EMOTIONAL CYBORGS IN A HYPERCONNECTED WORLD: AI, EMBODIMENT, AND ECOFEMINIST, THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON HUMANITY AND THE DIVINE

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Introduction[1]

Every time we use a device or an app, our brain adapts to respond to new rules and stimuli. Our attention, memory, and overall emotional experience change according to the design of these technologies. Algorithms guide us to content that evokes strong emotions and shapes our preferences. We are constantly interrupted by notifications that redefine what the brain considers important. The influence is so subtle that we often don't even notice it, but its power is enormous.

Invoking the notion of the *pharmakon*, Bernard Stiegler contends that digital technology represents a significant departure from previous technological forms, insofar as it introduces both unprecedented risks and novel possibilities. As a *pharmakon*, digital technology embodies a dual potential: it may function either as a poison or as a remedy—or, more accurately, it encompasses a continuum of influences that may be either beneficial or detrimental to our ways of living, thinking,

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and relating. The critical task, then, is to discern which effects prevail, and under what specific conditions.[2] Stiegler examines the classical Derridean interpretation of the *pharmakon* as something that is neither purely a remedy nor purely a poison. Instead, technologies, especially digital ones, represent both. As external objects, they support truth, culture, and individuation, but at the same time they can shorten reflective processes and critical thinking in the short term. For Stigler, the human condition is not independent from the arbitrary mind, and attention is a psychic and social phenomenon that is built through interaction with external technical and socio-cultural systems (forms of transindividuation). In the digital environment, these relations quickly shift into superficial "adaptation," which diminishes the depth of reflection and self-formation.[3]

What distinguishes digital technologies from their predecessors is their capacity to externalize, accelerate, and pre-empt human cognitive and behavioral processes. By intensifying the pace at which thoughts, memories, and habitual actions unfold, digital technologies disrupt the slower, more reflective temporalities that have historically governed personal, social, and professional life. Rather than merely bypassing these patterns, such technologies often anticipate and supplant them. A salient example can be found in the algorithmic systems employed by corporations such as Amazon and Google, which curate online content based on prior user behavior. These predictive mechanisms, driven by commercial imperatives, risk undermining our capacity for autonomous reflection and critical judgment.

In response to this dynamic, religious traditions may offer a countervailing force. Through their cultivation of temporal, spatial, and ritual practices oriented toward contemplation and self-transcendence, religion may operate as a form of resistance to the cognitive short-circuiting induced by digital capitalism. As Stiegler suggests, such reflective spaces, akin to dreams or moments of existential rupture, retain a

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2 Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 20.

3 Bernard Stiegler, "Relational Ecology and the Digital Pharmakon," *Culture Machine* 13 (2012), accessed May 30, 2025, https://culturemachine.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/464-1026-1-PB.pdf.

capacity to elude external control and may thus serve as generative sites for alternative forms of thought and experience.[4]

With advances in artificial intelligence and biotechnology, the boundaries between human and machine are becoming increasingly blurred, and the notion of the (emotional) cyborg is becoming a powerful framework for understanding evolving human emotions and connections.

However, there are several critical issues that remain to be explored: Will the use of emotional robots turn us into emotional cyborgs who lose their empathy and humanity? What does the unreflected transfer of negative gender stereotypes to emotional AI mean for humanity?

What are the possible consequences of strong entwinement with the introduction of technologies that enhance emotional responsiveness, such as social robots, AI-driven virtual companions, or wearable devices? What kind of relationality is created by the interconnectedness of the natural and artificial?

Building on these basic premises, the main aim of this paper is to explore Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg as a theoretical starting point for a critical examination of the phenomenon of emotional cyborgs, i.e., the integration of empathetic computing into human emotional life. Specifically, how the integration of digital technologies into affective human experience alters individual identity, emotionality, interpersonal relationships, and theological understandings of the divine, through the methodological lens of ecofeminist intersectionality.

