

Does Revelation Talk About Artificial Intelligence? (<https://mindmatters.ai/podcast/ep91>)

Robert J. Marks:

What will be the theological impact of artificial intelligence? That's the topic today on Mind Matters News.

Announcer:

Welcome to Mind Matters News where artificial and natural intelligence meet head on. Here's your host. Robert J. Marks.

Robert J. Marks:

We have been talking to Dr. John Lennox, who has written a fascinating book, 2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity. How will AI affect the future? Dr. Lennox is able to look at the AI phenomena from a number of different perspectives. From the technical side, he's an Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University. On the theological side, he acted as a pastoral advisor to Green Templeton College at Oxford. Dr. Lennox. Welcome.

John Lennox:

Thank you very much.

Robert J. Marks:

Let's talk about the theological implications of AI. You have a reputation, not only as a mathematician, but a Christian apologist. And I wanted to go into some of the apologetics that you gave in the book and how it relates to some of the modern perceptions of artificial intelligence. Generally, how will technical advances affect the way in which people, either believers or non-believers think of God?

John Lennox:

Well, sometimes technological development has a very positive effect because if like myself, you believe that God is the intelligence behind the universe, that he's made human beings in his image, so that we are to a certain extent, creative, and we can produce this technology. Then the existence of the technology and the need science itself is evidence that there is a God behind it all. So that is a positive development.

John Lennox:

And I welcome it because as a scientist in that sense, I have always felt that one of the strongest evidences for there being a God behind the universe is the fact that we can do science and the universe is mathematically intelligible. So that gives me a huge impulse to do the subject that I've spent my life doing. How AI will affect that? I don't know. Because the more we understand of how things work, I look at it this way, then the more I can admire the ability of God to produce all this potentiality.

John Lennox:

Just as the more I know of engineering, the more I can admire the genius of a Rolls-Royce, Rolls and Royce who produced the beautiful engines of their motor cars. But of course the development of technology is always two-edged. I often say artificial intelligence is a bit like a knife. You can use a knife to do surgery and save people's lives. You can also use it to stab them to death. So we mustn't be naive about just saying that everything is wonderful because it isn't.

Robert J. Marks:

Interesting. The development of science is said by some to replace the need for a belief in God. Wherein I think you could also look at sciences as exposing how great God is. Do you think that that is going to be the case with artificial intelligence?

John Lennox:

Well, I just don't know, but I spent most of my life contending with people that think that science replaces God. And I see that as a very foolish argument really. It's like saying that if you understand how a Ford motor car works, you don't need to believe in Henry Ford. It's a confusion between different kinds of explanation. And I often say to people, look, the God explanation, no more competes with the scientific explanation than Henry Ford competes with the law of internal combustion to explain a motor car engine.

John Lennox:

And in fact, you need both levels of explanation, the scientific one and the one in terms of the creative agency of God to give you a complete explanation. And so it's been clear to me for many years that a lot of the heat could be taken out of this science versus God thing if people only could realize that explanation comes at different levels.

Robert J. Marks:

Excellent. I think that your old professor Polkinghorne addressed this.

John Lennox:

He does. Yes.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, that's good stuff There's a guy and we talked about this offline a little bit, and you said you didn't know about it, but I'd like your comment on it. His name is Levandowski, Silicon Valley wunderkind and he founded an AI church. So AI is finding churches now, people that worship AI. The name of his church was Way of the Future.

Robert J. Marks:

In trying to get tax exemption for his church, he wrote an epistle to the IRS in the United States. And his epistle reads, "the AI church believes in the realization, acceptance and worship of a Godhead based on artificial intelligence developed through computer hardware and software." I wanted your take. You see any chance that Levandowski's church will ever catch on ?

John Lennox:

Not really, but this is the first time I've heard of it so I would need to think about it. But you see, I would be initially very skeptical of these kind of churches for very clever and specially trained people because the real church is formed of all kinds of people. And the gospel is accessible to the most simple people and a God that's based on AI is a God that's a product of technology. It sounds a little bit like the Tower of Babel in the ancient world and it's far too small for me to believe in anything like that.

John Lennox:

He thinks it's expanding the mind, actually it's contracting the mind because AI hasn't reached anything like the state of let's say, constructing a conscious entity, and God is a conscious entity who spoke the universe into existence. So there God is far too small and anyway, I would be fascinated to know what their doctrine of salvation is and eternal life. Although I can guess that eternal life will come when they upload their weary brains onto Silicon and somehow they exist forever, which is another transition that I very much doubt.

Robert J. Marks:

Yes. Interesting. A footnote on Levandowski, he was subsequently charged with the theft of proprietary technology. I'm not sure that his AI church had the equivalent of 10 commandments about theft.

John Lennox:

He has clearly haven't got as far as thou shalt not steal. So they're morally rather infantile. Yeah.

Robert J. Marks:

And I don't know the outcome of that. I should look that up someday, but that was an interesting commentary on Levandowski. You mentioned the idea of obtaining immortality. That's a common theme in many religions and that's certainly a theme that you mentioned that's in the AI religion. Well, I think the answer's obvious, but let me ask you anyway. What is the solution to immortality in Christianity?

John Lennox:

Well, perhaps the best way to discuss this is to put it in the context of Yuval Noah Harari's best-selling book, Homo Deus. And in it, he says that, "There are going to be two major agenda items for the 21st century." The first one is that we'll solve the problem of physical death. And I quote, "Every tactical problem has a tactical solution. We don't need to wait for the second coming in order to overcome death." So he's aware of Christian hope there.

