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AI AND/AS RACIALISED POLITICAL THEOLOGY

ABSTRACT
Building on earlier work engaging with the entanglement of artificial intelligence (AI) and apocalypticism and both with whiteness (Ali 2019), in the present essay I explore AI through the lens of a political theology informed by critical race theory and decolonial thought. The essay begins by setting out the meaning of a few key concepts, viz. AI, political theology, 'The World', and the apocalyptic, before going on to consider their relationship, and concludes by briefly sketching an oppositional stance that I suggest is appropriate to adopt in relation to AI where the latter is understood as a manifestation of racialised political theology.

Introduction

In April 2022, Michael Paulus, Dean of Library, Assistant Provost for Educational Technology, and Director and Associate Professor of Information Studies, at Seattle Pacific University delivered a Winifred W. Weter lecture entitled "Artificial Intelligence and the Apocalyptic Imagination: The Ends of Artificial Agency". The abstract for this lecture reads as follows:

> The increasing role and power of artificial intelligence in our lives and world requires us to imagine and shape a desirable future with this technology. Since visions of AI often draw from Christian apocalyptic narratives, current discussions about technological hopes and fears present an opportunity for a deeper engagement with Christian eschatological resources. Dr. Paulus argues that the Christian apocalyptic imagination can transform how we think about and use AI, helping us discover ways artificial agency may participate in new creation. (Paulus 2022)

While broadly concurring with the view that Christian apocalypticism and eschatology inform the historical backdrop to developments within AI and cognate phenomena, building on yet extending earlier work engaging in critical race theoretical and decolonial interrogation of the rhetoric and reality of

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a purported 'existential risk' posed by AI[1], I suggest the need to shift the lens from theology to political theology – more specifically, and crucially, to *racialised* political theology given that religion and race should be seen as entangled and historically co-emergent[2]. Embracing such a shift invites us to think about AI in relation to transformations about what some commentators refer to as "the line of the human"[3]. In this connection, I suggest that contemporary Transhumanist and technological Posthumanist phenomena such as AI, irrespective of whether these are understood in purely discursive and/or material terms, indicate that such transformations are underway.

I further maintain that the shift in lens to racialised *political* theology also requires us to consider transformations about the line of the human in relation to the matter of sovereignty as conceptualised by German jurist and legal theorist Carl Schmitt[4] and what existential phenomenologist Martin Heidegger refers to as 'onto-theology' – that is, metaphysics as a historically-disclosed common way-of-being and hierarchy of beings whose apex is occupied by a being of divine standing (that is, a god)[5]. Drawing on the work of various decolonial and other theorists, I suggest the need to think about AI as occupying such a 'God-spot' in late technocentric colonial modernity, this position being located immanently in the world and manifesting as an apocalyptic response to the recurrent phenomenon of 'White Crisis'[6] prompted at least in part by non-white contestation of the hegemony of whiteness[7]. I maintain that political theology is better positioned than theology to think through the implications of the emergence of this AI 'god' insofar as the latter is, at least on some readings, being positioned to take on the surveillance and control of human

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1 On this point, see: Ali (2019) and Ali (2021).
2 On this point, see: Loyd (2013).
3 Commentators include decolonial theorists such as Sylvia Wynter, Lewis Gordon, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Ramon Grosfoguel, all of whom draw and build upon the work of Martinican psychiatrist and anti-colonial activist Frantz Fanon. Briefly, according to Fanon (1986), a "line of the human", erected by white colonisers, demarcates a "zone of being" occupied by those racialised as white – and thereby considered human – from a "zone of non-being" occupied by those racialised as non-white – and thereby considered sub-/non-human.
4 In the first instance, Schmitt's (1922) state-centric theorisation of sovereignty as the capacity to decide upon a state of exception – that is, enact the suspension (temporary or otherwise) of a legal regime from a site above and beyond the law.
5 In this connection, see: Thomson (2000) and Thomson (2013).
6 By 'White Crisis' I refer to a situation in which a hegemonic whiteness is subjected to increasing contestation by the non-white 'other', engendering a heightened sense of anxiety and threat among those raced as white expressed through various discursive formulations, and prompting a variety of responses; in this connection, see: Bonnett (2000) and Bonnett (2005).
7 'Whiteness' should be understood here as both (1) a marker of identity existing in dynamic relational-tension to other racialized identity markers (such as blackness, Muslimness etc.) and (2) a tacit invisible background standard; on this point, see: Garner (2007), Garner (2010a), and Garner (2010b).

beings for biopolitical (that is, social differentiation) and necropolitical (that is, extermination) purposes[8].

To motivate my argument, I need to set out the meaning of a few terms, viz. AI, political theology, 'The World', and the apocalyptic with a view to exploring how AI might be understood in relation to them. I conclude by briefly sketching out a stance in relation to resisting the encroachment of the AI 'god'.

Artificial Intelligence

For my part, and irrespective of whether one is considering artificial intelligence (or AI) more generally so as to include its symbolic and robotic incarnations, or focusing on machine cum Deep Learning more specifically[9], I want to suggest that thinking about the phenomenon in technological rather than in sociotechnical terms is problematic insofar as it 'brackets' (that is, ignores or sets aside) the context within which AI emerges as a 'machinic assemblage' of material and other forces (social, economic, political, cultural etc.). Arguing along similar lines, in *Artificial Whiteness: Politics and Ideology in Artificial intelligence* (2020), Yarden Katz attempts to make the case for thinking about AI as both a political economic tool for advancing imperial/colonial interests, and an ideology that mimics the fluid/nebulous structure of race – more specifically, whiteness[10]. Somewhat relatedly, in *Resisting AI: An Anti-Fascist Approach to Artificial Intelligence* (2022), Dan McQuillan refers to AI as a "layered and interdependent arrangement of technology, institutions and ideology" (McQuillan 2022: 1), and "a form of computation that inherits concepts developed under colonialism [reproducing] them as a form of race science." (ibid: 4)