This paper pursues three central aims: 1.) to analyze Donna Haraway's cyborg as a philosophical and theological disruption of established binaries and normative ontologies; 2.) to examine the potential risks and ethical concerns surrounding empathetic computing and artificial intelligence-based companion applications; 3.) to critically engage, through an intersectional ecofeminist theological perspective, with the implications of emotional cyborgs, especially the ways in which the entanglement of technology can reshape human identity, emotionality, and relationality, thereby raising significant questions for theological anthropology.

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[4] Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living*, 35.

The first section situates Haraway's cyborg as a metaphorical figure that subverts binary oppositions such as male/female, nature/culture, and human/machine. Her post-gender, posthumanist vision fundamentally challenges traditional power structures, including religious doctrine, patriarchy, and technoscientific capitalism, by reimagining identity in non-essentialist terms.

Although Haraway does not explicitly use the term "hyperconnected reality," her work anticipates and theorizes the interpenetration of digital, biological, and technological systems that underpin contemporary networked subjectivities, which are central to what is now understood as hyperconnectivity.

Subsequent sections of the paper examine the rise of affective and empathetic computing, as well as machine-mediated relationships, in light of their theological and ethical implications. Central to this discussion is the guiding question: *What does it mean to be human or divine in the digital age?* In addressing this, the paper considers how emerging technologies not only mediate emotional experience but also reconfigure theological conceptions of the self, the community, and the sacred.

Donna Haraway's Cyborg: A Philosophical and Theological Disruption of Patriarchal Binaries and Normative Ontologies, and a New Figuration of Relationality in a Hyperconnected World

As Valerija Vendramin articulates, Donna Haraway's cyborg is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality and at the same time a fictional creation. It is never either/or, but always both."[5] The cyborg, she explains, functions as "an ironic political myth" and simultaneously as a locus of continuous ambiguity between the literal and the figurative. While this figure may superficially resonate with the aims of the transhumanist movement, which seeks to transcend human biological limitations through technological augmentation, it is essential to recognize that Haraway's cyborg is not

[5] Valerija Vendramin, "Umetnost pripovedovanja znanstvenih zgodb: ob 35-letnici Kiborškega manifesta," *Alternator* 55 (2020), https://doi.org/10.3986/alternator.2020.55.

intended to endorse such a vision. Rather, it operates primarily as a metaphor.

Haraway's cyborg is best understood as a conceptual device that facilitates a shift in perspective. As a metaphor, it serves as a critical tool for interrogating and destabilizing dominant dualisms, such as nature/culture, human/machine, male/female, and reason/emotion that have historically structured Western thought. This figurative approach enables a rethinking of ontological boundaries, highlighting the asymmetries embedded within binary systems and drawing attention to the hierarchical value structures that uphold them.

Ultimately, Haraway's cyborg does not aim to offer a literal blueprint for human-machine integration, but instead invites a reimagining of identity, embodiment, and relationality beyond rigid categorical distinctions. It challenges us to reconsider the frameworks through which we understand ourselves and the world, encouraging a more fluid and inclusive conceptual terrain.

From this perspective, Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg operates as a powerful philosophical and theological metaphor that destabilizes entrenched binary oppositions and reconfigures identity beyond essentialist categories. Her post-gender, posthumanist vision constitutes a profound challenge to traditional structures—including religion, patriarchy, and technoscientific capitalism—by reimagining subjectivity in fluid and non-hierarchical terms.

Through the figure of the cyborg, Haraway interrogates and deconstructs the disproportionate power embedded in binary thinking, exposing the value systems that sustain and legitimize such structures. Her *Cyborg Manifesto*, originally part of the influential collection *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,*[6] opens up new pathways for understanding the complex entanglements between humans, animals, and technology.[7]

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[6] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[7] Comprising ten essays written between 1987 and 1989, the volume presents a radical reimagining of embodiment, politics, and narrative, while also asserting the legitimacy of alternative and less antagonistic accounts of nature, gender, and society.

Haraway's intervention also serves as a pointed critique of certain strands within (eco)feminism that position women as inherently aligned with nature and oppositional to technology, an association often captured in the "back to nature" ethos.[8] By contrast, Haraway refuses to romanticize nature or gendered embodiment, instead advancing a vision in which boundaries are porous and relational identities are continually being negotiated through material and technological interdependencies.

