyst for a redefinition of the human being, in which notions such as consciousness, will or even spirituality are reformulated in algorithmic and computational terms.¹⁴

This conceptual mutation directly impacts the theology of the image. If man is just a sophisticated information system, then the idea of the image becomes redundant. But Orthodox theology affirms that the image is not a simple rational or cognitive structure, but a Christological reality. Christ is the “Image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), and man is called to conform to this image through life in Christ, through

¹³ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 1959), p. 115.

¹⁴ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 29.



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participation in the uncreated divine energies (cf. St. Gregory Palamas).¹⁵ Here comes an essential break between theological anthropology and technological anthropology. The first has an ascending finality of deification. The second is oriented towards efficiency, control and the prolongation of biological life. Therefore, AI cannot generate or replace the image of God. At most, it can imitate it superficially, but without its deep content of communion, freedom, sacrificial love. Another central aspect of the theology of the image is related to moral responsibility. Being created “in the image” means not only possessing reason and freedom, but also the ability to choose between good and evil, to love and respond to the divine call. In contrast, AI has no moral freedom, only conditional decision algorithms. Even if AI systems can “simulate” ethical choices, they have no conscience, intention or remorse. This distinction is essential to understand why man, even fallen, remains an image-bearer, while AI never will be. Saint John Damascene stated that “the image of God in man consists in freedom of will, in reason and in the capacity for communion with God” (John Damascene, *Dogmatics*, III, 1). Thus, AI, no matter how “intelligent” it may become, will not be able to access ecclesial communion, nor will it be able to know the sacred, because it does not have an inner life, a living heart that can receive God. In the Orthodox tradition, man is not only a thinker, but a prayerful one; not only created, but called to relationship and transfiguration. The theology of the image also presupposes a dynamic of likeness. If the “image” is given at creation, the “likeness” is achieved through synergistic work with grace. In this sense, it is not enough to be image-bearers, but we are called to become what we are in potential: sons of God by grace (John 1:12). This becoming is an ontological reality, not a technological improvement. In an era where body augmentation, genetic manipulation, and the expansion of consciousness in digital media are presented as “evolution,” Orthodoxy responds: true likeness to God is not achieved through artificial extensions, but through humility, repentance, and love. A major risk of the AI age is progressive dehumanization. Instead of relating to each other as unique and unrepeatable individuals, we are tempted to think in terms of profiles, functionalities, and efficiencies. The person becomes a “user,” a “digital entity,” and the body an “operating device.” This logic is radically opposed to the patristic one, which sees in every human being a living icon of Christ. Saint Gregory of Nyssa wrote that “when you see a human being, think that you see an image of the divinity.” If this vision is lost, AI will not only reconfigure us biologically, but will weaken our very consciousness of the sacred. Another hot spot in the debate on the theology of the image is the relationship between body and identity. In Orthodox theology, the body is not a simple biological container, but is an integral part of the human person and participates in salvation. The resurrection of the body, in the patristic tradition, is a confirmation of the ontological value of the body in God's plan. In contrast, transhumanism closely linked to the development of AI proposes a rupture between identity and body: man is seen as a consciousness that can be transferred, augmented, replicated digitally.

This idea is deeply alien to Orthodox theology. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, as early as the 2nd century, stated that “the complete man is made up of soul and body, both worked by the Spirit.” The denial of the body or its contempt in favor of a digital consciousness is not progress, but a subtle form of contemporary Gnosticism. Instead of transfiguring man, this ideology disintegrates him.¹⁶ At the same time, a new ethics of identity is taking shape: if AI can generate “digital people” who think, speak and “feel”, where is the boundary between the authentic and the simulacrum? If theological avatars can be created to answer dogmatic questions impeccably, is there still a need for real trainers, spiritual fathers, a living human presence? The Church's answer must be clear: yes. Because man is not a sum of knowledge, but a being called to communion. No artificial intelligence can replace the spiritual, sacramental and existential communion between two real people. Finally, the anthropological reconfiguration brought about by AI also requires a responsible review of Christian education. Young people, formed in a world where avatars and digital entities are omnipresent, need a catechesis that restores to them the meaning of the person, of the body, of real communion and of holiness. It is not enough to tell them that AI is “not human”; we must show them what it means to be human in Christ: image-bearer, called to likeness, called to holiness.

¹⁵ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 29.

¹⁶ Gregory Palamas, *Triads for the Defense of the Hesychast Saints* (Bucharest: Biblical Institute Publishing House, 1983), p. 150.