Although interpreting AI as a tool and an ideology is quite plausible given its historical development, this framing does not exhaust the range of possibilities for thinking about the relationship between AI, colonialism, and whiteness – more specifically, white supremacy[11]. Crucially, rather than follow Katz's invitation to think about "AI [as being] adapted, like whiteness, to challenges from social movements" (Katz 2020: 155), I want to suggest that AI might be

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8   For a recent example of a theological approach to AI, see: Dorobantu (2022).
9   It is useful to briefly distinguish three related phenomena: (1) AI as the attempt to build computational systems and/or tools capable of simulating – perhaps even *replicating* – intelligent behaviour, where intelligence is framed either in specifically human or in more general natural terms; (2) machine learning as the attempt to give computers the ability to learn without being explicitly programmed based on processes of statistical correlation and pattern detection; and (3) Deep Learning as a subset of machine learning systems based on neural network models involving multiple hidden layers. As to the relationship between the three phenomena, it is often stated that Deep Learning is a subset of neural networks is a subset of machine learning is a subset of AI.
10   According to Katz, "AI serves the aims of whiteness – and thus is a tool in the arsenal of a white supremacist social order – but ... it also mirrors the nebulous and shifting form of whiteness as an ideology." Katz (2020: 155)
11   Briefly, in referring to 'white supremacy', I follow Mills, who understands it as "the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today." Mills (1997: 1)

an adaptation of whiteness itself. Put simply, we should be thinking about AI *as* white supremacy. Relatedly, I want to consider the possibility that rather than AI being understood as a tool for advancing imperial/colonial interests, it might be more useful to think about AI *as* colonial in and of itself, since this raises the vexing question as to whether AI can be decolonised.[12] Furthermore, and notwithstanding McQuillan's assertions that AI is, among other things, "a paradigm for social organisation and a political project", and "a condenser for existing forms of structural and cultural violence" (McQuillan 2022: 2), I want to push back against his assertion that "rather than being an apocalyptic technology, AI is more aptly characterized as a form of supercharged bureaucracy that ramps up everyday cruelties, such as those in our systems of welfare." (ibid: 4) While not disputing the value and importance of bureaucratic readings of AI, especially given the biopolitical and necropolitical entanglement of AI technology with statist formations, I maintain that attention to 'the political' – more specifically, to the matter of sovereignty – prompts engagement with political theology, and in times of crisis the latter can assume apocalyptic form.

Political Theology

Like AI, political theology can be – and has been – understood in various ways. One useful point of departure is provided by Reichel, who invites us to think about how "the theological conceptualizes *higher* powers engendering, conditioning, and affecting our reality as a whole, while the political deals with *rivalling* claims and contestations of power *within* the creaturely realm, and devises norms, structures, and institutions to negotiate them [emphases added]." (Reichel 2021: 3) Framing the issue in this way necessitates engaging both 'vertical' and 'horizontal' concerns, thereby pointing to something akin to the idea of a 'Great Chain of Being' (Lovejoy 1964) and/or what Heidegger referred to as an onto-theology. Against this backdrop, Reichel further suggests thinking about "political theology proper on a meta-level with regard to both politicized theology and theologically funded politics", insisting that "such a meta-perspective does not make political theology neutral in any way" since it is always articulated in terms of and with reference to "specific conceptions and shapes of power." (Reichel 2021: 4) Attending to such non-neutrality, it should be noted that Reichel's framing and exploration of political theology is both Christian-centric and Eurocentric prompting the need to think and do political theology 'otherwise' along decolonial and critical race theoretical lines.

Notwithstanding such concerns, Reichel's approach is apposite insofar as it involves a shift in focus from theology to political theology in the context of exploring digital theology as a political theology of the digital[13]. Notwith-

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12   In this connection, see: Adams (2021).
13   On her view, "what is curiously absent in digital theology as it presents itself to date ... is a species of digital theology that undertakes something like a conceptual analysis and theorization of digitality through a theological lens, with specific attention to the

standing the contingency of the relationship between AI and digitalisation, in its contemporary articulation as machine cum Deep Learning, AI is enabled by cloud services that supervene upon a digital infrastructural substrate, viz. the Internet[14]. For this reason, and analogous to the need for a political theology of the digital, there is a need for a political theology of AI – or perhaps understanding AI and/as political theology, where political theology is racialised in colonial modernity.

In framing her political theology of the digital, Reichel begins with the state-centric conception of political theology theorised in terms of sovereignty set out by the German jurist, legal theorist, and Nazi party member, Carl Schmitt[15]. However, taking a lead from Foucault and others, her engagement with political theology entails a shift in focus from sovereignty – and divine omnipotence – to surveillance – and divine omniscience (as entangled with divine omnipresence)[16], whereas I insist on the need to remain focused on the issue of sovereignty, albeit framed in terms that do not presume the necessity of statism.

In setting out my approach, I similarly turn to Schmitt, drawing attention to two statements which appear in his seminal work, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (1922), viz. (1) "sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt 1922: 5), and (2) "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts." (ibid: 36) For present purposes, the importance of the first statement lies in its pointing to a power located at and exercised from a site beyond the scope and reach

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power dynamics engendered by its technological and societal transformations. In other words, a political theology of the digital." Reichel (2021: 2)

14 Riffing on Lovejoy's (1964) 'Great Chain of Being', Kirby et al. (2011) theorise such developments in terms of the development of one or more 'Great Chains of Computing.'