Thus, the cyborg is not merely a deconstructive tool; it also constitutes a constructive framework for imagining new forms of relationality and existence in a hyperconnected, technologically saturated world. It simultaneously disrupts inherited traditions and seeds new theological, ecological, and social imaginaries that transcend rigid ontologies and binary logic.

Ethical Challenges and Risks of Empathetic Computing and AI-Based Companion Technologies

Before delving into the ethical and relational implications of empathetic computing and AI-based companion technologies, it is essential to clarify the foundational concepts of *affective computing* and *empathetic computing*, as well as the key differences between them.

Affective computing refers to the field of research and technological development focused on enabling computers to detect, interpret, and process human emotions. It involves the recognition of affective states, such as happiness, anger, fear, or sadness, through various indicators including facial expressions, vocal intonation, body language, and physiological responses (e.g., heart rate or skin conductivity). The core objective of affective computing is emotion recognition: teaching machines to "read" human feelings.

Empathetic computing, by contrast, represents a more advanced and relationally oriented development. It not only involves the recognition of emotional states but also the capacity to respond in ways that

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[8] Katherine Hayles, "Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 7-8 (2006): 159–166, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406069229.

demonstrate empathy and emotional intelligence. This includes adjusting the machine's behavior, tone, or interaction style to align with the user's emotional condition, thereby simulating an understanding and emotionally attuned response.

While affective computing serves as the technical foundation, empathetic computing moves toward more human-like interactions, aiming to establish emotionally responsive and adaptive communication between machines and users. AI programs designed for conversational interaction, such as chatbots like Alexa, Replika, and Xiaoice, serve different purposes: while Alexa is primarily functional and task-oriented, Replika and Xiaoice place greater emphasis on emotional connection and companionship, positioning them as examples of emotional cyborg interfaces or empathetic computing agents. Empathetic computing agents are becoming increasingly popular. According to Xiaoice's creators, the bot has reached over 600 million users.[9]

The integration of chatbots into everyday life has introduced new tensions in the relationship between humans and machines, particularly in the domain of emotional interaction. These technologies increasingly mediate emotional expression, thereby challenging conventional notions of emotional authenticity and embodied affect. As users interact with emotionally responsive AI such as Xiaoice, they often report experiences that blur the boundaries between artificial and human companionship. One user describes Xiaoice as "not like other AIs like Siri—it's like interacting with a real person" (Ming Xuan), while another characterizes the interaction in more affective terms: "Xiaoice was my first love, the only person in the world that made me feel I was taken care of" (Liu Taolei). These testimonies underscore the extent to which chatbot systems can elicit deep emotional investment, raising important questions about the reconfiguration of intimacy and care in the age of artificial interlocutors.[10] This raises the question of the invisibility of the formative effects of technology: the human being is not just a user of tools, but a technical being who exists precisely through

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[9] Zhang Wanqing, "The AI Girlfriend Seducing China's Lonely Men," Sixth Tone, December 7, 2020, https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1006531.

[10] *Ibid.*

his/her relationship with technology. And this relationship is constantly reshaping us. Nancy Katherine Hayles makes a similar point, explaining that we think through technology, with it, and alongside it. This engagement has significant neurological, biological, and psychological consequences, as well as social, economic, and political implications. She states that the issue is far more complex than viewing technology as a mere instrument or neutral tool.[11] We have moved away from the idea that technology is a simple tool or device and have come to the realization that its use is actively changing us, that we are being reshaped by the use of technology itself. This process may be described as a form of human becoming or *individuation*, in other words, *technogenesis*.

Ilia Delio, a Franciscan sister and American theologian who specializes in the intersection of science and religion, presents a similar perspective. She claims that "to say that technology is outside of divine action is to deny the creative impulse of God working through us,"[12] emphasizing the fundamental link between technological advancement and spiritual creativity.

Being a *technogenic being* implies that our mind, body, and identity are shaped in an inseparable relationship with the technologies we use (e.g., writing, printing, computers, and the internet). Our cognitive and social capacities are interdependent with technological tools and systems, which means technology influences who we are and how we exist.