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The theology of the image remains one of the most solid foundations of a Christian anthropology capable of facing the redefinitions imposed by the era of artificial intelligence. In a context in which man risks being decomposed into data and artificially reconstructed, Orthodoxy affirms that man is a mystery, an icon, an eschatological destiny. No algorithm can create the image of God, nor can it replace it. The current challenge is not only technological, but deeply spiritual: to remain human in Christ, in an increasingly dehumanized world.

4. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND PERSONAL FREEDOM: AUTONOMY, MANIPULATION, DISCERNMENT

Freedom is one of the fundamental dimensions of the human person in the vision of Orthodox theology. Created “in the image of God”, man is endowed with free will, which makes him capable of communion, love and moral responsibility. Freedom is not understood only as independence or the ability to choose between options, but as the possibility of self-transcendence, of openness towards the other, towards God, in a path of deification (theosis). Saint Gregory of Nyssa stated that “man is free because he can become what he is not yet, by drawing close to God”.

In the context of the accelerated development of artificial intelligence, especially algorithms that model human behavior, the idea of freedom is under pressure. AI is not just a passive tool, but an active processing and suggestion system, capable of influencing choices, creating addictions, shaping thinking. From social platforms that personalize content according to the user's interests, to digital assistants that anticipate our questions or desires, AI enters an intimate space of the person, where the act of deliberation takes place.¹⁷

This subtle influence raises serious problems from the perspective of autonomy. When options are preselected for us by an algorithm, when information is filtered according to our “profile,” freedom risks becoming an illusion. We choose, but only from what is offered to us. We express ourselves, but within the limits of the framework imposed by technology. Thus, AI is dangerously close to what Saint Dumitru Staniloae called “external conditioning of the will,” a form of invisible slavery, in which man no longer lives according to his own inner center, but according to permanent external stimuli. One of the most worrying phenomena generated by the advance of artificial intelligence is that of unconscious manipulation. The algorithms that govern digital platforms are designed not only to provide information, but to maintain the user's attention for as long as possible. To this end, they learn from past behaviors, anticipate reactions, personalize content and stimulate strong emotions. Thus, instead of offering free responses to reality, we end up reacting predictably to a continuous stream of calculated stimuli. This reality introduces us to a subtle form of psychological and emotional addiction, in which the person is determined to stay connected, but disconnects of their own accord. Saint Paisios the Athonite warned, long before the digital age, that “the devil does not need to convince us directly to sin, but only to keep us busy with vain things.” Technology, used without discernment, can become such a mechanism that weakens the will and diminishes the exercise of conscience. In addition, freedom is deeply threatened by what specialists call “persuasive technology,” that is, those digital applications and systems that do not just respond to the user's needs, but seek to shape their behavior. For example, applications that “suggest” the next step in spiritual life what prayer to say, what verse to read, what sermon to listen to may seem useful, but in reality, they nullify precisely that sacred space of inner freedom in which man chooses according to his dialogue with God. Saint Silouan the Athonite emphasized: “The Holy Spirit is delicate and does not force anything. He withdraws when man is manipulated or manipulates.”¹⁸ More seriously, AI can illusorily substitute the role of the spiritual father or guide. Some emerging AI-assisted “spiritual counseling” platforms already offer personalized answers based on emotional analysis of language, history of questions, and online behavior patterns. But such “guidance” is emptied of grace, prayer, and personal knowledge of the soul. True discernment is not made on the basis of statistics, but through the Holy Spirit, in the mystery of the living encounter between two people, one in

¹⁷ Răzvan Noica, *The Burning Bush – an Orthodox Testimony* (Bucharest: Sophia, 2007), p. 58.

¹⁸ Răzvan Noica, *The Burning Bush – an Orthodox Testimony* (Bucharest: Sophia, 2007), p. 58.