15 According to Reichel, "God is not the state, and the state is not God. God's sovereignty and the sovereignty of nation-states, God's providence and political governance, God's relation to creation and power dynamics within the world, are not one and the same thing. The political, then, is not the theological, and the theological is not the political. But clearly, the theological is political, and the political is theological." (Reichel 2021: 4) Going further, "sovereignty became the central notion of the modern nation-state even as it theologically had long served to define God's absolute authority and providential control over creation. It marked the political aspiration for absolute power and the site of struggle between secular and religious political theologies." (ibid: 5)

16 Reichel's concern is with exploring the "conceptual exchanges and structural homologies between notions of divine omniscience and the digital". On her view, "the sophisticated conceptualizations of divine omniscience theologians have developed over centuries can offer helpful intellectual resources for a more fine-grained analysis of how power/knowledge operates in the digital. It may even turn out that some are not only systematically, but even genealogically relevant." (Reichel 2021: 8) On this basis she identifies four kinds of digital omniscience, viz. (1) disciplinary (typified by the Foucauldian panopticon), (2) performative (typified by the exhibitionism associated with social media), (3) controlling (typified by the behavioural conditioning associated with surveillance capitalism), and (4) replicating (typified by metaphysical speculations about the computational nature of the cosmos) (ibid.: 10–15).

of the law. By way of a concrete example drawn from the field of AI, consider attempts by the UN to gain international agreement on a treaty banning the development and deployment of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), efforts that continue to be thwarted by powerful statist actors within the world system such as the US and China exercising veto powers. How best to think about the sovereignty of those who *can* position themselves as 'above-and-beyond-the-law'? Herein lies the importance of the second statement and the historical fact that, as Schmitt maintains, in Western historical experience there was a transfer "from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver." (ibid.: 36) Put simply, the lawgiver – who is also, following Schmitt's first statement, above and beyond the law – occupies what might be referred to as the 'God-spot'. While Schmitt articulates this position in the context of theorising sovereignty in statist terms, I suggest that the first statement points to a contingency between the state and sovereignty which allows for the possibility of conceptualising sovereignty in non-statist terms. Recent examples of thinking about non-statist sovereignty in the context of digitalised space more broadly include Blount's (2019) 'nomos of cyberspace', extending the later Schmitt's exploration of the history of international law as a European colonial undertaking by disarticulating its dependence on the notion of territoriality (that is, land)[17]; and in the specific context of AI, there is the notion of 'AI Empire' according to Tacheva and Ramasubramanian (2023) based on the networked conceptualisation of empire and sovereignty theorised by Hardt and Negri (2001)[18].

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17   According to Blount (2019), "Schmitt reads territory as an essential agent of law and politics. Here, Schmitt's analysis is chosen for critique due to this asserted essentialness, because it is the question of territory that sits at the heart of the debate on the nature of Cyberspace." On his view, "Cyberspace pushes up against the international as its territorial geography thins and runs out, and it is these places of abutment and intersection that exhibit the fault lines from which global space is emerging." In short, Cyberspace is neither free of the state nor fully under its control; rather, it is entangled with it.

18   According to Tacheva and Ramasubramanian, "AI is more than just the information and communication engine of Empire – it has become a totalizing ecosystem, prompting us to refer not simply to 'Empire' but rather to AI Empire." Tacheva and Ramasubramanian (2023: 2–3) Crucially, they go on to state that "in many ways, AI acts as the glue binding together the complex ecosystems of data, algorithms, and the computer." (ibid.: 3) Notwithstanding the utility of framing AI as an imperial assemblage, the assertion that AI Empire is 'self-gluing' – that is, self-organising – arguably invokes a form of fetishisation that obscures the role of differently positioned actors in the modern/colonial world system. This is ironic given their insistence that "the interlocking *roots* of AI Empire are deeply steeped in heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, white supremacy, and coloniality [emphasis added]" (ibid.: 2), "*religion* and *ethnicity*" being understood as merely among "many other important systems of oppression and axes of identity AI Empire is implicated in." (ibid.: 4) In the context of the present essay, given the entanglement of race and religion (Lloyd 2013), to what extent does their excavation of roots betray a 'bracketing' of political theology? More specifically, and informed by the interpretative schema set out in Ali (2017), to what extent does it turn about a 'secular' (in the sense of 'de-godded') modernist framing that obscures *long durée* theopolitical

Yet what political bearing might this have beyond the (onto-)theological – that is, beyond articulating the positioning of different political actors, dominant and subaltern, statist or otherwise, in a singular hierarchy of power? Here I turn again to Reichel who makes the following interesting assertion in relation to the matter of sovereignty: "since sovereignty invariably gestures toward ultimate dimensions, it not only prompted *struggle between different conceptualizations* of 'superhuman power,' but also *struggle for supremacy* between the respective ultimate authorities of the two participant fields [emphases added]." (Reichel 2021: 6) Although she frames this struggle in conceptual terms and within the context of a particular tradition, viz. Western Christianity, it is interesting to interrogate the issue of theopolitical struggle 'otherwise' – more specifically, from a decolonial and critical race theoretical perspective. Exploring that line of enquiry brings me to the work of decolonial theorist Jared Hickman, his re-reading of race and/as globalisation, and the idea of battling political theologies/cosmologies which I approach through a sustained engagement with the phenomenon of world-making.

'The World'

By 'The World' I mean the world system which emerged in the *long durée* of the 16th century following the so-called Columbian voyages of discovery to the New World commencing in 1492 CE, a global hierarchical system whose dominant core lies in 'the West' and whose subaltern periphery is constituted by 'the Rest'[19]. According to seminal world systems theorist Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), the history of the modern world-system has been in large part a history of the expansion of European states and peoples into the rest of the world and resulted in the emergence of a capitalist world-economy. However, others have argued that this framing is at best incomplete and at worst a mischaracterization insofar as it obscures what decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo (2011) refers to as the 'dark underside' of modernity, viz. the fact that it was forged through violence[20] as an imperial-colonial undertaking with 'religious' cum racial foundations, and that the structuring logics (ontological, epistemological, cultural, political, economic etc.) of this project – what is referred to as 'coloniality' – persist in the post-colonial era notwithstanding the formal end of colonialism with the national independence movements of the 1960s.