John Lennox:

But then secondly, once we've overcome the need to die, he says carefully that, "Humans will still die, but they won't have to die." Once we overcome this problem of mortality, then the next item, the second major item will be the intensification of the pursuit of human happiness. And that agenda involves changing our biochemistry, re-engineering bodies and minds so that we shall re-engineer homo sapiens so that they can enjoy everlasting pleasure. That's what he says.

John Lennox:

And he finishes having raised humanity above the beastly level of survival struggles, we will now aim to upgrade humans into gods and turn homo sapiens into Homo Deus, but think in terms of Greek gods. So

there are two agenda items, one solve the problem of physical death and reach immortality and you are right. This has been a topic, not only in many religions and many mythologies. And it goes right back to the book of Genesis where we are told a fascinating account of human beings being tempted to reach after godhood and the enemy tempts them by saying, "If you eat that fruit of that particular tree, you shall be as gods knowing good and evil."

John Lennox:

So there's the origin of the twisted notion of Homo Deus. Now the ironic thing to my mind is this. Here are these people trying to like Harari to solve the problem of physical death, but they're too late. It has already been solved because Jesus Christ was raised by the power of God from the dead. So God has got a solution to the problem of physical death. And the message of the Christian gospel is of course that anybody who repents of the mess they've made of their own life and the lives of others, and trust Christ for salvation receives eternal life. And therefore they will be resurrected from the dead.

John Lennox:

So we don't need to worry what happens to our brains nor do we need to hope that they can be uploaded onto Silicon. So that's the first thing. And the second thing is that he's searching to intensify human happiness by reengineering our bodies and minds. Now, the very interesting thing is that part of the Christian hope is that the true Home Deus, that is Christ himself will return and will raise us from the dead and we will be transformed. That's the real upgrade for which there's strong evidence as contrasted with Harari's hope.

John Lennox:

So they're within Christianity, you have both sides of this thing and you've got a credible solution. And that was one of the major motivations for me writing this book, because I thought, "Look, if people in the world are prepared to take seriously scenarios like Tegmark's and those of other people, why don't we have a look again at a scenario that most people know very little about?" And that is the biblical view of death and the solution of the problem of mortality. And also the question of the transmutation of human bodies in the resurrection. These are hugely important topics that seems to me.

Robert J. Marks:

Interesting. There's another parallel interestingly between AI and Christianity on super intelligence that you address. Could you elaborate on that?

John Lennox:

Well, I don't know what particularly you mean, but one of the ironic things is that you could characterize AGI as human beings trying to reach up to God and achieve a super intelligence that way. The Christian message is the exact opposite. It talks about God becoming man and God becoming man in Jesus Christ, who then through what he does in his life, death, resurrection, Ascension, and return. He deals with all these questions at a far deeper level. So the parallels are very strong and therefore I feel that they can be used to advantage to help us to explain what the Christian message is.

Robert J. Marks:

Fascinating. Last question I want to ask you, you offer a conjecture in your book about some passages in Revelation and the possibility they could relate to the adoption of AI. Talk about that.

John Lennox:

Well, of course the Book of Revelation tends to be very controversial in discussing it because there are a lot of symbols in it, but C.S. Lewis taught me a long time ago that symbols usually stand for a reality. And we've got to ask ourselves, what is the reality about which the Book of Revelation is talking? And very briefly put in Revelation 13, we read about an animal or a beast, and it's clearly talking about a world authority or leader.

John Lennox:

And we read that it commands a construction of an image that is an image of another animal or human, and it gives breath to this. And the result is worldwide deception and control and all who refuse to bow down and acknowledge the authority of this beast stroke human, whatever it is, are killed so that you're dealing with this scenario for a social control is absolute. And what is intriguing and rather chilling actually in the light of our AI developments is that freedom to buy and sell is determined by the wearing of some kind of mark, an implanted chip.

John Lennox:

Tegmark talks about a bracelet that people may have to wear that will determine whether or not they're regarded as socially acceptable. And we've already got that kind of social acceptability factor in the credit system that's being rolled out in the Chinese population today. So it's relatively easy to see how this kind of thing could come about.

John Lennox:

Now, I'm not one of these speculators that know exactly what it means, but I am interested in what it stands for. And if you've got something that appears to give breath to another creature, to an image, actually, which is presumably a material thing. And it's so effective that it causes the whole Earth to worship it, which is a fascinating concept.

John Lennox:

Then are we here? And that's a question. Is it a partial realization of AGI? We just don't know. But we do know looking back in history that at every stage human beings have set up images and bowed down to worship them. And what technology will produce one day is probably beyond our wildest dreams. For that reason, I want to take this scenario as seriously, indeed much more seriously than Tegmark's scenario.

Robert J. Marks:

Yeah, that's a fascinating conjecture about the passage in Revelation. Thank you very much. We've been talking to Dr. John Lennox about his new book entitled 2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity and on this podcast touched on some of the theological aspects of his book.

Robert J. Marks:

You can get his book at the website 2084book.com. That's 2084book.com. Check out Dr. Lennox's website, johnlennox.org. And of course, all of John Lennox's books are available on amazon.com. Dr. Lennox, how many books have you written so far? You keep count?

John Lennox:

No, I don't keep count really. But if people want to do the job of counting them, they'd better have a look at my website.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Okay. So you're not worried about your resume?

John Lennox:

Not for the purposes of this particular program. No.

Robert J. Marks:

Exactly. Okay. Okay. Very good. Well, thank you very much. This is Robert Marks, until next time be a good cheer.

Announcer:

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