

ONFAITH

ASKING THE CLERGY

Can AI be a good spiritual guide?

BY JIM MERRITT
Special to Newsday

Artificial intelligence is beginning to extend its reach to apps dispensing spiritual advice, sometimes via avatars of religious figures. This week's clergy discuss the pros and cons of interactive AI assistants answering questions about faith.

THE REV. DWIGHT LEE WOLTER
Pastor, Congregational Church of Patchogue

I made up a question for AI, "Is lust sinful?" AI said Matthew 5:28 frames lust as a feeling, action and moral issue involving behavior and boundaries. I said, "The pastor is having lust for someone in the church." AI answered, "That changes the situation in an important way. Being a pastor involves power and trust and can cause harm to the other person, the church and to their own calling. Even if the lust seems mutual, the pastoral relationship makes it inappropriate." AI offers spiritual ideas, texts, reflections, questions and can help you articulate your findings. AI doesn't have spiritual awareness, but neither do some people who claim they do. AI is a well-read, tireless assistant. AI is built from knowledge, experience and spirituality drawn from philosophy, psychology, religion and our questions. Clergy know theology and parish experience. For those unwilling to ask clergy or their house of worship closed, AI can be a good beginning. AI recommended praying before you consult AI, then using AI, praying again and then seeking spiritual guidance from a trusted human relationship. That is great guidance.



Nitin Ajmera

NITIN AJMERA

Former Chair, board of trustees, Parliament of the World's Religions

In Jainism, the soul has a virtue of infinite knowledge. A soul's journey from a wanderer human being to salvation and Nirvana is nothing but the journey of seeking the knowledge within. In this process, the soul takes help from gurus, uses their senses to create the distinction between the right and the wrong and through experiences and experimentation, continues to evolve from a mundane existence to an enlightened existence. Throughout the transformation, we will need tools to get this knowledge and guidance, be it listening to a lecture, researching in a library, reading a book or asking AI for the same. These tools only give us what has been experienced by others and show us what they did or can do. Getting information from AI is not bad, but considering it a final answer with no research, experimentation or result may mislead you to an incorrect path. Hence, we should consider the information received from AI but not trust it to the extent that we lose our own inner capability of finding knowledge with our own power.



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My first reaction was an emphatic "no!" Not only did I not want to trust our souls to a soulless computer — I also didn't want AI coming for my job. After some reflection, I felt this question was more about advice in general than AI in specific. Who wouldn't I take advice from, spiritually or otherwise? I found myself returning to Pirkei Avot 4:1, "Who is wise, one who learns from every person." The tradition is saying that advice should come from all sources. Why wouldn't I include AI? The fact that the question is about spiritual advice makes me even more determined to say "yes." After all, it's advice, not a commandment. There is no requirement to follow it. Spirituality is inherently specific to the soul of the person seeking the advice. Any spiritual journey would involve seeking to open ourselves up to take in as much wisdom as we can. The key then is how we discern wisdom from nonsense. That involves deep reflection and aligning with our personal sense of self and purpose. So, would I ask AI for spiritual advice? Absolutely! But, like any advice, I would have a lot of soul searching before I decided to follow it.



Dwight Lee Wolter

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