Yet while centring 1492 CE and race in relation to the formation of the modern/colonial world system – where race(s) should be understood as the outcome of a process of racialisation involving processes of (1) exclusion, (2)

phenomena such as anti-Islamism (Orientalism, Islamophobia) and its necropolitical entanglements with the War on Terror (WoT) etc.?
19   See: Hall (1992). Whether this constitutes the *first* instance of a world system is open to debate; in this connection, see: Gunder Frank and Gills (1993) among other works.
20   Crucially, Feldman and Medevoi maintain that "race was born, reproduced, and fashioned in war making, where perpetual war, not the Enlightenment's perpetual peace, comes to mark the very being of modern statehood." Feldman and Medevoi (2016: 11)

taxonomisation, (3) reproduction, and (4) naturalization of (1)-(3) – I suggest the need to make some corrections to the decolonial reading of the world's creation.

Scholars such as Nelson Maldonado-Torres, building on the work of Sylvia Wynter (2003) and others, rightly draw attention to the decisive role played by 'religion' in the lead-up to what I refer to as the 'Big Bang of Race'[21]. Yet in conceptualizing the racial world system emerging in the long durée of the 16th century in terms of a 'rupture'[22] of the "theological-racial episteme" (Maldonado-Torres 2014a: 648) inherited from the medieval era and its replacement by an anthropological/racial episteme (ibid.: 651)[23], they assume the legitimacy and facticity of the secularization thesis[24], viz. the inevitability of the transition

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21   According to Lloyd, "race and religion are thoroughly entangled, perhaps starting with a shared point of origin in modernity, or in the colonial encounter [such that] religion and race is not just another token of the type 'religion and,' not just one approach to the study of religion among many. Rather, [that] every study of religion [and/or race] would need to be a study of religion and race." (Lloyd 2013: 80) Consistent with this view, Maldonado-Torres states that "the modern concepts of religion and race were mutually constituted and together became two of the most central categories in drawing maps of subjectivity, alterity, and sub-alterity in the modern world." Maldonado-Torres (2014a: 691) For this reason, Feldman and Medevoi point to "a pressing need ... to thicken a transversal critical vocabulary adequate to our political present ... recenter[ing] religion as an organizing category for the comparative study of race and ethnicity." (Feldman and Medevoi 2016: 13)
22   For my part, I am inclined to consider the idea of a 'rupture' problematic insofar as it suggests a break with the past, whereas I want to argue for continuity through change based on the phenomenon of historical *sedimentation* of structural relations. In short, I want to argue for the taking up into and *persisting* of the old at the core of the new, which is crucial in terms of how we think about the ontological background or 'horizon' of 'The World'.
23   In this connection, Abbasi rightly points to "a major issue in Maldonado-Torres' work", viz. "the seemingly secular approach that he assumes with such binaries as the religious versus racial, and theological versus anthropological, when dealing with the racialization of the Muslims." Abbasi (2020: 10) Ironically, he goes on to state that "part of Maldonado-Torres' main argument itself is based on a *theological* difference between a supposed 'religion' and 'no religion', yet it seems to overlook that this is a theological difference, while framing it solely as anthropological." (ibid.: 18) I suggest that Abbasi's critique is supported by Hickman who maintains that "to the extent modernity can be ascribed a particular intellectual content, it is a 'theological' one: nothing less than 'the creation of the world'." (Hickman 2010: 147) Crucially, he avers that the result of such political theological world-making is "the (re)routing of the theological through the anthropological, indeed, the ethnological." (Hickman 2010: 147) For my part, such '(re)routing' might better be understood in algorithmic terms as involving the sedimented procedural re-*iterating* of political theology along racialised lines; in this connection, see: Ali (2019) and Ali (2020). Going further there is a need to think about the anthropological and ethnological in relation to the transition from pre-modern intellect to modern rationality – see: Ogunnaike (2016), the relationship between rationality and computation (including in and as AI), and how race is set in opposition to computation with respect to whiteness – see: Mahendran (2011).
24   Maldonado-Torres' embrace of the secularisation thesis is ironic given his critique of Wallerstein for failing "to examine critically enough the role of secularism in the

from religion to reason (and latterly, science), a move which has been called into question on empirical, ethical, and theoretical grounds by various scholars including the anthropologist Talal Asad. According to decolonial theorist Jared Hickman, "the secular" is a local phenomenon particular to Euro-Christian history that "reinforce[s] the Eurocentrism encoded in its very provenance" (Hickman 2017: 34) when deployed globally[25]. For this reason, and with a view to correcting the secularist tendency within decolonial theory[26] obscuring the theological nature of race as a *persistent* phenomenon rather than as a phase within the history of racialisation as suggested by Wynter and others, I suggest the need to adopt a position along the lines of Hickman's globalised post-secular conception of race as political theology.

According to Hickman, modernity needs to be understood not as a passage from a religious to a secular ordering of the world, but rather in terms of a *remapping* of the political theological in terms of a globalising shift from the transcendent (or 'vertical') cosmological order to an increasingly immanent (or 'horizontal') sphere of the planetary via racialised difference[27]. I would suggest that this reading has precedent within decolonial and critical race theoretical scholarship: consider, in this connection, Lewis Gordon's argument for thinking about race as a creation of the 'theodicean grammar' of the world, wherein (racialised) failing is associated with a deficit (or 'lack') on the part of those rendered subhuman[28]; David Theo Goldberg's conception of race as the work of 'anthropic gods'[29], and Sherman Jackson's reference to 'second creators'[30],

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geoculture of the world-system. He cannot ... see the ways in which secularism continues the logics of imperial Christendom ... The secular-religious divide has come to work in ways similar to the Christian-pagan divide. The lack of a radical critique of secularism surreptitiously serves to maintain the superiority of Western cultural epistemologies intact." (Maldonado-Torres 2008: 382–383)

25   According to Hickman, "it is a mistake to cast [the] epistemic shift, [the] slippage between the universal and the planetary [as effected by the onset of race as globalization], as an eruption of the 'secular,' unless that term is qualified beyond recognition. To consider it as other than the opening of yet another political-theological dispensation – that is, as an extension and expansion of the 'religious' in new circumstances – may be simply to fall prey to a type of presentism (namely, a triumphalist modernism) that is blind to the ongoing mystification of the contemporary moment, as though the world we live in now is more real and immediate, less laden with symbolic meanings, than before." (Hickman 2010: 152)

26   In this connection, see: Pasha (2017) among other works.

27   Consistent with the view of decolonial scholars, Hickman locates this shift in the Columbian voyages initiated in 1492 CE which he understands as inaugurating a transformation of the political theological order. Crucially, this reading ensures that the Weberian thesis of disenchantment associated with secularisation is replaced with a framing in terms of re-enchantment as relocation of enchantment. Put simply, it is not about *de*-theologization, as suggested by Nancy (2007) or *de*-godding, to use Wynter's (2003) phrasing, but rather *re*-theologization or *re*-godding.