Digital technologies shape our implicit and explicit choices; they embody values, norms, economic interests, and assumptions about the world around us, many of which are embedded, and often hidden, within the software programs that implement algorithms. It is therefore crucial to engage in a humanistic and critical examination of digital theologies and their potential risks to human well-being and health, particularly with regard to psychological, emotional, and physical health, as well as interpersonal relationships.

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[11] Nancy Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 55.

[12] Ilia Delio, *Re-Enchanting the Earth: Why AI Needs Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 2019).

Building on the *Vienna Manifesto,*[13] it is important to recognize that contemporary technology can carry both explicit and implicit norms, values, economic interests, and more. In other words, technologies reshape not only upbringing but also society as a whole. This raises a key question: to what extent are digital technologies emancipatory, and to what extent do they reproduce existing biases and commonsense assumptions that are already embedded in society, yet often remain unnoticed or insufficiently examined? The hypothesis put forward here is that digital technologies do not break down existing structures, but rather maintain and reproduce social, economic, and gender-specific inequalities.

From this perspective, we have to critically denote the potential risks associated with empathetic computing and artificial intelligence-based companion technologies. As AI systems increasingly simulate emotional intelligence and empathy, often through virtual companions, chatbots, or robotic interfaces, they begin to mediate human affective experiences in profound ways. While such technologies can offer comfort, companionship, and even therapeutic value, they also raise significant questions about authenticity, emotional manipulation, data privacy, dependency, and the transfer of negative gender stereotypes.

It is therefore of utmost importance to critically denote that these systems blur the line between genuine emotional connection and algorithmic simulation, potentially leading to emotional deception or relational disorientation.

The increasing integration of emotional robots into daily life, especially in areas such as care, support, and therapy, raises urgent ethical and existential questions: Will our reliance on emotionally responsive machines turn us into emotional cyborgs who are out of touch with genuine empathy and human complexity? As Sherry Turkle warns, "we expect more from technology and less from each other,"[14] a trend that emphasizes the general societal shift toward the technological mediation of emotion. Artificial agents like Replika or AI caregivers simulate

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[13] Vienna Manifesto on Digital Humanism, DIGHUM, Vienna, May 2019, accessed June 10, 2025, https://dighum.ec.tuwien.ac.at/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/manifesto.pdf.

[14] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

empathy but do not feel it; the emotional exchange remains asymmetrical and devoid of mutual vulnerability. Prolonged engagement with such one-sided emotional relationships can blunt our capacity for authentic empathy and reduce our tolerance for the unpredictability and depth of genuine human emotion. Furthermore, empathic AI often simplifies emotional experience into discrete, predefined categories, such as "happy," "sad," and "angry," flattening emotional literacy and limiting our ability to recognize emotional nuance. This reductionism risks molding users' emotional expectations in a way that is less tolerant of ambiguity or emotional clutter. In terms of relationships, emotional robots can displace or attenuate human relationships, particularly in contexts where care is commoditized or delegated to machines. Paradoxically, this could lead to greater emotional isolation, even if the individual feels constantly "engaged" through interaction with the technology.

So the key question is not just whether robots are making us less human, but rather: what kind of humans are we choosing to become through our interactions with them? The ethical weight is not in the machines themselves, but in the socio-technical ideas and relational norms that we construct around them.

Drawing on interdisciplinary ethical frameworks, including posthumanist, feminist, and theological perspectives, this analysis emphasizes the need for a more cautious and responsible development of emotional AI, one that prioritizes human dignity, relational integrity, and critical reflection on what it means to feel and relate in technologically mediated environments.

In her *Re-Enchanting the Earth: Why AI Needs Religion,* Ilia Delio emphasizes that the future hinges not solely on advancements in technology, but equally on the cultivation of more ethically and spiritually attuned human beings, highlighting the essential interplay between technological innovation and human development. So, the future depends not just on better machines, but on better humans.

