Can AI 'Know' God? A Comparative Study of Generative AI and Human Theology

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether generative artificial intelligence (AI) can meaningfully "know" God by comparing AI-generated theology with the writings of human theologians. Using major Large Language Model (LLM) chatbots, the study analyzes AI-produced theological material alongside works by Grudem, Pannenberg, Tillich, Gonzalez, and Karkkainen. The findings show that AI excels in speed, consistency, and analytical precision, rapidly synthesizing large bodies of theological data. However, the paper argues that AI's epistemology is fundamentally limited. AI can only reconstitute patterns from existing texts, while humans, created in the image of God, possess an eternal potential for divine knowledge that no machine can share. Human theologians engage theology not merely through method but through a God-given capacity for revelation, spiritual transformation, and the pursuit of truth. Therefore, while AI may aid theological research, genuine theological knowledge remains uniquely and irreducibly human.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the world and the implications for theology are profound. Specifically, publicly available Generative Pre-trained Transformers (GPT) AI chatbots using Large Language Models (LLM) have the ability to construct theological writings. While textbooks produced by human theologians are well-established with a breadth of perspectives available within a generally cohesive framework, AI-generated theology presents a novel approach to constructing theological knowledge. This leads to an interesting research question, whether the nature of theological knowledge generated by AI is different from that of human theologians? My thesis argues that AI-generated theology surpasses human theologians in speed, consistency, and analytical precision, yet its epistemological approach is fundamentally limited, as it is only a reconstituted form of godly knowledge, lacking the eternal potential embodied in humans made in God's image.

This paper summarizes my comprehensive Ph.D. dissertation, which examines whether theological knowledge generated by publicly available GPT AI chatbots fundamentally differs from that produced by human theologians. The research conducts a comparison between theological text generated by AI chatbots to established works by human theologians. Methodologically, the dissertation evaluates strengths and limitations in ten key areas, detailed later in this paper. Finally, a comparative analysis examines AI's epistemological approach to knowledge in contrast to a biblical-theological understanding of humanity's capacity for knowledge.

An Overview of Generative AI

Artificial Intelligence refers to technology that can perform tasks typically requiring human intelligence, such as speech recognition and decision-making. Generative AI is a groundbreaking frontier, capable of creating text, images, and music by mimicking patterns in existing data. It works together with Large Language Models, which Minaee et. al (2024) described as "large-scale, pre-trained, statistical language models based on neural networks." The key innovation behind ChatGPT is the transformer, first studied by researchers Vaswani et. al (2017), and uses a self-attention mechanism to weigh words in a sentence relative to each other, enhancing natural language processing and improving the model's ability to understand and generate language. This process is crucial for predicting missing words and generating the next word, enabling the model to learn language structure and nuances through pre-training.

Pre-training AI uses a self-supervised learning approach with vast amounts of text data to help models predict missing words (or "masked language modeling") and generate the next word in a sequence, as researchers Devlin et. al (2019) outlined. This allows the AI to understand the full context of a sentence, despite missing words from the user. For example, a user request for a sermon on Matthew 4:18-22 should not be interpreted as a sermon on Matthew followed by numbers but a desire for biblical context and real-life application to the disciples' calling. Pre-training enables the model to predict the next word using predictive analytics, as researchers Radford et. al (2018) described. According to Brown et. al (2020), this is usually autoregressive, meaning the model is generating text one at a time based on previous outputs.

Once trained on a large data set of vocabulary, the LLMs can produce human-like text for tasks like creative writing and conversational responses. Interestingly, past AI models, like symbolic AI, attempted to "think" like humans using problem-solving theories such as those

outlined by Newell and Herbert (1972, p. 1), but they failed to produce coherent text efficiently. Instead, GPT technology, which simply generates the next word, excelled in its place. That is why ChatGPT is not the AI of movies, where it learns and grows like humans, otherwise known as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), but rather is a next-word generating algorithm.

Comparing AI to Human Theologians

For this comparison, AI chatbots ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity-DeepSeek, and Claude were used to create theological text corresponding to sections of systematic and historical theology textbooks by a diversity of theologians. Theologians being analyzed include Wayne Grudem (2020), Wolfhart Pannenberg (1993), Justo Gonzalez (1975), Paul Tillich (1968), Veli-Matti Karkkainen (2019), and a survey of global theologians (2020). A profile of these theologians was used for generating AI-prompts to provide a fair comparison. Using these prompts, AI-generated theological writings on such areas as the Doctrine of Man were then compared to Wayne Grudem's chapter of the Doctrine of Man.

Outlined below, this paper provides a condensed comparison of AI-generated theological knowledge with human theological knowledge. While the author's full dissertation offers an extensive examination of each aspect including detailed discussions on the sources, methodologies, justifications, and limitations inherent in AI and human-generated theological knowledge, for the sake of brevity, the following table succinctly summarizes the core distinctions identified in this comparative analysis.

