

God's Mission and Ethical AI: Opportunities and Challenges for the Future of Missions in Asia

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ABSTRACT

Asia, the world's largest and most populous continent, a home of roughly 60% of the global population. It's a legacy of fundamentalism, traditionalism, where people love to avoid changing situations. And with the presence of technology in Asia, like the Artificial Intelligence (AI), it gave birth to reforms in Asian societies, offering both innovative opportunities and pressing ethical challenges.¹ For the Church, AI presents innovative tools for evangelism, discipleship, pastoral care, and business as mission, yet also raises concerns of ethical issues like dehumanization, digital inequality, and theological distortion. This article explores the relationship between *Missio Dei*² and the ethical use of AI in Asian missions. By grounding reflection in biblical theology, assessing emerging opportunities, and identifying critical risks, the study proposes a framework for ethical AI³ use that upholds human dignity, advances justice, and strengthens the Church's witness in the digital age.

INTRODUCTION

From the prehistoric pigments⁴ to this twenty-first century, a huge technological revolution ascended that rivals the printing press and the industrial age: the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). Asia stands at the forefront of this transformation, with AI shaping economies, education, communication, and governance. For Christians, the pressing question is not whether AI will impact mission, but how it will do so, and whether its use will align with the purposes of God. Technology is never neutral. It embodies human values and can either advance the kingdom of God or undermine it. As the Church in Asia reflects on its role in the rapidly evolving digital landscape, the biblical foundation of *Missio Dei* provides a critical lens.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF GOD'S MISSION

The Bible is above all the innovations and situations. The Bible welcomes innovation, however, not

1. The ethical challenges of AI include bias and discrimination, risks to data privacy and security.

2. *Missio Dei* is a Latin theological term meaning "the mission of God" or "the sending of God," referring to the belief that God is the active source of all mission, and His redemptive power encompasses creation.

3. Ethical AI refers to the practice of designing, developing, and deploying artificial intelligence systems in a way that upholds human values minimizing potential harm and bias.

4. Prehistoric pigments were derived from natural minerals, primarily the iron-based pigments ochre (red, yellow, brown) and manganese oxide (black), along with charcoal.

dehumanization. Matthew 28:19–20 the Great Commission states, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." This verse commands global discipleship, which today can be aided powerfully through digital tools, allowing us to reach places physically inaccessible. 1 Corinthians 9:22–23 states, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel..." Paul's flexibility in mission suggests using "all possible means" — which today may include AI, apps, or online platforms — for gospel outreach. Proverbs 8:12 states, "I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion." Wisdom and innovation can coexist. AI, when used wisely, reflects God's gift of human ingenuity and knowledge. Exodus 31:3–5 states, "And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills..." This refers to Bezalel, empowered by God for craftsmanship — a principle that supports using human skill and innovation (like tech) in God's service. Romans 10:14–15 states, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?... And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" Digital platforms and AI can amplify the "preaching" and reach of the gospel to unreached groups or those without access to physical churches.

The foundation of mission lies in the nature of God Himself. God is Creator and Sustainer: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1). Humanity, created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), is entrusted with creativity, stewardship, and responsibility. This *imago Dei*⁵ affirms the human capacity to innovate, but it also places boundaries: technology must never usurp God's place or diminish human dignity.

The New Testament frames mission through the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God revealed in Christ and extended through the Spirit-empowered church. Mission is holistic, involving proclamation, reconciliation, justice, and care for creation (Luke 4:18–19; Acts 1:8). Thus, the ethical evaluation of AI in missions must ask:

- Does it affirm human dignity as image-bearers of God?
- Does it advance justice and inclusion, especially for the marginalized?
- Does it contribute to God's purposes of reconciliation and transformation?