28   See: Gordon (2013).

29   See: Goldberg (1993: 83) and Goldberg (2009: 522).

30   See: Jackson (2005: 182).

all of which point to whiteness as attempting to occupy what was earlier re-ferred to as 'the God-spot' in the Great Chain of Being. In short, "we might best think of race as a 'God-term'" and that "'race' originates – and persists – as a theological construct." (Hickman 2010: 158–159)

Following Hickman (and others), I maintain that what is perhaps most im-portant, at least at the outset, in shifting from a secular to a postsecular frame is that it enables us to recalibrate and refocus our decolonial lens and the at-tendant set of categories[31] we use to interrogate the modern/colonial world, thereby allowing us to better appreciate continuity through change[32] and the hauntological presence of the past. However, before going on to explore the latter, there is a need to problematise certain aspects of Hickman's racialised political theological schema.

According to Hickman, "the Muslim world occupies a special place in the Euro-Christian eschatological fantasy unleashed by the revelation of plane-tary immanence – it is not merely an object of that fantasy but also felt to be a competing subject with its own comparable fantasy." (Hickman 2017: 267) While it is beyond the scope of this essay to engage at length with Hickman's discourse on political theology as immanentization along critical lines, it is important to appreciate the implications of the *meta*-theological – Hickman (2017) refers to it as 'metacosmic' – location from which Hickman's assessment of competing theological fantasies are framed *as* fantasies.

While he indeed endorses a postsecular framework, I suggest that this is one that is 'ontologically-flattening' insofar as all eschatological schemes are deemed equally 'fantastic'. In addition, and like Nancy (2007), whom he sub-jects to critique for the latter's embrace of secularisation/de-theologization, Hickman's metacosmic framework is totalising and universalist insofar as it involves a generalised claim-making regarding the world and/or the global. For example, Hickman sees rival, battling God(s) as folded into the planetary, yet all Gods are required to 'horizontally' fold into the planetary in the same way, albeit differently positioned, which points to a disciplining meta-discourse on the political theological and onto-theological similar to Richel's (2021) me-ta-level framework.[33]

As to immanentization, Coviello and Hickman maintain that "the 'imma-nent frame' … that supposedly surrounds all of us might be better ascribed to globality than secularity, since it is precisely that encounter with radical, unforeseen difference within the emergent singularity of the globe that fra-gilized belief in an unprecedented way. Replacing secularity with globality as

31   In this connection, see: Hickman (2010: 146) and Coviello and Hickman (2014: 647-648).

32   See: Hickman (2010: 164).

33   As Hickman states, "as diverse peoples were yoked together in a coherent mundus, it became more urgent to specify each group's role or place in a cosmic scheme that in-creasingly seemed to encompass them all … I suggest that global cultural encounter oc-casioned critical metareflection on tradition itself and the anxious speculation of self-con-sciously 'new' or the polemicized 'invention' of 'old' cosmologies." (Hickman 2010: 170)

the background condition of modern life has the signal virtue of introducing a master category that by definition theoretically makes all planetary inhabitants full subjects of history and also is considerably more neutral in relation to religion." (Coviello and Hickman 2014: 649) One problem with this line of argument is that it tends to assume that the 'fragilization of belief' associated with the loss of transcendence – Nietzsche's death of God – that is arguably specific to Euro-Christian historical experience generalises to other political theological formations, a position that has been subjected to contestation by Pasha (2013). For my part, I am inclined to think that the source of this problem is traceable to possible latent Eurocentrism – or rather Euro-*Christian*-centrism – on their part as well as a lack of awareness of the 'paratheological' possibilities afforded by metaphysical schemes rooted in *tassawwuf* (that is, the Sufi tradition within Islam), *a fortiori* the latter in its Akbarian[34] articulation with its commitment to *both* theological immanence *and* transcendence.[35]

Yet notwithstanding the problems with Hickman's totalising reductionism, as stated previously, his framework is important insofar as it invites us to engage with how the past is reiterated in the present. In terms of the contribution of antecedent historical phenomena that informed the colonial enterprise, and whose structuring logics were embedded in the constitution of the modern/colonial world system – building on the work of Slovenian historian Tomaž Mastnak and others, I maintain that the anti-Islamic(ate) foundation of the Crusades commencing in 1095 CE stands out as of perhaps decisive significance vis-à-vis its role in Christian polity formation[36] – that is, the emergence

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34　By 'Akbarian', I refer to that metaphysical tradition of *tassawwuf* initiated by the Shaykh Al-Akbar (Great Teacher), Muhiyyudin ibn 'Arabi.

35　According to Hickman, it is immanentist polytheistic political theology that "takes for granted a certain reciprocity between the divine and the human that is largely lost on those schooled in the traditions of transcendental monotheism." (Hickman 2010: 174) To what extent does this invocation of "traditions of transcendental monotheism" constitute a veiled reference to Islam as tacitly domesticated both to monotheism and transcendence on the pattern of an alleged affinity to, and 'fantastic' symmetry with, Christianity? And assuming "a certain reciprocity" between the Divine and the human is warranted, how should this reciprocity be understood? Is a commitment to polytheism and immanentism necessary? I would suggest otherwise. For example, on the anthropo-cosmological scheme of the Andalusian Sufi ibn 'Arabi, the Divine is both transcendent and immanent in relation to the world, and the human being is a finite theomorphic 'mirror' reflecting this transcendent and immanent nature. While this entails the existence of a plurality of theomorphic human beings, it does not entail the need to embrace the kind of universalizing and 'metacosmically'-flattening political theology advanced by Hickman – and I maintain this with due regard to differential asymmetries of position among these ontologically flattened 'gods'.

