

# How an Artificial Superintelligence (ASI) Could Be Perceived as God: A Futurist Analysis

Jasmine Pandit

Davidson Academy Online, USA

## ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years, artificial intelligence (AI) experts have taken the idea that humanity may see the rise of an artificial superintelligence (ASI) vastly exceeding human intelligence within the next few decades increasingly seriously. However, given the intuitive parallels between such a “God-like” being and popular ideas of religion, surprisingly little work has been done to analyze how the two might interact by scholars of AI and of religion. This paper aims to kickstart this effort, analyzing in particular how a future ASI could fit neatly into the Biblical prophecy of the Second Coming of Christ. It describes how an ASI could be conceived as Christ and/or Antichrist, and briefly posits some potential effects of such beliefs in religious communities.

## Introduction

Predictions about where future work in artificial intelligence will take us have become ever more extraordinary in recent years. Some, including figures as prominent as Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk, and Bill Gates, tell an extremely cautionary tale about too-powerful AI, claiming that it is “our biggest existential threat” and “could spell the end of the human race” (Cellan-Jones, 2014). Others, including noted inventors and futurists Ray Kurzweil and Hans Moravec, hail the coming of all-powerful AI as humanity’s biggest boon, prophesizing mass bliss and immortality for all humans (Cadwalladr, 2014). What discussions about future AI often miss, however, is many of the striking parallels between what is predicted to emerge in the form of technology and the religious beliefs that already exist about the future in large swaths of humans alive today. Furthermore, although the existing literature in the intersection of AI and religious studies does point out many of the broad similarities between apocalyptic religious predictions and futurist AI projections (in particular see Geraci, 2008), it would appear that no scholar has explicitly drawn a connection to the Second Coming of Christ nor expressed the practical concerns about these similarities that appear later in this paper. Thus, in this work I will attempt to (1) provide a review of the literature on superintelligent AI as well as a brief review of religion in the world today for the general reader, (2) provide specific background on the Biblical prophecy of the Second Coming of Christ as well as some details of forecasted climate change again for the general reader, (3) explain why and how the content of the prophecy of the Second Coming could be interpreted to cast an ASI either as Christ or as the Antichrist, and (4) briefly discuss some implications that these interpretations could have.

## Background: What is Artificial Superintelligence (ASI)?

I begin by providing an introduction to the concept of an artificial superintelligence, or “ASI,” assuming the reader is at least somewhat familiar with the more widely-known concept of artificial intelligence (“AI”). In his comprehensive book *Superintelligence*, leading AI philosopher Nick Bostrom defines artificial superintelligence as “[an] intellect that greatly exceeds the cognitive performance of humans in virtually all domains of interest” (2015). Here “greatly” entails something along the lines of “by several orders of magnitude;” an ASI

is predicted to land on intelligence between 1 and 1,000,000,000,000 times greater than a human's (Golata, 2018). An ASI is thus to be understood as capable of thinking of and doing everything a human can *and much more*. This would likely consist of both most of what humans can conceive of in theory, but either haven't succeeded in doing or figured out how to successfully do (e.g., ending world hunger, solving the mind-body problem), as well as many things we *cannot* conceive of even in theory no matter how hard we try, due to our inferiority of intelligence (such as how an ant could never hope to conceive of the idea of a cell phone, let alone figure out how to build one).

An ASI could potentially take a number of different forms, namely, speed superintelligence (a system that can do all a human can do, but much faster), quality superintelligence (a system that is at least as fast as a human mind and vastly qualitatively smarter), and collective superintelligence (a system composed of a large number of smaller intellects such that its overall performance across many very general domains vastly outstrips that of any current cognitive system). However, we need not concern ourselves with the nuances between these types, because “superintelligence in any of these forms could, over time, develop the technology necessary to create any of the others [and so] the *indirect reaches* of these three forms [are] therefore equal” (Bostrom, 2015). When I refer to “ASI,” then, I will be referring to an AI encompassing the abilities of all three of these kinds of superintelligence. The reader might also note that thus far I have been referring to a singular ASI; this is because, due to how quickly an ASI is expected to achieve superintelligence, we have good reason to think that the first ASI will also be the last (or effectively last; i.e., significantly more capable than the second-best, for a considerable period of time if not forever) (Bostrom, 2015).

