

ChatGPT and the Network Generation

Theological Discussions with ChatGPT on Christ and Culture

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Research Introduction:

A limited analysis of how evangelicals in the “network generation” utilize AI Chatbot ChatGPT in theological discussion, by focusing on student discussions with the AI about Richard Niebuhr’s “Christ and Culture.” The analysis includes the benefits and limitations associated with the use of AI in theological conversation.

ChatGPT

- A large *language* model that *generates* words
- It uses analytics and information from internet
- Predictive analytics to generate responses
- It can write a 500-word essay, get 1410 on SATs
- Plausible sounding inaccuracies - “hallucinations”
- It hones in on person’s nuance to respond
- It steers towards majority viewpoints, has bias
- Synthesizes different ideas clearly, coherently

The Network Generation

- Olivet University: millennials, Gen Z, and beyond
- Digital natives in an interconnected global society
- Seamless adoption of AI by young people
- Considering the postmodern influence
- Rejection of meta-narrative, emphasis on person
- ChatGPT individualized, nuanced conversations
- AI is well-timed to facilitate personal engagement
- But also, guiding in a larger societal framework

Student Conversations “Christ and Culture”

- Students read Niebuhr’s book, I gave 1 hr. lecture
- I provided guidelines for conversing with ChatGPT
 - Summaries, clarity on paradigms, critiques
 - Relevance, limits of paradigms in current culture
 - Compare to philosophical topic of your interest
 - Provide biblical substantiation for statements
 - Get self-reflection questions, analyze alignment
- Students then wrote reflections on their conversations and I led a discussion with them



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Richard Niebuhr's "Christ and Culture" is a classic work of Christian ethics that explores the relationship between Christianity and the world in which it exists. Niebuhr presents five typologies to describe the different ways Christians have engaged with culture throughout history. These main points are:

1. **Christ against Culture:** This approach suggests a complete separation between Christianity and the world, viewing culture as sinful and corrupt. Christians following this model seek to create an alternative, pure society.
2. **Christ of Culture:** In this perspective, Christianity and culture are seen as closely related and mutually supportive. Christianity is understood as the fulfillment of the best aspects of culture, and Christians are encouraged to engage fully with the world.
3. **Christ above Culture:** This approach acknowledges that culture has both good and evil aspects, but emphasizes that Christ transcends culture. Christians are called to participate in culture while simultaneously seeking to transform it through the influence of Christ.
4. **Christ and Culture in Paradox:** Here, the tension between Christianity and culture is seen as an ongoing struggle, with Christians living in a constant state of tension. This view emphasizes that Christians must live within the world while recognizing its inherent flaws and contradictions.
5. **Christ Transforming Culture:** This perspective sees Christians as active agents in transforming culture to align with the values of Christ. Christians are called to engage with the world and work towards social change, while recognizing that ultimate transformation will only come through



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The "Christ and Culture in Paradox" paradigm, as presented by H. Richard Niebuhr, shares some similarities with existentialist thought, although they are not identical. The similarities lie primarily in their acknowledgment of tensions, paradoxes, and individual responsibility in navigating these tensions. However, their underlying assumptions and focuses can be quite different.

Similarities:

1. **Tension and paradox:** Both the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" paradigm and existentialism acknowledge the tensions and paradoxes that individuals experience in life. In the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" paradigm, the tension exists between the fallen nature of the world and the redemptive work of Christ, while existentialism deals with the tension between human freedom and the apparent meaninglessness of the world.
2. **Individual responsibility:** Both approaches emphasize individual responsibility in navigating these tensions. In the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" paradigm, Christians must rely on God's grace while engaging with the world and its fallen nature. In existentialism, individuals are responsible for creating meaning in their lives through their choices and actions.
3. **Authenticity:** Both the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" paradigm and existentialism value authenticity and encourage individuals to confront the realities of their existence. In the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" approach, this involves recognizing the reality of human sinfulness and the need for God's grace. In existentialism,  involves acknowledging the freedom and responsibility inherent in human existence.



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When determining where an individual with a Chinese cultural and background might fit within Niebuhr's Christ and Culture typology, it's essential to consider the unique cultural, historical, and socio-political context of China. Here are some questions tailored to explore this fit, taking into account the diverse aspects of Chinese society, including its religious plurality, communist governance, and rich traditional heritage:

1. **Cultural Integration vs. Distinction:** How do you view the integration of Christian faith with traditional Chinese values and practices? Do you see a way for Christianity to enrich Chinese culture without compromising its core teachings?
2. **Community Engagement:** Considering the emphasis on community and familial ties in Chinese culture, how do you think Christians should engage with their local communities and families, especially if they hold different beliefs?
3. **Authority and Governance:** Given the authoritative governance in China, how should Christians relate to governmental authorities, especially in contexts where religious practice is closely monitored or restricted?
4. **Evangelism and Witness:** In a society where open evangelism can sometimes lead to scrutiny or conflict, what approaches do you think are most effective for sharing the Christian faith?
5. **Cultural Preservation vs. Transformation:** Do you believe that Christians are called to preserve the cultural and historical heritage of China, or to transform aspects of it in light of Christian values? How do you balance respect for cultural heritage with the transformative call of the Gospel?



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Observations from Student Conversations

- Loved the succinct summaries – esp. ESL students
- Easily handled diversity of thought, context: China, Ethiopia, college life, evangelism strategy
- Contextualized questions for self-assessment
- Personalized, on point analysis of student views
- Inaccuracies on specific facts like Caron's critique
- No acknowledgement of inaccuracies despite seemingly persuasive responses
- Students could not tell ChatGPT was giving errors

Reflections from Students on Using AI

- Overall positive on AI for theological engagement
- Easy access to discuss theology w/o a person
- Comfort in discussing tricky topics w/o judgment
- Facilitates critical thinking, reflective process to be challenged, refine, and clarify one's theology
- AI can't replace genuine human interaction, personal experiences
- Surprise at not knowing that some of what they were reading was factually inaccurate

Analysis: AI, Theology, Network Generation

- AI positive development for Network Generation
- Best use of AI in research is to condense, assist
- AI matches postmodern influence: individualized, yet can help fit within grand narrative of KOG
- Naivete of youth on dangers of AI, especially w/ regards to truth
- Perhaps concerns about AI are overblown
- Need for better AI use guidelines in academia
- AI is still “artificial”, it may replicate, but is still not genuinely a human, so it is limited

Future of AI and Concluding Remarks

- AI instructors, visiting ancient times, practical use
- Fake, biased, extreme, manipulative information
- Impressive new theology, systems w/ AI help
- Bible being used unbiblically, but seems biblical
- Theology that is not Christian, but sounds like it
- Be cautious, but also understand the limits of AI
- AI is ultimately limited, can be used for good/evil
- May one day capture/surpass human intelligence
- But God is beyond AI and only we can know God