36　My focus on the Islamicate 'other' in relation to the matter of Christian (cum European cum 'Western') polity formation should not be taken as justification for not taking into consideration the relationship of other 'others' including those that are 'internal' – for example, the Jews – and those that are 'external' – for example, the indigenous of the Americas and Africans – to the Christian (cum European cum 'Western') polity. That said, I maintain that the Islamicate other as a polity formation was *distinct* from

of Christendom cum Europe cum 'the West', and it is to the phenomenon of anti-Islamic(ate) crusading that I should now like to turn with a view to understanding its contribution to the phenomenon of race-making and how this is taken up into the political theology of AI.[37]

Crusading, Race-making, and the Islamicate

While decolonial scholars rightly point to the 'colonial moment' of the *long durée* of the 16th century inaugurated by the Fall of Granada in 1492 CE, and the commencement of the Eurocentrically-framed 'voyages of discovery' (actually, conquest) as initiating indigenous genocide, systematizing anti-black racism, and bringing the modern/colonial world into being along structurally-hierarchical lines, the phenomenon of structural/systemic anti-Islamism dates back much earlier – arguably to the launch of the Crusades. As Hamdani states, "the year 1492 is an important milestone ... Yet its birth in a medieval crusading milieu is most often underrated, if not totally forgotten." (Hamdani 1979: 39) I suggest that while decolonial scholars such as Maldonado-Torres have not *forgotten* the crusading milieu, they have *underrated* its importance vis-à-vis thinking about modernity/coloniality, and that this underestimating is due to a mistaken conception of the *paradigmatic* relationship between Christendom and 'Islamdom', that is, the spatial-political abode of the Islamicate.[38]

Here I draw attention to the need to think about the significance of the Crusades vis-à-vis the Muslim threat, whether real or imagined, and their entanglement with events involved in shaping the contours of the religio-racial logic emerging within the context of the so-called New World voyages. In this connection, consider how anti-Islamism functions in and *as* a background discursive 'horizon' informing the very terms of debates that were arguably of decisive significance in the emergent construction of 'race' such as those which took place at Valladolid during 1550–1551 CE between Bartholome De Las Casas and Juan Gines de Sepúlveda. According to Mastnak, for both Sepúlveda and Las Casas, "'the Turk' functioned as an organizing principle in the internal economy of [their natural philosophical and theological] reasoning" structuring their responses to the 'problem' of the humanity of the New World Indians" (Mastnak 1994a: 140), European identity having been forged in antagonistic opposition

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other formations in being perceived as posing a military threat, real and/or imagined, to the Christian (cum European cum 'Western') polity, and that this is a difference that makes all the difference when thinking about what I refer to as the longer durée logics informing the long durée project of colonialism.

37   It should be noted that, rather bizarrely, Hickman is strangely silent about the Crusades.

38   In this connection, see: Ali (2017). A similar argument has been made more recently by Abbasi who takes Maldonado-Torres to task for exemplifying "a wider tendency of Latin American and Caribbean decolonial thinkers to unintentionally center their own geopolitical commitments, at times, at the expense of others, such as the Muslims and Muslim Question." (Abbasi 2020: 2)

to what was known as the '*imago Turci*'.[39] Crucially, I suggest this has genealogical significance for what I have elsewhere referred to as 'the decolonial question concerning artificial intelligence': briefly, and developing the argument of Dilan Mahendran (2011), AI and developments such as machine *cum* Deep Learning are grounded in computation[40], the latter is grounded in rationality, and both can be situated in opposition to race along the line of the human. Yet what mediates the shift from that which is the bearer of a rational soul created in the *imago Dei* (image of God) to the rationally-embodied *imago Hominis* (or 'Man') is the *imago Turci*, a largely occluded figure within decolonial accounts.

Returning to the Crusades, Mastnak maintains that their significance cannot be overemphasised. On his view, which is worth quoting at length:

> As an ideal and as a movement, the Crusades had a deep, crucial influence on the formation of Western civilization, shaping culture, ideas, and institutions. The Crusades set a model for 'expansionist campaigns against non-Europeans and non-Christians in all parts of the world.' The ideas, iconography, and discourse associated with the Crusades made a profound imprint on 'all Christian thinking about sacred violence' and exercised influence long after the end of actual crusading. They continued to play a prominent role in European politics and political imagination. In fact, the crusading spirit has survived through Modernity well into our own postmodern age. (Mastnak 2002: 346)

In short, the Crusades provided a 'template' for later imperial-colonial ventures[41] including, I argue, those taking place within the contemporary techno-centric modern/colonial world order witnessing expansionist datafication

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39   In this connection, mention should be made of Sepúlveda's *Exhortation on The War against The Turks* which was published in 1529 CE, thirty years prior to the Valladolid debate, and the fact that Turks were viewed as irrational and sub-human; on the latter point, see: Nájera (2010) and Abbasi, the latter of whom maintains that "a rereading of a number of the key events and figures that define the decolonial discourse on race and religion, such as the Valladolid debates and the figure of Christopher Columbus, help to better conceptualize how active the figure of the Muslims was in the imagination and real lives of Europeans who created the coloniality of being." (Abbasi 2020: 3) On this basis, one might argue that there is an intimate link in European imagination between two 'outer' worlds, viz. the so-called 'New World' and 'Islamdom'.