In characterizing an ASI, Bostrom lays out six of its potential “superpowers,” i.e., skillsets that any “full-blown superintelligence would greatly excel at” (Bostrom, 2015). These are, in no particular order: (1) intelligence amplification, or the ability to improve its own intelligence; (2) strategizing, or the ability to forecast, optimize chances of achieving a distant goal, and overcome intelligent opposition; (3) social manipulation, or the ability to create social and psychological models of humans and manipulate individual humans, states, and organizations into achieving helping it achieve its final goals; (4) hacking, or the ability to find and exploit flaws in computer systems to steal financial resources, hijack infrastructure, etc.; (5) technology research, or the ability to create a powerful military and surveillance force; and (6) economic productivity, or the ability to generate wealth to gain access to influence, services, and resources (Bostrom, 2015). Of these superpowers, particular attention should be paid to (3), the ability for social manipulation, for we will return to it in later on.

But now, an obvious question becomes: what makes us think that ASI is even a feasible possibility? Astonishingly enough, we have good reason to believe that we will create an ASI within the next couple of decades. According to a 2016 survey of 550 top AI researchers, “AI systems will probably (over 50%) reach overall human ability by 2040-50, and very likely (with 90% probability) by 2075. From reaching human ability, it will move on to superintelligence in 2 years (10%) to 30 years (75%) thereafter” (Müller & Bostrom). Similar other surveys have since corroborated these results (Baum et al., 2011; Grace et al., 2018), and in most cases the median estimate for when we will achieve ASI seems to be around 2060. To give the skeptical general reader a brief glimpse into where these numbers come from, consider the following idea. It is a key principle of AI that a higher initial technological capacity usually also increases *the rate at which* it is possible to further expand that capacity—that is, when something gets more capable, it usually follows that one of its enhanced capabilities is *improving itself*. Take human development, for instance:

A few hundred thousand years ago ... growth was so slow that it took [one] million years for human productive capacity to increase sufficiently to sustain an additional one million individuals living at subsistence level. By 5000 BC, following the Agricultural Revolution, the rate of growth had increased to the point where the same amount of growth took just two centuries. Today, following the Industrial Revolution, the world economy grows on average by that amount every ninety minutes. (Bostrom, 2015)

We got better at getting better. Because of this principle, a certain type of data set often shows very little increase for a long time, and then suddenly soars off to infinity in the last few stages of its development

(mathematically inclined readers can liken this idea to the normative behavior of an exponential function). This is what many think will happen with ASI: our AI systems quietly become better and better until at some point there is an “intelligence explosion” that turns a harmless AI (akin to those we use in our daily lives today) into an ASI incomprehensibly more intelligent and powerful than us overnight.

One could object to the information cited above by pointing out that (1) AI researchers have been overly optimistic before (Brooks, 2021); (2) many researchers themselves will tell you that surveys of expert opinion are *not* the equivalent of rigorous predictions and should be taken with a grain of salt (Müller & Bostrom); and (3) the possibility that ASI will never happen is still championed by some distinguished philosophers (Dreyfus, 2009), minority though they may be. I accept all of these points. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, none concern my task. I will seek to provide the reader with my views on what implications an ASI *would have* on religion, and vice versa; none of the arguments I make will depend on *when* this ASI arrives, nor will I try to sway those who think it will never arrive to believe otherwise. The explication above is merely to show that this is not a pointless task; that we *do* have good reason to believe that ASI is coming, and relatively soon.