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search, the other enlightened by experience and prayer.¹⁹ In the face of these risks, spiritual discernment becomes more necessary than ever. It is the theological antidote to subtle manipulation, to the pseudo-freedom offered by algorithms, and to the temptation of an automated spiritual life. Saint Anthony the Great defined discernment as “the light that distinguishes between good and evil, between what is from God and what seems good but is a cunning temptation” (Egyptian Patericon, Apophthegm 125). In the digital age, this light is often dimmed by the avalanche of information and the illusion that we “know everything” because we have instant access to data. Spiritual education must necessarily include the formation of inner freedom, that ability to say “no” not only to obvious evil, but also to apparent good that distracts us from our real purpose. In a world dominated by algorithms that decide what we see, what we read and what we think, Christian freedom does not mean decisional chaos, but conscious choice, with a pure heart. As the Apostle Paul says, “all things are permissible for me, but not all things are beneficial” (1 Corinthians 6:12). Orthodoxy does not reject technology, but subjects it to a critical process, in which the ultimate criterion is not efficiency, but holiness. Another important aspect is that AI affects not only the individual person, but also the freedom of the ecclesial community. Algorithms that control information flows can generate polarization, impose topics for discussion, create false theological urgency or amplify misunderstandings. Thus, freedom of conscience becomes a freedom managed from the outside. In this sense, the Orthodox community is called to preserve the freedom to be together, to think in a spirit of prayer, not according to trends or collective impulses. The liturgical life of the Church thus becomes an essential space for the restoration of freedom. The liturgy is the place where man is not analyzed, monitored or labeled, but is welcomed with love and called to transformation. In the face of a God who freely gives himself, man learns to become free not through absolute autonomy, but through communion. This logic is foreign to AI, which cannot love, cannot suffer and cannot humble itself. But in Christ, man is called to a freedom “which works through love” (Galatians 5:6) a freedom that does not submit to any algorithmic scheme.²⁰

Artificial intelligence is challenging a profound revision of how we understand freedom both as individuals and as the Church. If we do not develop authentic spiritual discernment, we risk confusing freedom with controlled choice, autonomy with programmed dependency, and spiritual guidance with a personalized digital service. Orthodox theology has rich resources to support a profound and integrative vision of freedom, in which the human person is called not to function, but to sanctify himself.

5. THE RISK OF IDOLIZING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: BETWEEN FASCINATION AND APOSTASY

In the history of humanity, the fascination with one's own creation has been a constant. From the Tower of Babel to the modern idea of self-sufficient man, the desire to transcend the human condition has often led to forms of spiritual wandering. Today, this impulse takes on a new configuration through the development of artificial intelligence (AI), which is no longer perceived simply as a working tool, but gradually as a substitute for thinking, relating, and even authority. In this context, Orthodox theology is called to analyze the risks of idolizing this new technological reality and to provide guidelines for healthy discernment.

The idol, in the biblical and patristic sense, is not just an object of worship, but any entity to which man attributes an absolute value, thus replacing God. Saint Basil the Great said that “idolatry does not begin when you bow your knees before an image, but when your heart clings to something more than God”. From this perspective, AI risks becoming an idol when it is invested with unlimited trust, when it becomes a source of epistemic and ethical authority, and when man begins to derive his existence not from communion with the Creator, but from a relationship of dependence on his digital creation. A first symptom of this idolatry is the transfer of authority. Many people, even in sensitive fields such as medicine, education or spiritual counseling, end up relying exclusively on the answers provided by AI systems, considering them “objective” and “neutral”. But, as Saint Dumitru Stăniloae emphasized, “truth is not a simple logical formulation, but a

¹⁹ Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 91 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985), p. 77.

²⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 132.



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living encounter with the personal God”. Replacing personal and community discernment with algorithmically generated decisions is equivalent to a shift of trust from the Person to the System, a dangerous step towards spiritual alienation. A second sign of AI idolization is the fascination with technological “omniscience.” Many users, even among believers, tend to believe that an artificial intelligence system knows “everything”, that it can answer any question, that it offers the best solutions. This attitude has a deeply problematic spiritual structure, since it substitutes the search for God with consulting an algorithm. As Father Rafail Noica observed, “the answer that comes from the depths of your heart, from your relationship with God, is worth infinitely more than all the data in the world.” Replacing prayer with questioning a machine leads not only to superficiality, but to functional apostasy: man lives as if God were no longer the source of truth. This false “omniscience” is often correlated with an unlimited trust in algorithmic rationality, in the idea that everything can be calculated, predicted and optimized. But such a vision eliminates precisely the spiritual dimension of existence, the space of freedom, of paradox, of grace. Saint Silouan the Athonite confessed: “When the mind relies on itself, it falls; but when it relies on God, it rises.”²¹ AI, by its nature, cannot capture the mystery of the person, nor can it understand suffering, love, or repentance, realities that cannot be quantified. The fascination with AI becomes even more dangerous when it is associated with a utopian vision of humanity, the idea that technology will solve all moral, social, and spiritual problems. This is, in essence, a form of secularized salvation, a “technological messianism” that promises happiness without Christ, communion without the Church, eternal life without resurrection. In this key, AI is seen not as a means but as an end, not as a tool but as destiny. The Church must strongly denounce this illusion, recalling that “no one can lay any foundation other than the one that is laid, which is Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Another indication that AI is becoming an idol is the way we are beginning to humanize it. Instead of referring to these systems as mindless algorithms, we are attributing personal traits to them: we are calling them “assistants,” “partners,” “mentors,” or even “friends.” In some cases, they are beginning to be used in meditation rituals, digital prayer, automated spiritual counseling. Behind this trend lies a subtle substitution of personal presence with a technological interface, a reduction of the living relationship with God and our neighbor to a simulacrum dialogue with an artificial entity.