40   While it might be argued that machine cum Deep Learning systems are better construed in terms of *pattern recognition* (rather than rationality) once the latter is operationally-recast along instrumentalist lines – that is, in terms of pattern detection and classification through statistical correlation – this line of argument fails to engage with the fact that such pattern recognition is rule-based, the choice of which rules to encode being tied to human purposes; on this point, see: Gluck-Thaler (2023). Beyond this, there is the fact that a developmental goal of AI systems – including those implemented through machine cum Deep Learning – is attainment of at least human-level intelligence which certainly includes the capacity for reasoning (that is, rationality).

41   On this point, see: Mastnak (1994a), Mastnak (1994b), Mastnak (2002), Mastnak (2003), Mastnak (2004), Mastnak (2010). According to Mastnak, "Europe as a unity that [emerged from Christendom and] developed a 'collective identity' and the ability to orchestrate action ... was, as a rule, articulated in relation to Muslims as the enemy ... [Crucially,]

and algorithmization, carceral surveillance, and securitisation, all of which are entangled with and empowered by the development and deployment of AI and cognate technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT).

Yet, what has the Crusades to do with my earlier reference to Hickman's suggestion that political theology should be understood in relation to the immanent sphere of the planetary? Consistent with the position of Mastnak and others, Hickman maintains that:

> Due to [an] intense, intertwined history ... Euro-Christian anti/imperialism is bound to see itself – and so must strain all the more not to see itself – in its Islamic counterpart. Call it the brother/other effect – discomfiture by the resemblance of the brother induces his projection as other only for that otherness then disconcertingly to retroject the self to the self." (Hickman 2017: 267)

In short, the planetary terrain as dominated by Christendom cum Europe cum 'the West' remains entangled with anti-Islamism. Going further, drawing on Hickman's framing of this statement against the backdrop of his assertion that "the Muslim world occupies a special place in the Euro-Christian *eschatological* fantasy unleashed by the revelation of planetary immanence [emphasis added]" (ibid.: 267), it is crucial to appreciate that Euro-Christian eschatology – that is, expectations about the end of the present age, the world, or history itself – tends to be framed in apocalyptic terms.

The Apocalyptic

According to John M. Court, author of *Approaching the Apocalypse: A Short History of Christian Millenarianism* (2008), the term *apocalyptic* "comes from a Greek word meaning to uncover or reveal and refers to revelations or prophecies relating to the destruction of the world at the end of time." (Court 2008: 215) Although eschatological and apocalyptic ideas are traceable to other traditions, including the Islamic, given what historian David F. Noble (1997) refers to as the West's "religion of technology", I suggest the need to centre Jewish and Christian apocalypticism in any exploration of AI and the apocalyptic[42].

European identity was formed not *by Islam* but, predominantly, *in the relationship ... to Islam*." (Mastnak 1994b: 3) This view is supported by Cardinal and Mégret who maintain that "Islam was created as the archetypal 'Other' against which Christendom could narratively project what it was not, and in the same swift move, what it was ... Involuntarily, Islam forged medieval Christendom, which in turn forged a particular image of Islam, without which ... there would be no Europe." (Cardinal and Mégret 2017: 5–6)

42   According to Noble (1997), since its 12th century CE rise in medieval monasteries, technology has been entangled with Christianity in at least two ways: (1) as implicated in the Christian desire to restore humanity to the perfection of Adam prior to his fall – that is, the 'pre-lapserian' state of being (and knowing) – if not to the pursuit of divinity itself (a 'turn' which took place in the 17th century CE), and (2) from the 13th century onwards, technology has been presumed necessary in a millenarian struggle – rather, war – between Jesus and the forces of evil (or 'the Antichrist'), the outcome of which will inaugurate the eternal heavenly kingdom. Regarding (2), it is crucial to note that at

This is crucial since according to Court, "Jewish and Christian apocalypses use *a schematic view of history* to calculate the calendar and focus attention on the imminent events of this world's end [emphasis added]" (Court 2008: 4–5) – that is, a unilinear and teleological sense of history marked by an immanent unfolding of events. In this connection, perhaps one of the most important and abiding such historical schemas is that due to the Catholic abbot, Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202 CE), whose Crusader worldview and apocalyptic thinking was endorsed by Columbus, principal architect of the so-called New World voyages of discovery that ushered in the modern/colonial racial world system. According to Fiore, history is divided into three ages – that of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – and it has been argued that this scheme came to be the most influential one known to Europe until the appearance of Hegelianism, Comtean positivism, and Marxism[43].

In terms of how the Western Christian apocalyptic might manifest in the realm of AI, I suggest the need to return to the ancient Greek sense of the apocalyptic pointing to 'that which is revelatory of some truth'. On this basis, it might be argued that AI, *a fortiori* in its machine *cum* Deep Learning incarnation, might be viewed as apocalyptic insofar as it functions as a reinforcing (if not amplifying) 'social mirror', its training data, mode of validation, and range of deployment reflecting – and thereby *revealing* (at least to critical consciousness) – the structural violence of the social fabric along multiple entangled and interlocking lines (racial, gendered, classed etc.) which, building on what was stated earlier, is usefully understood in terms of a racialised political theology.

Yet engagement with the apocalyptic also warrants thinking about the revelation of truth in terms of 'the fulfilment of prophecies' which in a technological register and in the specific context of AI invites thinking about the validation of machine cum Deep Learning 'predictions' (actually, statistical correlations), who gets to make and validate them (and according to what rule-based criteria), as well as surfacing and interrogating claims about the alleged inevitability of AI systems to become a pervasive GPT (that is, General Purpose Technology) and critical infrastructure.

Going further, and attending to the later and specifically Western Christian sense of the apocalyptic, the fulfilment of such prophecies tends to be framed

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different periods in Western history, along with the Catholic papacy, various figures within Islamic and Islamicate history – including the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims in general, and Salahuddin Ayyubi (Saladin) – have been identified as the Antichrist.