5. *Imago Dei* is a Latin term meaning "image of God," a core doctrine in Christian theology stating that humanity was created by God in His own image and likeness.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ETHICAL AI FOR MISSIONS IN ASIA

“No technology is ambivalent; each one comes with certain biases and tendencies. The true challenge of ethics is not in determining which technologies should be made possible but in determining how those new possibilities are wielded. Thus, Scripture puts the emphasis not on the technology, but on how those innovations are used” (Reinke, Tony, Dec 1, 2021). However, when guided by biblical ethics, AI offers significant opportunities for advancing God’s mission in Asia.

1. **Digital Evangelism and Translation.** AI has accelerated Bible translation, enabling minority languages to access Scripture more rapidly. For Asia’s thousands of unreached groups, this is a profound missional resource.
2. **Theological Education.** AI-powered learning platforms provide contextual theological training for pastors in rural or resource-poor areas. Digital tutors can supplement seminaries and extend training far beyond traditional classrooms.
3. **Pastoral Care and Counseling.** AI-based mental health platforms are emerging in Asia. Used ethically, these tools can support pastoral care where trauma, depression, and anxiety are prevalent, while reminding the church that ultimate healing rests in Christ.
4. **Diaspora and Urban Missions.** AI tools that analyze communication and migration patterns can help churches connect with dispersed communities across Asia, opening pathways for diaspora missions.
5. **Business as Mission.** AI applications in entrepreneurship, finance, and social innovation can empower Christian leaders to integrate faith and economics, especially in South Asia, where poverty reduction and spiritual transformation must go hand in hand.

CHALLENGES AND RISKS OF AI IN MISSIONS

“Noreen Herzfeld said, ‘A Christian theology centered in our relationship — with God, neighbor, self — is necessarily an embodied theology.’ For that reason alone, it seems that AI cannot entirely replace human relationships” (Cootsona, Greg, Jan 23, 2024). Yet, AI poses equally serious challenges that require theological discernment.

Ethical Concerns

AI poses serious ethical challenges, particularly in the areas of bias, misinformation, and surveillance. Algorithms often mirror the prejudices present in their training data, reinforcing social inequalities and marginalizing vulnerable groups. In authoritarian contexts, surveillance technologies powered by AI may severely limit freedom of religion, restricting worship,

monitoring churches, and silencing dissenting voices. For missions in Asia, these issues demand careful theological reflection and ethical discernment to ensure technology serves God’s mission without violating human dignity. “Even so, little separation between the soteriological and the humanitarian motifs was in evidence during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The missionaries persisted in the pre-Enlightenment tradition of the indissoluble unity of “evangelization” and “humanization” (cf van der Linde 1973), of “service to the soul” and “service to the body” (Nergaard 1988:34–40), of proclaiming the gospel and spreading a “beneficent civilization” (Rennstich 1982a, 1982b) (Bosch J. David, Orbis Books 1991).

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Dependence vs. Discipleship

While artificial intelligence offers tools for spiritual learning, there is a genuine danger in reducing discipleship to digital algorithms. Prayer, fellowship, and discipleship are inherently relational and cannot be automated without losing their essence. True spiritual formation is grounded in the presence of God, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the accountability of the faith community. Over-reliance on AI risks creating a mechanized version of faith that lacks transformation. Machines can transmit information but cannot nurture intimacy with Christ. The Church must ensure technology supports, rather than replaces, the deeply personal journey of following Jesus.

Cultural Complexities

Asia’s cultural and religious diversity adds unique layers to how technology, including AI, is perceived and used. *Societies shaped by Confucian*⁶ traditions often value harmony and collective responsibility, while Hindu contexts emphasize *spiritual cosmologies*⁷ that may see technology as part of destiny. In Buddhist regions, technology may be viewed through the lens of *impermanence and mindfulness*,⁸ whereas Islamic

6. A Confucian tradition society is a society that is founded on the ethical and social philosophy of Confucianism, which emphasizes social harmony, virtue, and family relationships.

7. Spiritual cosmologies are comprehensive belief systems that provide explanations for the origin, nature, and eventual fate of the universe.