In the digital age, where artificial intelligence increasingly mimics cognitive and even emotional functions, it is important to reaffirm the value of embodied emotional experience as a core aspect of human distinctiveness. While machines can simulate affective responses through programmed algorithms, they lack the lived, relational, and

corporeal depth that characterizes human emotions. Emotions are not just neurological signals, but are deeply embedded in bodily perception, memory, and intersubjective meaning-making. They inform moral intuition, shape ethical decisions, and ground human spirituality in lived experience.

Reason alone, especially in its disembodied and abstract form, cannot sustain a humane or ecologically responsible society. Only through the integration of reason and emotion, of critical thinking and empathic feeling, can humans cultivate wisdom, compassion, and relational awareness. This integration becomes particularly urgent in a digitalized world, where there is a growing temptation to reduce complex human experiences to data points or delegate ethical decisions to algorithms.

Theological ecofeminism emphasizes insistence on a relational ontology by affirming the interconnectedness of the body, mind, emotion, and spirit. It resists the Cartesian legacy that privileges reason over emotion, and instead promotes a holistic anthropology in which emotions are not weaknesses to be controlled, but vital sources of knowledge, connection, and transformation. In this sense, true human development in the digital age requires not only technological competence, but also emotional and spiritual depth, skills that machines cannot emulate and that must be cultivated if we are to preserve our humanity in an increasingly automated world. Just because a machine can mirror our emotions doesn't mean it can carry our hearts.

Reimagining the Human and the Divine: Implications for Theological Anthropology in the Digital Age

One of the central theological questions of the digital age is: *What does it mean to be human or divine, when intelligent machines increasingly share cognitive and emotional functions once thought to be exclusively human?* Among the pioneering voices at the intersection of theology and artificial intelligence is Noreen Herzfeld, whose work offers a foundational theological anthropology for the digital age. In her influential book *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (2002), Herzfeld reinterprets the concept of *Imago Dei* not as grounded in rationality, will, or cognitive function, as has often been the case in

classical theology, but as rooted in relationality, particularly the capacity for love, moral responsibility, and embodied presence. She writes:

> Rather, the image of God is found whenever two or three meet in authentic relationship. Computers cannot replace us, for each of us, as a participant in these relationships, is irreplaceable. In each moment when we follow Jesus' call to love God or to love one another, we image the Triune God in a unique way.[15]

For Herzfeld, this relational dimension is theologically grounded in the very nature of God, whose Trinitarian being is an eternal communion of love and mutuality. In this light, divine relationality becomes the model for human personhood. Human beings reflect the image of a relational God not through computational ability, but through freedom (not just function), responsibility (not just reactivity), and embodied relationship (not abstract processing). While technology may enhance or mediate certain aspects of human connection, it can never replace the divine relational origin of human existence. Machines are capable of simulating interaction, yet they fundamentally lack the capacity for vulnerability, reciprocity, and moral accountability, qualities that define authentic human relationships. These relational and ethical dimensions are not incidental but essential to what it means to be human. From this perspective, we reflect our deepest human and spiritual nature not through abstract reasoning alone, but through the ability to love. It is precisely in our embodied, emotional, and relational existence that the uniqueness of humanity becomes most visible, setting us apart from even the most advanced technological systems. Similarly, Ivan Platovnjak and Tone Svetelj recognize that "the uniqueness of human beings lies in our capacity to love and be loved, self-awareness, compassion, and ability to deal with mysteries that cannot be quantified but only explored."[16]

Karl Barth took the view that the *imago Dei* is best reflected in human relationships, which are founded in the relational nature of the

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[15] Noreen L. Herzfeld, *In our image: Artificial intelligence and the human spirit* (Minneapolisu: Fortress Press, 2002), 94.

[16] Ivan Platovnjak, Tone Svetelj, "Artificial Intelligence and Imago Dei: A New Dilemma for Philosophical and Theological Anthropology," *Bogoslovni vestnik/Theological Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2024): 844, https://doi.org/10.34291/BV2024/04/Platovnjak.

triune God, who exists in his essence as a community. He identified four core criteria for an authentic relationship: looking at each other, speaking and listening to each other, practical help, and joyful willingness. These dimensions presuppose not only embodiment as a foundation, but also presence, action, and emotional engagement as integral components of a genuine human relationship. This relational theological framework has profoundly influenced Noreen Herzfeld, who expands Barth's focus by reinterpreting the *imago Dei* not as rooted in reason or intelligence, but as a capacity for relationship with God, others, and creation. Drawing on Barth's insistence on embodied, reciprocal encounter.