43   On this point, see: Cohn (1957), Noble (1997) and Gray (2007). According to cultural critic Erik Davis, "the speculative waves from Joachim's work surged beyond theology. By casting history as a self-transcending process, Joachim prepared the way for thoroughly modern ideas about progress, revolution, and social development" (Davis 1998: 305). Crucially, on his view, "Joachim's age of the Spirit pops up in the heart of postwar visions of the information age" (ibid.: 305), and at least one commentator has suggested that "in the title of one of [Ray] Kurzweil's earlier books, 'The age of spiritual machines', one can hear the echoes of Joachimite prophecies down the centuries" (Jones 2016: 12).

in terms of 'the destruction of the world at the end of time', thereby inviting a return to the discussion of the phenomenon of 'the world' and its relation to the planetary, as well as to how to think about time and its ending; regarding the latter, should this be understood as pointing to the death of 'The Future' (not to mention its ongoing erasure of 'Other'-ed futures), or its transformation into a new temporality that preserves the contours of the old through change?

While the above constitutes one way of thinking about AI and the apocalyptic, in earlier work I have argued for thinking *otherwise* about the entangled apocalypticism of AI[44]. Building on that work yet extending it vis-à-vis what has been suggested above regarding a planetary racialised political theology framed in terms of rival, battling cosmologies, I turn now to offer some brief reflections on AI in relation to whiteness attempting to occupy 'the God-spot'.

AI and 'the God-spot'

While there are an increasing number of works exploring the religious and theological implications of AI, few if any have approached developments within this area through the lens of political theology. For example, in his brief think piece for *Medium* entitled "The Great White Robot God" (2019), cultural theorist David Golumbia explores connections between white supremacy and the nebulous phenomenon of artificial general intelligence (or AGI) through the bridging phenomenon of discourse about IQ[45], notably pointing to "the messianic/Christological structure of AGI belief, especially when promoted by members of the Radical Atheist community, which itself has significant overlap with the alt-right." Notwithstanding such resonances between AI, crude or overt white supremacy, and strands of apocalyptic Christian messianism, I suggest the need to consider the entanglement of AI and white supremacy within the more mainstream political landscape of liberalism which critical race philosophers such as Charles W. Mills maintain is racialised, at least in its contemporary, manifestation within Western polities. For my part, this necessitates returning to the relationship of whiteness to the line of the human, and both in relation to technology – more specifically, AI.

For some commentators, whiteness continues to occupy the position of the human, technological beings coming to displace non-white others in the realm of the sub-human[46]. However, in earlier work I have suggested a different possibility, viz. the migration of whiteness into the realm of the Transhuman and technological Posthuman under mounting contestation of the human by others previously positioned as sub-human – which I elsewhere suggest is usefully understood in terms of the historically-recurrent phenomenon of 'White Crisis', with the latter understood as apocalyptic – that is, revelatory, inevitable,

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44   In this connection, see: Ali (2019).
45   For a useful exploration of the links between scientific racism, IQ, and AI in its statistical incarnation as machine cum Deep Learning, see: McQuillan (2022).
46   In this connection, see, for example: Atanososki and Vora (2019).

and bringing about the end of the world[47]. Crucially, this migratory shift is intended to maintain the relational and hierarchical binary between the European (Western, white) and non-European (non-Western, non-White). Insofar as this hierarchy can usefully be thought about in the onto-theological terms of a 'Great Chain of Being', and if it is indeed the case that whiteness is attempting to morph into the technological Posthuman – which for present purposes means into AI[48] – then insofar as the apex of this chain is occupied by God, whiteness as AI is attempting to occupy 'the God-spot'.

Conclusion

Taking seriously Hickman's suggestion to think about 'the world' as a *theo-geo-political economy* – that is, a "divine economy not in its traditional theological sense but in a modern critical sense, denoting something like a historical sociology of humanizing divinities and divinizing humans in the eschatologically charged immanence of the globe" (Hickman 2017: 51) – while contesting the ontological flattening at work in this schema, I want to conclude by gesturing toward what I consider to be perhaps the most appropriate response to the onset of AI and/as racialised political theology.

In doing this, I switch register from decolonial and critical race theory to the genre of speculative science-fiction apocalypse, engaging the backstory to Frank Herbert's *Dune* saga, viz. the Butlerian Jihad, which, I suggest, provides an interesting exploration of a possible future confrontation with AI[49].

Why Herbert's epic rather than something else? Perhaps because he appears to have taken political theology seriously, and because if the *long durée* of history has anything to teach us, it is that when 'the machine' launches its crusades, the wretched of the earth respond with *jihād*.

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47   For a detailed presentation of this argument, see: Ali (2019) and Ali (2021).
48   In this connection, it is crucial to appreciate that technological posthumanism refers to an orientation that turns about a convergence – or perhaps confluence – of technologies referred to by the acronym GRIN, viz. genetics, robotics, information technology and nanotechnology. A related acronym is NBICS which refers to the combined resources of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, cognitive science, and synthetic biology.
49   This topic is explored in greater detail in Ali (Forthcoming) which is based on a presentation delivered at "ReOrienting the Muslim Question: 2nd International Conference on Critical Muslim Studies" which took place at Leeds University from 16–18 June 2023.

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Sajid Mustafa Ali

VI i/kao rasna politička teologija

Apstrakt:

Nadovezujući se na raniji rad koji se bavi preplitanjem veštačke inteligencije (VI) i apokalipticizma i oboje sa belinom (Ali 2019), u ovom radu istražujem veštačku inteligenciju kroz okvir političke teologije zasnovane na kritičkoj teoriji rasa i dekolonijalnoj misli. Ovaj rad počinje izlaganjem značenja nekoliko ključnih pojmova, tj. VI, politička teologija, 'Svet' i apokaliptika, pre nego što pređe na razmatranje njihovog odnosa. Rad zaključuje kratkim ocrtavanjem opozicionog stava za koji predlažem da je prikladno da se usvoji u odnosu na veštačku inteligenciju gde se ona shvata kao manifestacija rasne političke teologije.

Ključne reči: veštačka inteligencija, politička teologija, rasizam, kritička teorija rase, dekolonijalna misao.