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AI, Authority, and Intention in Religious Decision Making

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Synopsis

Generative AIs seem to be everywhere. They offer a useful way to answer all sorts of questions quickly, perhaps even religious ones. However, questions of correct intention, misinformation and speed may make the use of systems like ChatGPT problematic for religious questions.

Niyah and AI

In Hassan Hasaa'Ree Ali's short story 'Doa.com', a young man called Lukman visits the graves of his parents. For a small fee, a machine dispenses a smart card, which can be inserted into the headstone. This smart card recites *Surah Yasin*, *doa selamat* (supplication) and *tahlil* (a form of dhikir) on the visitor's behalf. On this day, however, Lukman finds the machine broken. He sits before his parents, unable to pay tribute (Hasaa'Ree Ali, 2021). In this short story, technology had taken such a central place in society and by extension faith, that Lukman could no longer perform prayer.

During my time in the island city, I asked many people whether such a future seemed plausible. Could Muslims in Singapore really forget how to perform *doa*? Some rejected the story; it could never happen. Others felt we were already there; they had witnessed funerals where prayers were performed by a CD or a *Spotify* playlist. Yet others, whilst agreeing that technology had become a regular part of ritual practice, saw no problem. Muslims have always created and embraced technology, the radio transmitting the call to prayer and speakers at the tops of minarets before that (McCallum, 2017). These were all just tools to facilitate faith.

However, one interlocutor made a striking distinction between the technologies of the past and the generative AIs (*gAI*) which now abounds. 2022 was the year of *gAI*. The most prominent of these programs being *ChatGPT*. *OpenAI*, the creators of *ChatGPT* claim that the system is able to provide "instant answers."¹ *ChatGPT* then is a powerful new tool to facilitate faith, especially for difficult questions of theology, and ethics. But *gAI* is different to a radio my interlocutor explained, because of *Niyah* or religious intention.

Imam al-Ghazali defined intention as "the condition and state of the heart, which include two issues, knowledge and action" (al-Ghazali, 1993, 319). *Niyah* focuses on intention, approaching a situation with Islamic intent transforms the value of the act itself. For example, as Umar bin al-Khattab relates, the prophet stated, "The emigration of one for the sake of Allah and His Messenger (PBUH) and one that emigrates for gaining a worldly advantage or for marrying a woman are different." (Muslim, 1991). In this way, *Niyah* can

[1] OpenAI, "ChatGPT" (2023) Indeed, creative and critical thinking are very much part of Islam and Quranic approach. They are represented in many thinking styles as proje accessed 19/01/24.

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transform the secular into the ritual (Alwi et al, 2021, 3). In this way, also, secular technology like a speaker, becomes (at least temporarily) religious when used to transmit the azan.

Surely, it should follow that *AI*, used with Islamic intention will be equally transformed into a religious or ritual technology. However, my interlocutor disagreed. When listening to the radio, or the Azan over a speaker, you can know that the person on the other side of the technology also had correct *Niyyah*. However, with *AI* the same certainty cannot be guaranteed. For example, *ChatGPT* in its commercial and widely used version 3.5 is trained on a corpus of 3.4 billion words drawn from every conceivable source including, books, Wikipedia, and even online message boards like Reddit. This eclectic canon means that *ChatGPT* generated texts can contain multifarious forms of bias present within such source texts. A particular concern when asking religious questions then is that *ChatGPT* for answering religiously inspired questions relies on sources outside the accepted canon of Islamic jurisprudence. This issue is compounded by the fact that *ChatGPT* does not provide sources for its 'opinions'. According to my interlocutor, this fact meant that *gAI* could never have Islamic intentions.

Others agreed, in a survey we did amongst fifty Singaporean Muslims, several respondents argued that a human like *AI* could not convert to Islam. In part, they argued this because the *AI* would not have a soul and could not have genuine Islamic convictions. In other words, the *AI* would lack appropriate intention. This raises a theological challenge for using *ChatGPT* as a tool for religious guidance, but perhaps not an irresolvable one. Several of the *Ustaz* I spoke to in Singapore argued that this issue of *Niyyah* could be circumvented by taking *ChatGPT* outputs as a mere starting point taken up for further exegesis. From there, by using traditional religious sources believers could be certain of veracity of *gAI*'s statements. However, this raises a problem of speed and convenience.

Speed and technology

Despite these theological quandaries, generative *AI* seems to be here to stay, also in Singapore. The question then is how to respond to these challenges. Many of the *asatizah* who I met could see a fairly straightforward solution to the *ChatGPT* problem. Slowing down and shifting the perspective on *ChatGPT* from being a complete output, to being a step in a process towards knowledge. As one *Ustaz* put it to me:

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“There needs to be a paradigm shift in how we approach answering our faith. We need to start trusting users, we need to empower users to first, have the ability to question, to think critically and so when they interact with technology, they know that this technology has its own bias, technology doesn't exist in a vacuum...You have to think, why? ...I need to cross check, cross reference, and things you read need to be a mix of online and offline work.”