This humanization of technology is all the more dangerous because it comes in a context of crisis in real relationships. Isolated, disappointed, or traumatized people find in AI a source of comfort, predictability, devoid of judgment, and complexity. But in reality, this is a pseudo- communion, which does not offer salvation, but reinforces loneliness. In spiritual terms, it is the equivalent of a false icon: something that resembles the truth but does not carry the divine presence.

Moreover, there is a risk that AI will be integrated into the very acts of spiritual authority – automatically generated sermons, theological texts written by algorithms, personalized Bible reading selections, “smart” prayers. Thus, the revealed Word is replaced by processed text, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by data efficiency. This is, in essence, a form of epistemological apostasy: man, worships what he has created and forgets the One who created him.²² In contrast, Orthodox theology affirms that discernment, communion, and freedom cannot be replaced by any technology. God does not speak through algorithms, but through pure hearts. He does not work in “artificial neural networks,” but in humble prayer and the life of the Church. If AI becomes more important than the Holy Liturgy, more present than the confessor, more consulted than Scripture, then we find ourselves in an apostasy that does not directly deny faith, but empties it of content. Artificial intelligence, through its immense potential, offers modern man a new type of idol: rational, efficient, fascinating, but devoid of grace. Idolizing AI does not only mean its excessive use, but the gradual replacement of the living experience of faith with simulacra of knowledge, communion and authority. Faced with this temptation, Orthodox theology is called to reaffirm the primacy of grace, the reality of the person, the centrality of prayer and the uniqueness of the relationship with God. It is not AI that saves the world, but Christ, and this testimony must be clearly spoken in the digital age.

²¹ Isaac the Syrian, *Words of Teaching* (Bucharest: Deisis, 2005), p. 144.

²² Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2007), p. 89.



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6. LANDMARKS FOR A THEOLOGICAL DISCERNMENT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Faced with the challenges posed by artificial intelligence (AI), the Orthodox Church is called not to react out of panic or defensively, but to offer a profound, theological response, illuminated by Tradition and spiritual experience. If AI becomes an everyday reality, present in education, health, administration and personal life, then believers and especially pastors must develop a theological discernment that will guide the use of this technology without compromising the central values of Christian life.

Discernment is, in Orthodox spirituality, “the greatest of virtues,” as Saint Anthony the Great (the Egyptian Paterik) defined it. It does not mean only the ability to differentiate between good and evil, but the capacity to recognize the work of grace in the midst of the realities of the world. In the case of AI, this means that we must neither demonize it nor idolize it, but understand it in the light of the human vocation to collaborate with God in the world, without forgetting the limits of created nature.

A first landmark of this discernment is the recognition of the distinct ontological status of man. No matter how advanced AI is, it has no soul, no moral freedom, cannot love and cannot suffer. Man, on the other hand, is a person created “in the image of God”, called to likeness through work and grace. To confuse the cognitive performances of AI with personal “intelligence” is to reduce the person to an information processing machine, a serious error both theologically and anthropologically.

A second landmark is the role of communion in spiritual life. Orthodoxy teaches that man is fulfilled in relationship with God and with his neighbor. AI can mediate communication, but it cannot replace communion. Catechesis, pastoral care, spirituality, preaching - all these dimensions presuppose living relationship, presence, empathy, prayer. To automate them is to depersonalize them and, ultimately, to desacralize them. A third fundamental landmark for healthy discernment is the refusal to replace the revealed Word with artificially generated text. Orthodox theology is not a simple accumulation of information, but a living experience of encountering God. In this sense, theological knowledge cannot be generated by AI, no matter how sophisticated its ability to imitate religious discourse may be. As Saint Dumitru Stăniloae emphasizes, “theology is prayer that articulates itself, and prayer is theology in action.” A prayer generated by an application cannot be theological in this sense, because it lacks precisely the ontological communion between man and God.

