Special Forum: AI through the AΩ: Theological Librarians Interact with Artificial Intelligence

Between a Gift and das Gift
How to Fulfill our Call in a New Age of AI

by Jaeyeon Lucy Chung

Despite their apparent sameness, the English word "gift" and the German term das Gift share an interesting yet twisted linguistic genealogy. The English word "gift" has its roots in the Old Norse word gift or gipt, which originally meant "a present or offering." This word can be traced back to the Proto-Germanic giftiz, which also relates to the act of giving or a gift. Similarly, the Middle High German gift was derived from the same origin and had a similar meaning of "a gift or a present." Its original meaning, however, has changed over time. By the sixteenth century, the German noun, das Gift, began to take on an almost opposite meaning: "poison." This radical change in meaning is believed to be linked to the practice of using substances for medicinal purposes.

The development of a new technology known as artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative AI, now poses a daring question to many of us, including not only top tech CEOs and engineers but also teachers and librarians: Will AI be a never-seen-before gift or an insidious poison to humanity? Considering the enormous capabilities of AI in providing needed information and resources to its many users, librarians are especially concerned that this new technology will become das Gift rather than a gift by nullifying their roles and vocations. Of course, this rising anxiety surrounding the development of AI could be a reactionary response to the dawning of a new era rather than a thoughtful and constructive response. Recall that when Google was first introduced with its impressive data collection and search capabilities, many people reacted by saying this might be the beginning of the end of libraries and librarianship. It is too early to predict what the future holds regarding the technological impact of AI on our lives, including spiritual, artistic, political, and economic aspects.

As we enter a new era of AI, how can librarians redefine their roles and vocations to ensure that this technological advancement becomes a gift rather than das Gift for theological students and educators? First and foremost, theological librarians can play a pivotal role in rendering this new technological innovation a gift for theological students and educators by guiding them in its proper use. This involves helping them distinguish between unfounded AI-generated information and credible fact-checked knowledge. In a recent *New York Times* article, Jacob Shapiro and Chris Mattmann caution that AI can fake current and past events. While new digital content and data may be safeguarded through built-in systems, a vast realm of raw content has not been watermarked. Watermarking is a digital technique to embed certain information into a digital signal. Until this world of content is fully watermarked, there is a risk of people attempting to alter history through AI-generated content and fake data, including digital files such as photos, personal narratives, and historical events (Shapiro and Mattmann 2024).

Without a doubt, it is poisonous to humanity if AI is used to rewrite the historical record for certain ideological or even religious purposes. This is why librarians' roles are becoming more

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critical in an age of AI. By providing students and educators with the gift of critical discernment, librarians contribute to continuing authentic theological education.

To keep AI as an educational gift for students and educators, theological librarians should also rewrite their responsibilities to meet new challenges. As Michael Hanegan and Chris Rosser correctly point out in their whitepaper, theological education is inherently interdisciplinary. Indeed, students are regularly engaged in various disciplines such as languages, philosophy, ethics, history, literature, social science, and even natural science as part of holistic theological education (Hanegan and Rosser, n.d.). What we should not miss regarding the interdisciplinary nature of theological education is that AI is multidisciplinary at its core. This is a significant reason for theological librarians to proactively engage in ongoing conversations around AI technology, theological education, and ethics. By offering theological educators up-to-date AI-based research skills and methodological tools, theological librarians can enhance the quality of theological education.

Although we are fast entering the age of AI, we should not overlook that the digital divide is still very real today. To render AI available as a gift for humanity, we should ensure that this new digital technology becomes a gift for all, not just for some who are fortunate and privileged. Until a few years ago, the digital divide meant a split between people, households, communities, and geographic areas in access to present-day information and communication technologies, such as computers, the Internet, and mobile devices. Now, in an age of AI, there is a greater chance that the existing digital divide may further deepen in such a way that the privileged have better access to not only technology but also the skills to use it effectively and the people to help them out, while the under-privileged might have access to technology but without the added support. This is why librarians' roles and responsibilities are even more critical in an age of AI. For instance, anyone who has used AI tools such as ChatGPT knows how important it is to feed the AI the correct prompts to generate more appropriate replies. Undoubtedly, to narrow the digital divide, thereby rendering AI available as a gift for all, librarians should renew their sense of vocation and responsibility with particular attention to new social needs and calls.

While librarians should strive to renew their vocation and responsibility to bridge the digital divide, they must also educate users on the potential environmental impact of digital technology, highlighting that this boon for humanity can undermine environmental sustainability. It is no secret that AI consumes enormous levels of electricity. In the New York Times, Delger Erdenesanaa writes, "In a middle-ground scenario, by 2027, AI servers could use between 85 to 134 terawatt hours (TWh) annually. That's similar to what Argentina, the Netherlands, and Sweden each use in a year, and is about 0.5 percent of the world's current electricity use" (Erdenesanaa 2023). Evidently, the more we use AI, the worse we render climate change. Considering that theological schools are devoted to training community leaders who can influence many others, theological librarians may contribute to protecting the environment, at least indirectly, by helping them be ethically conscientious of AI usage. From a critical perspective, this means the role and responsibility of librarians, especially theological librarians, may no longer be delimited to traditional areas, such as providing needed information and resources to library users. Though they may not be professionally trained ethicists, librarians should be ready to engage in new efforts, such as environmental advocacy, for the common good of the world beyond the boundaries of the library.

In the new era of AI, theological librarians may find it challenging to fulfill their fundamental calls and vocations if they intend to remain only in their comfort zones. As AI transforms the educational landscape with its wide-ranging capabilities, theological librarians must explore new approaches. They might consider collaborating with librarians from other fields and forming early partnerships with AI developers. For instance, in a recent blog post, ITHAKA researchers Elmira Jangjou and

Melissa Blankstein point out that community libraries, whether public or academic, "often operate in isolation, potentially overlooking opportunities to maximize their impact through collaboration" (Jangjou and Blankstein 2024). As part of the community, theological libraries should proactively consider developing cross-sector library partnerships at regional or national levels, with a focus on identifying their distinctive strengths and challenges. Additionally, they could create collaborative guidelines to ensure that AI is used responsibly within the industry and in the community.

Whether or not we endorse it, the new age of AI has already started impacting many aspects of our lives. As this contribution explains, AI has the potential to become either an incredible gift for humanity or a dangerous poison, das Gift, to bring humanity down. It is a critical task of librarians, especially theological librarians, to render this new technological innovation available as a gift for students and educators.

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