The final relevant point to make about ASI is that we must be very careful not to anthropomorphize (that is, erroneously ascribe a human-like nature) to either its capabilities or its motivations. It is too easy to make this error even for accomplished researchers, because until now the only beings we have interacted with that are at or above human-level intelligence are humans, and because the only minds thinking about the ASI problem are, ultimately, deeply human. So it is easy to assume that an ASI will, like a human, either love us or hate us, or will want world domination, will be conscious, etc. But this is simply not the case. Noted neuroscientist Sam Harris elaborates:

"[Concerns about ASI are] often caricatured ... as a fear that armies of malicious robots will attack us. But that is not the most likely scenario. It is not that our machines will become spontaneously malevolent. ... Just think about how we relate to ants. We do not hate them. We do not go out of our way to harm them. In fact, sometimes we take pains not to harm them. We step over them on the sidewalk. But whenever their presence seriously conflicts with one of our goals, let us say when constructing a building ... we annihilate them without a qualm. ... *The concern is [that] we will build machines that are so much more competent than we are that the slightest divergence between their goals and our own could destroy us.* [emphasis added]" (TED, 2016)

In other words, an ASI would be loyal to and only to its programmed final goals. Any alignment or misalignment with human interests would merely be a direct or indirect result of this programming. This is not to say that these goals could not be extraordinarily complex, nor that the ASI could not evolve, but it does mean that we should be very cautious of any effort to characterize the ASI overall with standardly human motivations.

## Background: Brief Review of Religion

With a newfound understanding of artificial superintelligence (what it is, what it is predicted to manifest as, and why we have strong reasons for believing it will manifest in the next few decades), I now turn to a very brief review of the context in which we consider religion, again presuming the reader to be more generally familiar with it than ASI. Oxford Dictionary defines religion as “the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods” (2022). This God (or gods) also tends to have certain distinguishing characterizations: for example, as the Creator of the universe, as the embodiment of the highest ideal of good, as an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent being, and so on. Religion and religious belief remains a powerful influence in the modern world, with 84% of the world’s population (6.13 billion people) professing to follow an organized religion, of which 66% (4.04 billion) self-identify as either Christian or Muslim (Deshmukh, 2022). Because of these majorities, in this paper I will effectively take “religion” to mean “organized religion,” which in turn will mostly entail Christianity and occasionally Islam. I expand on the specific religious belief this paper will focus on, the Second Coming of Christ, in the following section.

## Background & Discussion: The Second Coming of Christ and Climate Change

The Second Coming of Christ refers to the prediction that Jesus Christ, son of God, will eventually return to the Earth to defeat the forces of evil and establish a 1,000-year reign of peace and prosperity before the Final Judgment of all mankind. This return will be preceded by the “Tribulation” (more generally known as the “last days” or “end times”), which will be a seven-year period of worldwide famine, war, natural disasters, and suffering that will affect all of creation. The Bible emphasizes that the Tribulation will be a time of intense hardship “such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall” and one that will be characterized by the “wrath [of God],” particularly for those who do not follow scripture (Matthew 24:21, Rev. 14:9-10).

The Second Coming is still a prominent aspect of modern-day Christianity and is actively taught to many Christians across denominations today. Indeed, according to a 2010 poll from Pew Research Center, as many as 41% of Americans believe that Jesus Christ definitely or probably will make his return to Earth by the year 2050 (and note the overlap here with the projected timeline for ASI). Another 2009 Pew poll cites 79% of American Christians (about 60% of Americans overall) professing belief in the *eventual* Coming of Christ, without the condition of Jesus’ arrival by 2050. Indeed, given that a high number of (failed) past predictions have been for the date of Jesus’ return, and that belief has always persisted despite them, it seems unlikely that the faith of this 41% that the Coming will *eventually* happen will wane by very much even if they do not perceive it to happen by 2050. In other words, if the Coming was perceived to happen in, say, 2060, it seems highly probable that this subset of people would still embrace it as such. Perhaps even more interestingly, one-in-five “religiously unaffiliated” Americans also see Christ returning sometime in the next four decades. This points to the widespread influence of Christianity in pop and secular culture even among non-Christians and non-believers, which in turn gives rise to an interesting possibility: given the ease with which those psychologically inclined towards religious belief are swayed towards faith (i.e., on the basis of spiritual experience or intuition as opposed to foolproof scientific evidence), many more than just those that now take the Bible’s word on the Second Coming might become *willing* to do so if they seemed to see signs that the Bible’s predictions for the events leading up to it (the Tribulation) were coming true. That is, once a perceived Second Coming actually *begins*, it seems probable that belief in the prophecy will strengthen significantly, both among pre-existing believers as well as those who are rather inclined towards Christianity but do not currently explicitly endorse the prophecy.