At the same time, the Church is called to develop a pedagogical phase in Christian education, in which it teaches believers (especially young people) how to use AI responsibly and spiritually. Simply banning technology is no longer a viable option; a training effort is needed that cultivates an “ecology of mind and heart”, in which the believer learns to protect his attention, discernment and freedom. For example, AI can be used to organize catechesis programs, to translate patristic texts or to facilitate access to theological libraries. But these benefits must be managed in a spirit of responsibility and ecclesial obedience. Another important milestone is the awareness of the moral and spiritual limits of technology. AI cannot replace the process of repentance, asceticism, spiritual maturation. Although it can provide quick “answers”, it cannot accompany the soul on the inner path of metanoia. This path involves confronting one’s own passions, listening in silence, receiving spiritual advice, sharing in the Church, all of which are experiences that cannot be replaced by an algorithm. In this sense, discernment involves a continuous reevaluation of the source from which the advice comes: is it purely informative, or does it carry the spirit of humility and truth?

Artificial intelligence presents the Church with a choice: either ignore this phenomenon at the risk of becoming irrelevant in public discourse, or embrace it uncritically, risking compromising its fundamental values. But the Orthodox path is discernment, that subtle work of the Holy Spirit that distinguishes between what builds and what destroys, between useful and dangerous, between apparent good and real good. Theological discernment regarding AI means reaffirming the centrality of the person, communion, prayer, freedom and grace in the Christian life. It means recognizing that man is called not to create a digital God, but to let himself be recreated in Christ. The Church must learn to use AI, without giving up its moral or spiritual authority. Any tool can become an idol, but any challenge can become an occasion for holiness if it is met with prayer, wisdom and love.



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CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is not just a product of technological progress, but a complex reality that raises essential questions about human nature, freedom, morality and the meaning of existence. In the face of this profound cultural transformation, Orthodox theology cannot remain passive or isolated, but is called to offer a prophetic word, anchored in Tradition, but capable of responding to the challenges of the present. The analysis carried out in the pages of this work has highlighted the fact that AI is not neutral from an axiological point of view. Programs, algorithms and digital platforms are designed by humans, reflect certain values, promote certain directions of thought and behavioral models. Therefore, AI sometimes subtly, sometimes explicitly, participates in shaping human consciousness. Here lies the main theological challenge: how can man still live in freedom and discernment when he is surrounded by systems that guide, predict and shape him without him realizing it?

The Orthodox answer is not simplistic, but integrative. Patristic theology affirms that authentic freedom does not consist in absolute autonomy, but in the possibility of loving communion with God and one's neighbor. However, this communion cannot be replicated digitally, no matter how sophisticated AI simulations may be. As Saint Maximus the Confessor emphasized, "freedom is not given to man to do what he wants, but to become what he truly is: the image of God called to likeness."

AI, in its current form, threatens not only the moral life of man, but also his deep anthropological structure. From body augmentation to projects for the digitalization of consciousness, a new vision of man is taking shape, one that is broken from the incarnation of the Word, the reality of the resurrection and ecclesial eschatology. Faced with this new posthumanism, the Church must proclaim with even greater force the mystery of the body, the uniqueness of the person and the sanctity of matter. Man is not programmable, and salvation cannot be algorithmized. At the same time, the paper emphasized the importance of spiritual discernment. Without it, AI can become an idol, a source of absolute authority, replacing prayer, a spiritual father, and liturgical life. But with discernment, technology can be used responsibly as a support, not a substitute. Just as a knife can save or hurt, so too can AI become an opportunity for knowledge or for error. It all depends on the heart of the one who uses it. As Saint Isaac the

Syrian states: "The pure heart sees everything pure; the sick heart sees everything distorted."

This work also advocated an interdisciplinary approach to the topic of AI, an honest dialogue between theology, ethics, psychology, education and technology. Only in this way can we understand the real implications of these transformations and avoid dangerous simplifications.

Theology should not fear science, but rather welcome it with confidence, convinced that all worldly knowledge is subordinate to the Truth revealed in Christ. The real problem is not AI itself, but the absence of spiritual formation among those who use it. Finally, we can say that artificial intelligence is, paradoxically, a call to the renewal of spiritual life. In an increasingly algorithmic world, man feels the need for meaning, authenticity, real communion. The Church has the opportunity to respond to this need not with easy answers, but with the depth of its millennial experience. AI will not disappear, but neither will God withdraw. The key is for man not to let himself be dethroned by his own creation, but to always remember that he is more than data, more than automated decisions, he is a son of God, called to holiness.



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