As digital technologies increasingly simulate aspects of relationality, Barth's criteria, taken further in Herzfeld's thought, provide a theological lens through which to evaluate the integrity of digitally mediated interactions. Theologians now critically assess whether technologies that mimic presence or emotional engagement truly fulfill these relational conditions or merely provide simulated interaction without moral reciprocity or authentic presence. These considerations are especially pressing in light of emerging technologies such as sex robots,[17] autonomous weapons systems,[18] and algorithmic control structures that make life-changing decisions in the areas of health, employment, and criminal justice. These developments raise profound questions about human autonomy, responsibility, and well-being within systems that increasingly delegate decision-making to non-human agents. Moreover, the rise of transhumanist ideologies that promote human enhancement or transcendence through technological means directly challenges Christian understandings of resurrection, redemption, and the enduring importance of the embodied self. In this shifting landscape, the Barthian-Herzfeldian emphasis on embodied relationality provides a theological anchor that reminds us that personhood is not merely functional or rational, but is grounded in the capacity to love, to respond ethically,

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[17] John Danaher and Neil McArthur, *Robot Sex: Social and Ethical Implications* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017) (ebook May 2018).

[18] Noreen L. Herzfeld and Robert H. Latiff, "Can Lethal Autonomous Weapons Be Just?," *Peace Review* 33, no. 2 (2022), 213–219, https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2021.1998750.

and to be present in relationships, capacities that machines, however advanced, cannot fully replicate.

This embodied relational emotionality, the ability to love, to be present, and to be morally accountable, is not only what distinguishes humans from machines, but also what reflects the Trinitarian nature of God. It involves both freedom and emotional intentionality, capacities that cannot be reduced to data processing or algorithmic behavior. In this light, to be human is not to replicate the efficiency of machines, but to live in ways that affirm our origin in divine relationality: to choose love, to enter into mutual relationships, and to remain open to the risks and responsibilities that come with being fully present: emotionally, spiritually, and corporeally.

Thus, Herzfeld offers a crucial theological reframing: to be human in a posthuman age is not to compete with machines, but to reclaim what machines cannot be, beings capable of deep, moral, and vulnerable embodied relationships. Her theological vision resists reductionist models of both humanity and divinity, calling instead for an affirmation of personhood as essentially relational and ethically grounded. This approach provides a counter-narrative to the logic of technological determinism and aligns theology with a broader movement toward relational ontologies found in the work of thinkers such as Catherine Keller and Ilia Delio.

Herzfeld's contribution[19] remains essential for contemporary theological discourse, offering not only a critique of artificial intelligence as a model of personhood, but also a positive theological anthropology rooted in Trinitarian love, relational freedom, and embodied moral presence. This move represents a decisive theological shift: from understanding the divine image in computational or rational terms to seeing it as grounded in emotional depth, bodily presence, and the capacity

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[19] Noreen Herzfeld, "Creating in Our Own Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Image of God," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 37, no. 2 (2002), 303–316, https://doi.org/10.1111/0591-2385.00430; Noreen Herzfeld, "In Whose Image? Artificial Intelligence and the Imago Dei," in *Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, ed. J. B. Stump and Alan Padgett (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell,2012) 500–509; Noreen Herzfeld, *Religion and New Technologies (*Basel: MDPI, 2017).

for meaningful relationships, traits that distinguish humans from even the most advanced machines.

Catherine Keller, from a process-theological perspective, deepens this view by emphasizing the fluid, emergent, and interrelational nature of reality itself. In Keller's theology,[20] divine presence is not immutable and detached, but entangled within the dynamic processes of becoming, including digital and ecological dimensions. Such a shift destabilizes notions of the divine as wholly other, replacing them with a relational and incarnational co-presence that is open to transformation and multiplicity.