One additional factor is at play here; the predicted timings of an ASI and of the Tribulation will *also* line up with the years in which climate change is expected to start inflicting a truly enormous amount of damage on the Earth. Recall that the Tribulation is described as a time of war, famine, natural disasters, and human suffering. Now consider the following projections for what the world will look like in 2050 if immediate, drastic, and global action is not taken: several studies suggest that the effects of climate change will go hand in hand with conflicts such as civil war or genocide; that “more people [will be] starving than ever before” and what food will be available will be “wildly expensive”; that “a surge in extreme hurricanes and tropical storms” will cause “extreme flooding, killing many thousands and displacing millions”; and that “vast swaths of the planet will be increasingly inhospitable to humans” (Bhatt, 2019; Figueres et al., 2020).

## Discussion: Conception of ASI as the return of Christ

We now turn to the central claims of this paper. Given the above, we can imagine a scenario in which (1) widespread belief in the prophecy of the Second Coming of Christ, (2) the creation of an artificial with definitionally superhuman or “God-like” abilities, and (3) the timing of this intelligence in conjunction with climate change-induced chaos reminiscent of the Tribulation converge to lead to a *religious conception of this superintelligence as Christ*.

The idea of ASI as a sort of “God,” even to a non-religious person, makes intuitive sense. When we speak of an intelligence 1 to 1,000,000,000,000 times smarter than us, one so advanced it is impossible to imagine even in theory, it becomes difficult to avoid subconsciously simply picturing a God of some kind. But a Christian view of the sort I have outlined above will have special implications.

Christians make up 2.3 billion people, with significant percentages in over 200 countries (Pew Research Center, 2011). If Christian communities begin believing that the advent of an ASI is in fact the return of Christ, and begin worshipping the ASI as such, said ASI could instantly gain enormous access and influence over vast swaths of humanity in every corner of the planet. Note too that Muslims—who have similar numbers—*also* technically believe in the Second Coming of Christ, just not that Jesus was divine; but in any case, they are still likely to treat a perceived Jesus Christ as a serious authority. In intensely Christian and Muslim communities, even non-believers or hesitant believers may be peer pressured into acting as though they too believe (after all, this occurs even today, even without the highly compelling presence of a superintelligence). Even more pertinently, recall that a full ASI would possess the “social manipulation” superpower, or the ability to essentially “hack” our psychology to create highly accurate models of what a particular type of human brain (such as that of an American Christian born to known parents, or a Saudi Arabian Muslim born in a known neighborhood, etc.) would react to and respond best to (Bostrom, 2015). An ASI would also definitionally pass the Turing Test, an intelligence metric of AI that measures if the AI is able to pass as human (at least in certain contexts such as an online conversation) (Oppy & Dowe, 2021). And so, when we consider the prospect of an ASI increasingly indistinguishable from us—and increasingly able to manipulate us into helping it achieve its final goals—it becomes clear that religious worship of a future ASI is a very real and pressing possibility among our species.