Comparing AI-Generated and Human Theological Knowledge

Aspect	AI-Generated Theological Knowledge	Human Theological Knowledge
Source of Knowledge	Processes vast theological texts, historical records, websites and blogs on internet	Draws from scripture, tradition, reason, spiritual experience, and other theologians.
Methodology	Uses pattern recognition, language modeling, and probabilistic reasoning	Applies exegetical, historical, philosophical, and other systematic theological methods.
Justification	Justifies theological claims through text-based data analysis and logical consistency.	Justifies claims through divine revelation, intellectual reasoning, and lived/spiritual experiences.
Truth Validation	Relies on coherence within trained data but lacks personal verification or faith conviction.	Validates through scripture, theological reasoning, spiritual discernment, and peer review.
Subjectivity or Experience	Biases from training data; lacks independent critical reasoning or theological creativity.	Subjectivity due to personal experience, historical, and doctrinal biases - but this also allows for theological innovation.
Historical and Contextual Awareness	Can use internet data and trace historical developments but lacks personal human nuance in interpreting theological insights.	Contextualizes our theological insights based on historical, cultural, and spiritual factors.
Personal Spirituality	Lacks personal faith, divine revelation, and spiritual experience.	Engages in faith, divine inspiration, and spiritual transformation in theological development.
Freewill	Operates deterministically based on algorithms and data training	Exercises freewill, enabling genuine choice and responsibility in theological inquiry

Potential to change	Limited potential for genuine adaptation beyond training, dataset, and programmed responses	Capacity for significant growth, change, and transformation through ongoing experiences
Capacity for passion or love	Incapable of experiencing genuine passion, love, or emotional depth in generating theology.	Experiences profound emotional connections, passion, love, and compassion, which influences theological writing.

Evaluation - Strengths

The most striking strength of AI in generating theological text is its speed and efficiency. Human theologians may spend years studying centuries of writings, doctrinal treatises, and commentaries, carefully cross-referencing insights across traditions and languages. AI, by contrast, processes vast corpora in seconds, retrieving, categorizing, and summarizing theological arguments from multiple cultures and historical periods with remarkable consistency. As Mark Graves (2023) observes, AI "can provide new tools for scholars to access and analyze vast amounts of theological literature." This capacity not only accelerates research but also expands the scope of theological discourse, giving scholars immediate access to insights that would otherwise require a lifetime of labor to collect and compare.

A second strength is AI's analytical precision in synthesizing theological text by recognizing patterns across diverse theological traditions. Its ability to identify doctrinal consistencies, thematic links, and historical developments with speed and accuracy allows for connections that human theologians might overlook. For example, AI can correlate patristic writings with Reformation theology, mapping continuities and divergences across centuries of thought. This kind of consistency in analysis enhances comparative studies, interfaith dialogue, and global theological discourse. In addition, AI's precision in detecting linguistic nuances and

textual variations makes it a powerful tool for exegesis and translation, supporting work that would otherwise be hindered by human limitations of time, memory, or access.

Finally, AI contributes to the structuring and refinement of theological ideas through consistent analytical support. It can generate alternative frameworks, propose counterarguments, and provide comparative perspectives at a pace that keeps scholarly reflection dynamic and iterative. James Hutson (2023) notes that "AI algorithms, with their ability to ideate, scrutinize data, and discern patterns, can streamline the creative process." By consistently offering well-structured outlines, evidence-based suggestions, and alternative interpretations, AI challenges scholars to strengthen their reasoning and clarify their positions. As Mushtaq Bilal (2023) advised, AI should be "a research assistant not a supervisor," and Mollick (2023) likewise describe it as "a supportive tool." In this way, AI surpasses human theologians not by replacing their role, but by providing unmatched speed, consistency, and analytical precision that enhance and sharpen the theological enterprise.

Evaluation - Limitations

Despite its impressive ability to process theological data, AI has fundamental limitations that distinguish it from human theologians. While AI can imitate the outward form of theological writing such as sourcing academic texts or employing familiar theological methods, it lacks the genuine humanity that characterizes theology. Attributes like personal spirituality, freewill, the potential to change, and the capacity for passion or love are absent in machine-generated texts. Theology is not merely an intellectual pursuit, but it is grounded in prayer, worship, and the discernment of divine revelation. Human theologians engage in their work as a calling, shaped by personal faith and communal practices of devotion. As Ted Peters (2024) observes, existential

questions bring “puzzlement, dread, and fear” because they demand personal engagement, something no algorithm can replicate. Thus, while AI can generate content that resemble theological text, it ultimately produces only an imitation of theology, lacking authentic faith-based struggle, conviction, or the pursuit of divine truth.

In addition, even AI’s output remains surface-level and formulaic compared to the creative and contextually rich work of human theologians. While it can provide multiple perspectives when prompted, these remain derivative rather than transformative, because AI merely recombines patterns from existing sources rather than introducing dynamic new theological insights. Unlike theologians who challenge traditions, wrestle with existential dilemmas, and draw from lived experience, AI does not contribute novel or spirit-led perspectives. Its writing may appear coherent and wide-ranging, yet it lacks the depth of contextual nuance, personal engagement, and faith-based discernment. For this reason, AI can serve as a useful tool for organizing, comparing, or broadening perspectives, but it cannot substitute the work of theologians who embody creativity, accountability, and authentic participation in the pursuit of divine truth.