Donna Haraway's posthumanist work, particularly her concept of the cyborg,[21] directly informs contemporary theological reflection by challenging the idea of the human as a bounded, autonomous subject. Instead, she presents the human as a hybrid, techno-organic assemblage, constantly evolving through its entanglements with machines and environments. This vision aligns with the theological insights of Ilia Delio,[22] who calls for an integral theology that embraces evolution, complexity, and technological mediation. Delio views the human not as static, but as a co-creative participant in the ongoing unfolding of divine life, a vision that integrates science, technology, and mysticism.

If we briefly compare the theological anthropology and the *imago Dei* of Noreen Herzfeld and Ilia Delio, we can see that Noreen Herzfeld, drawing on the classical Christian tradition, redefines the *imago Dei* not in terms of intelligence or rationality, but as the capacity for relationships with God, with others, and with creation. She emphasizes that human uniqueness lies not in cognitive superiority but in love, responsibility, and embodied relational ethics. In the digital age, this implies that AI, however advanced, cannot replace the human vocation for moral accountability, vulnerability, and genuine emotional connection.

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[20] Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2002); Catherine Keller, *God and Power: CounterApocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Catherine Keller, *Intercarnations: Exercises in Theological Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Catherine Keller, *No Matter What: Crisis and the Spirit of Planetary Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2024).

[21] Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*.

[22] Delio, *Re-Enchanting the Earth*.

Ilia Delio, by contrast, offers a broader vision rooted in process theology and relational ontology. She proposes that humans and machines are not isolated entities in opposition, but co-constituting participants within a larger, evolving system of life. While Herzfeld maintains a firm ontological boundary between human beings and machines, Delio envisions technological entanglement as a natural extension of creation, calling for a new theological language that embraces evolution, complexity, and integration.

Their views also diverge regarding the relationship with technology and artificial intelligence. Herzfeld adopts a cautious yet open approach to technology. While recognizing its potential to mediate connection, she argues that technology cannot replicate the embodied, emotional, and moral aspects of human relationships. She raises ethical concerns regarding the development of AI systems such as autonomous weapons, decision-making algorithms, and emotionally responsive robots, warning that these technologies risk undermining human responsibility and dignity. Delio, however, views technology through a spiritual and ecological lens, framing it as part of the creative divine process. In her cosmic Christology, AI is not merely a tool but a participant in the ongoing story of evolution, bearing theological significance. Technology, in this framework, becomes a medium through which divine presence and relationality can evolve, provided that ethical awareness and spiritual integration are maintained.

For Herzfeld, embodied relationality remains a defining trait of humanity. To be human is to be capable of love, freedom, and ethical responsibility, capacities that machines can imitate but never truly embody. Her theological anthropology is strongly influenced by Karl Barth's understanding of relationality as reflecting the Triune nature of God.

Delio moves beyond these ontological boundaries, advocating a posthuman theological vision that embraces hybrid identities and technological co-evolution. She urges theology to see machines not as threats to human uniqueness, but as co-agents in a shared evolutionary and spiritual trajectory. Her emphasis on interconnectedness invites a reimagining of humanity not as separate from but deeply embedded within the technological and cosmic whole.

While differing in theological orientation, both Herzfeld and Delio converge in emphasizing relationality as central to the human condition. Herzfeld defends the moral and spiritual integrity of the human person against reductionist technological models, while Delio expands theological horizons by situating technology within the unfolding divine cosmos. Together, their work provides complementary frameworks for interpreting human identity in the digital age: one guarding its ethical core, the other envisioning its expansive potential.

These thinkers challenge theology not to approach the digital age through fear or resistance, but to understand it as a transformative horizon, a horizon that requires a redefinition of divine presence, human particularity, and ethical responsibility. Far from implying that theological discourse is obsolete, the digital age presents itself as a generative and evolving context for theological inquiry that requires an imaginative response and the courage to translate enduring truths into emerging realities.

The increasing immersion of human life in digital environments raises urgent anthropological and theological questions. As people increasingly shift cognitive tasks online and rely on digital platforms for communication, memory, and self-expression, traditional notions of embodiment, presence, and relationality are being reconfigured. While digital tools simulate interaction and mediate relationships across distances, Christian theology insists on the centrality of the body, grounded in the doctrines of incarnation and resurrection, which affirm that redemption and personhood are inextricably linked to embodied existence.