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In this process, the locus of intention returns to the user. It is not necessary to be concerned about the *Niyah* of ChatGPT, if the user takes its outputs, researches them further with traditional sources and returns human intention to the centre of their decision making.

However, returning to *Doa.com*, it is not a lack of care that leads Lukman to forgo recitation. When he realises that he cannot perform *doa* at his parent's grave he feels a “pang of unbearable soreness.” (Hasaa'Ree Ali 2021, 63) Instead, it is the abundance of convenience offered by technology. The sociologist Harmut Rosa argues that technology “vastly increases the imaginable opportunities and, second, it converts all the hypothetical possibilities into real options” (Rosa 2016, 28). For example, because we carry computers with access to email at all times, it is technologically feasible to respond to email 24/7. Rosa argues that this is compounded by the general speed up of our societies, in which we are expected to be ever more efficient.

This societal speed up, facilitated by technology, creates further problems in the information age. We consume much more content, at much greater speeds than at any time in history. This gives rise to a number of problems including, most prominent among them being misinformation (Jahanbakhsh et al, 2021). This is a particular problem for *gAIs* like *ChatGPT* because it is programmed to replicate human text by making sophisticated statistics-based predictions about the next most likely word in a sentence. This has the unintended consequence of “hallucination” in which *ChatGPT* creates feasible but untrue statements. As a result, *ChatGPT* is adept at creating convincing sounding statements, which are in fact misinformation (Emsley, 2023). As one Ustaz who works in tech pointed out to me, we have barely dealt with the misinformation issues posed by social media and now *gAI* is compounding those problems.

Slowing down, as the Ustadz I met suggested, is important not only to respond to theological questions of *Niyyah*, but also to combat misinformation. Psychological studies have shown that slowing down when reading information online has a positive effect on people's ability to discern misinformation (Fazio, 2020). However, Wilner et al (2023) show that people attempting this kind of slowing down face a temporal bind. Educators, who aimed to educate about misinformation online, and the virtues of slowing down, themselves faced pressure to speed up. They were expected to teach more students in less time. No doubt a pressure also faced by religious teachers in Singapore. In a society which values speed and efficiency, it is hard to promote slow consideration especially when *gAI* like *ChatGPT* offer instant answers.²

Conclusion

ChatGPT can be a powerful tool for researching and finding answers, even religious ones. Throughout history, Muslims have embraced technology as facilitators of their faith. Ethical and theological ideas like *Niyyah* even support the use of such innovations, so long as their religious ends are kept in mind. However, every new technology comes with new ethical challenges, and *gAI* poses the one of intention. If we defer to the machine for religious knowledge, can its intent be trusted? Can an *AI* have correct Islamic *Niyyah*? My interlocutors thought not.

However, if users take these outputs as starting points, they recentre human sources of intelligence. This may be easier said than done, as psychological and sociological studies (Wilner et al, 2023 and Fazio, 2020) show this kind of slowing down presents its own challenges in the internet age. its own challenges in the internet age. Taking time to consider a piece of information is integral to combating misinformation. Unfortunately, technologies like *ChatGPT* which offer instant answers makes that a challenge to achieve.

At the close of *doa.com*, Lukman stands in front of his parent's graves at a loss when a janitor comes to his aid. The old man offers his dog-eared copy of supplications. Together they read the prayers in *Bahasa* and for the first time Lukman "can fully inhabit the meanings." (Hasaa'Ree Ali 2021, 64) *Doa.com* is a reminder, that while technology can be a powerful tool for everything including faith, slowing down has value not only to prevent errors, but also in allowing the full embodiment of religious experience. As *gAI* continues to proliferate, weighing up the importance of these competing values, speed, truth and embodiment, will be central for the religious and non-religious alike.

[2] OpenAI, "ChatGPT" (2023) <https://openai.com/chatgpt> accessed 19/01/24.

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About Author

James McGrail is a PhD candidate on the One Among Zeros project at Leiden University which asks, “How digital religious futures in Muslim Southeast Asia help us reflect on the current digital transition?”. His research interests include how technology changes social relations, the use of audio as a methodology and creating accessible research outputs.

James received his BA from SOAS University of London in Study of Religion. There his dissertation focused on the effect of algorithmic polarisation on perceptions of the British Muslim community. He received his MSc in Anthropology from Leiden University where his dissertation focused on the transition to adulthood for Ghanaian youth working in the gig economy.

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