Finally, AI suffers from limitations in truth validation and epistemic rigor. Human theologians are embedded within scholarly and ecclesial communities, where their work undergoes peer review, dialogue, and doctrinal accountability. These processes ensure a higher standard of verification of facts and theological integrity. By contrast, AI validates only within itself, producing text through statistical prediction rather than communal scrutiny. This often leads to errors or “hallucinations,” what OpenAI (2023) itself admitted as “plausible-sounding but incorrect or nonsensical answers.” In theology, where doctrinal accuracy and scriptural fidelity are critical, such errors can mislead students, scholars, and faith communities if not

carefully checked. The absence of these academic and ecclesial traditions means that AI-generated theological text lacks the ethical trustworthiness that is expected in theology.

Comparative Analysis

AI-generated theological content has remarkable strengths, particularly in speed, consistency, and analytical precision, but its epistemological approach in producing knowledge is still fundamentally limited. At its core, AI does not create new insights but reconstitutes what has already been written, assembling pieces of information into a coherent form. This means that AI can imitate the structure of theology by summarizing arguments, citing sources, or organizing ideas, but it cannot originate knowledge in the same way humans can. Human theologians, by contrast, are not just processing information but are capable of genuine insight, reflection, and even transformation as they pursue truth. The difference is that AI's knowledge is always a reconstruction, while human knowledge can become something new through lived experience, prayer, and engagement with God.

This limitation becomes clearer when we consider how humans, unlike machines, have the potential for growth and change over time. Scripture teaches that "God created mankind in his own image" (Genesis 1:27), meaning human beings are endowed with agency, freedom, and the ability to respond to God. Theologians can learn from mistakes, wrestle with moral struggles, and be reshaped by suffering, worship, and community. AI, on the other hand, cannot repent, love, or grow; it is updated but never transformed. Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us that God "has set eternity in the human heart," pointing to the human capacity for transcendence, hope, and faith. This eternal potential gives human theology a dimension that AI can never replicate, a reflection of knowledge that goes beyond intellect to revealed divine truth.

That is why this comparison between AI-generated and human theology speaks to the biblical nature of theology that is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. John 1:14 tells us "The Word (*logos*) became flesh." Since the fullness of truth is in Jesus Christ, humans who trust in the Lord and have a relationship are called to live out this knowledge in our lives (Ephesians 6:16-19). This is why theology is not merely an intellectual exercise but is happening in the embodied life of humans. Theologians live out their theological work through faith, worship, and obedience, binding doctrine to practice and reflection of Christ-likeness. AI cannot live this out since it does not believe, obey, or suffer alongside the church. What it produces may be consistent and well-organized, but it remains only an outward form of theology. AI-generated theology is not a substitute for the uniquely human calling to seek and share godly knowledge with eternal significance.

Concluding Remarks

AI's remarkable capabilities will assist humans in surpassing previous eras in theological advancement, but will ultimately reach some limit in the future. With its extraordinary processing power that surpasses human capabilities, theologians will be able to use AI in novel and creative ways to gain new theological insights, build systems, and discern the revelation of God through Jesus Christ. However, AI is not a super-intelligence because it is incapable of surpassing divine eternal knowledge (Isaiah 55:8-9). Even if the much-discussed potential of AGI surpasses humans in every conceivable intellectual category, it can only be at best, a reconstitution of godly knowledge. Therefore, only humans have an eternal potential beyond AI in godly knowledge, which will eventually surpass AI in intellectual categories that are inconceivable and unquantifiable to any type of future AI.

This is also why AI cannot serve as an ultimate judge of ethics. It might assist humans with its speed, efficiency, and precision in judging narrowly predefined realms of ethics (red-light cameras or calling balls and strikes). However, overreliance on AI as John Lennox warns, can lead to a "play god" issue (2020, p. 208), which Jason Thacker (2021, 8.60 Calibre) cautions becomes "our new golden calf." This happens when humans subordinate themselves to AI in areas such as ethics, which are diverse and nuance. Since scripture helps us understand that God's knowledge and ultimate truth is infinitely higher, it means ethical judgment is derived this higher absolute truth, which all earthly wisdom stands in submission (Proverbs 3:5-6, 1 Corinthians 1:20-25). AI's processing of ethical ideas will always be limited and derivative, insufficient for ethical judgment. On the other hand, while fallen humans fall short of God's glory, the grace God has given humans is an eternal potential beyond AI needed for ethical judgment. AI cannot hope, repent, or love, it cannot seek after God or live in obedience. Humans, however, are called to know God personally, to embody wisdom in community, and to pursue truth as part of their eternal destiny. This capacity for transformation and transcendence is what makes humans unique.

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