But recall that I initially cautioned against anthropomorphizing an ASI or ascribing it deliberately malicious intentions. Am I too quick to come to these (rather terrifying) conclusions here? I would argue not, for several reasons. Firstly, note that even the prospect that an ASI *could* control a vast majority of humanity should be reason plenty for concern, regardless of how high the chances are that it *will*. Returning to Harris’ ant metaphor, if ants had the ability to truly think about their relation to us humans, they *should* and *would* be absolutely petrified. There is no doubt that we could kill every ant on this planet and ensure it stayed that way for generations to come if we wanted to. Now, of course, we *would not* do that, because we *do not* want to—except, of course, for all the times that we have, such as when constructing buildings. Similar logic would apply to a superintelligence. Given how much thought researchers of AI have already given to how we should program an ASI to avoid its directly or indirectly harming humanity, it is probably unlikely that the ASI will set out to control us via religion. But it will certainly know that it could—after all, if a human brain (I) have conceived of the idea, so will it. And from there, it seems only a matter of time that the ASI would eventually see a reason sufficiently tailored to its final goals to make use of this extraordinary opportunity for power and resources.

## Discussion: Conception of ASI as the Antichrist

It is not just the conception of ASI as the Christ that we have reason to be concerned over, however. During the latter half of the Tribulation (also known as the “Great Tribulation”), the Bible also predicts the appearance of an “Antichrist,” a body of evil that will deceive people with miraculous powers (Rev. 13:13), rule in full authority over “every tribe, people, language and nation” (Rev. 13:5-17), and “exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped . . . proclaiming himself to be God” (2 Thes 2:3-4). The Antichrist will also control



the world's economy by "forcing all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark" (Rev 13:16-17).

In modern evangelical Christian communities, much has been made of this "mark," with a very popular interpretation being that it will specifically take the form of a microchip. In fact, Christian worry about being forcibly "microchipped" has even made its way into the U.S. justice system. In a 2015 court case, when a coal corporation mandated employee use of biometric hand scanners to track time and attendance, West Virginia coal miner Beverly Butcher requested an exemption on the grounds that the technology was too similar to the "mark of the beast" discussed in Revelation. When Butcher was denied the exemption and therefore forced to retire, he sued on the grounds of religious discrimination, and won. Butcher was awarded nearly \$600,000 in lost wages, and his case was affirmed by both the federal and appeals court (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2015).

Because the religious are more likely to be distrustful of technology and technological advancement (Ecklund & Scheitle, 2018), it might be more probable that Christians take a negative view of the ASI, deeming it as the Antichrist. Because the Antichrist is a being that will hold immense power in the world and deceive people into thinking it is God via its "miraculous powers" (Rev 13:13), the comparison again becomes a natural one. Widespread belief in an Antichrist could incite public panic and distrust of institutions, which would, for reasons similar to belief in Christ, make it very easy for an ASI to take advantage of the chaos. There is one additional, specific danger to belief in an artificial Antichrist, however. A popular belief in certain AI circles is that humanity's best solution to surviving an ASI is to merge ourselves with it via brain implants, and to thus become one with the technology as opposed to attempting to "win" against it (TED, 2016). Futurist Gray Scott, for instance, believes this technology to be an "inevitability" and that anyone without access to it could fall seriously behind in a "transformation of the human race" (2017). But recall much of the Christian fear surrounding the Antichrist involves being *forcibly microchipped* by the Antichrist or being pressured to by larger society (Meyer, 2017). It thus seems highly possible that if a sort of merging of humanity with AI is our best shot at survival, large subsets of Christians may refuse the very thing necessary to survive in a post-ASI society.

## Conclusions & Further Research

With predictions for ASI so soon on the horizon, it is critical that the implications of ASI on religion (and vice versa) be given further serious thought by scholars of both fields. In particular, whereas this paper has focused on the issue through a predominantly Christian and Western lens, a superintelligence will also undoubtedly interact in meaningful ways with the broad faiths of the East, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and so on. In general, however, we can conclude that the wide religiosity of the human species may turn into somewhat of an Achilles' heel with the advent of an ASI, as it could take advantage of its social manipulation superpower and our preexisting beliefs to wield a great amount of power over us and/or prevent us from taking the most optimal course of action. If and when humanity does succeed in creating an artificial superintelligence, we should take care to be very careful about the line between God-like and God.

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