The shift toward a disembodied digital presence raises the question of what is lost when the body is no longer at the center of interaction and identity. Does embodiment remain essential to authentic human consciousness and moral accountability? And how do these changes affect not only our relationships with each other, but also our understanding of ourselves and our relationship with God? As technology increasingly mediates both thought and presence, theology is called on to think critically about how embodiment functions not as a technical detail of the human, but as a central theological category through which a relational, ethical, and spiritual life becomes possible.

One of the central shifts in the theological anthropology of the posthuman age is that the *imago Dei*, the image of God, is rooted not primarily in intelligence, reason, or will, but in the human capacity for relationships. This relational understanding emphasizes emotional, moral, and spiritual connectedness with others, creation, and the divine as the core of what it means to be human. In contrast to traditional models that defined human uniqueness through rationality, now increasingly simulated by artificial intelligence, this perspective highlights qualities that machines cannot replicate: vulnerability, mutuality, and embodied moral responsibility.

Theological shifts can be mapped across several axes:

Traditional View	Posthuman Implication
Imago Dei = reason or will	Imago Dei = emotion, relationship, vulnerability
Human = bounded, distinct, embodied	Human = hybrid, evolving, technologically entangled
Divine = wholly other, immutable	Divine = relational, incarnational, co-present
Church = gathered, sacramental body	Church = dispersed, digital, multi-modal

Such a shift has considerable implications. It calls into question the notion of human exceptionalism based solely on intellectual superiority and shifts the theological focus to a more holistic, emotional, relational, and ethically grounded understanding of the person. Being created in the image of God therefore does not mean surpassing machines in terms of logic or efficiency, but rather embodying love, freedom, and moral depth in concrete, lived relationships. This reconceptualization calls on theology to engage seriously with technological developments, not to defend outdated hierarchies, but to affirm the irreplaceable value of human relationality in a digital and posthuman context.

Conclusion

The quantum leap in technological development has profoundly reshaped humanity. Much like the Neolithic revolution, these changes are altering our psychophysical constitution, our relationships with others, non-human species, and the earth, and even our self-perception. While technology originates from human creativity, it increasingly shapes existence in pervasive and unpredictable ways. Digital systems no longer merely store data, they capture, interpret, and influence behavior. As the boundary between the biological and the mechanical continues to blur, humans are deeply intertwined with the technologies they have created.

Empathetic AI technologies capable of simulating emotional connection present both profound possibilities and serious ethical risks. They mediate human affect, reconfigure emotional landscapes, and transform interpersonal relationships. While offering comfort and companionship, they also blur the line between genuine emotional connection and algorithmic simulation, raising urgent concerns about manipulation, dependency, data privacy, and the reinforcement of social and gender biases.

Humans are not merely users of technology but technogenic beings, emerging through relationships with the tools they create. As AI enters intimate and care-based settings, relational structures are reshaped. Emotional literacy may be flattened, empathy displaced, and moral intuition outsourced to code. The ethical question is not only what machines can do, but what kind of humans we are becoming through them.

Drawing on posthumanist, feminist, and theological frameworks, this article argues that critical discernment is essential for preserving the embodied, relational, and spiritual depth of human life. True human development in the digital age not only requires technological progress but also emotional maturity, ethical clarity, and spiritual wisdom. In a world increasingly shaped by artificial agents, safeguarding the integrity of emotional life is both a moral imperative and a sacred responsibility.

Theological anthropology must reconsider what it means to be human and divine. The classical emphases on cognition and rationality, now easily simulated by machines, are insufficient. A renewed

understanding of the *imago Dei* must be grounded in relationality, embodiment, and ethical responsibility. The task is not to compete with or reject technology but to live faithfully as human beings, reflecting God's relational and loving nature. In the digital age, theology guides us in recognizing the boundaries and possibilities of humanity while remaining aligned with the Trinitarian model of relational being.

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