8. In the heart of Buddhist teachings lies the Noble Eightfold Path. Mindfulness, or sati, is a type of meditation in which one focuses on being intensely aware of what you’re sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment.

societies stress ethical limits under *divine law*.⁹ These perspectives influence how communities accept or resist AI in spiritual and social life. Missionaries must therefore contextualize their approaches, ensuring that the use of technology respects local traditions and avoids cultural imposition.

Economic Divide

The rapid advancement of AI highlights a growing economic divide within the global and Asian church. Urban congregations and wealthy institutions often have the resources to access advanced technologies, implement digital ministries, and train leaders in AI-based tools. By contrast, rural churches and marginalized communities struggle with limited infrastructure, poor internet connectivity, and lack of technical literacy. This unequal access risks excluding vast portions of the Body of Christ from participating in new forms of mission. If not addressed, AI could deepen disparities rather than promote unity. The church must therefore prioritize digital inclusion as a theological imperative.

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Theological Dangers

“Human beings are, by definition, mortal; by proposing to overcome every limit through technology, in an obsessive desire to control everything, we risk losing control over ourselves; in the quest for an absolute freedom, we risk falling into the spirit of a ‘technological dictatorship’” (Francis, Pope, May 25, 2024). Artificial intelligence carries the risk of becoming more than a tool—it can be idolized as a source of ultimate wisdom or control. When human innovation seeks *autonomy from God*,¹⁰ it mirrors the *hubris of Babel*¹¹ (Gen. 11), where people attempted to build a self-sufficient system apart from *divine authority*.¹² Such dependence on technology can

9. In Islam, divine law is known as Sharia, a comprehensive legal and moral framework derived from the Quran and the Sunnah (the teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad).

10. Autonomy from God generally refers to an individual attempting to be “a law unto themselves” by living independently of God’s authority, rather than being self-governing and free from God’s dominion.

11. The “hubris of Babel” refers to the extreme pride, overconfidence, and arrogance of the people in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, who sought to make a name for themselves and reach the heavens to rival God’s authority.

12. In the Bible, divine authority is God’s inherent right and

subtly replace faith in God with reliance on human creations, distorting the mission of the church. The danger lies not in AI itself, but in its elevation to a godlike status. Theology reminds us that true wisdom comes only from God, not machines.

TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR ETHICAL AI IN ASIAN MISSIONS

“As AI matures it would not be unreasonable to consider that whatever emerges will be the highest form of a false god that humanity has ever encountered. The Church is woefully unprepared, but the mission’s community has the ability to swiftly engage, if we have the will to do so (CDI Staff, March 16, 2024). The Asian church must adopt a framework that aligns AI with God’s mission. Four guiding principles are proposed:

Artificial intelligence must be harnessed to reduce digital inequality and amplify marginalized voices. Churches have a moral responsibility to ensure equal access by investing in digital literacy, particularly for rural pastors and leaders.

Human-Centered Design

Artificial intelligence must remain a servant to humanity, not a replacement of God-given dignity. Every technological tool should uphold the worth of individuals created in God’s image. Ministry must therefore remain relational, prioritizing community, discipleship, and love, while ensuring AI enhances rather than diminishes human connection.

Justice-Oriented Use

Artificial intelligence must be harnessed to reduce digital inequality and amplify marginalized voices. Churches have a moral responsibility to ensure equal access by investing in digital literacy, particularly for rural pastors and leaders. Such efforts reflect biblical justice, empowering communities while safeguarding inclusivity in God’s mission.

Mission-Focused Application

Artificial intelligence should be intentionally directed toward advancing God’s mission—supporting evangelism, discipleship, and holistic transformation. Efficiency alone cannot define success. Technology must remain a tool to proclaim Christ, nurture spiritual growth, and strengthen communities, ensuring that ministry outcomes reflect eternal values

ultimate power to govern, command, and establish laws over all creation.

rather than temporary productivity gains.

Community Discernment

The church must approach AI through shared spiritual discernment, guided by the Holy Spirit. Decisions about its role in ministry should not rest on individual preference or technological trends but emerge from prayer, dialogue, and collective wisdom, ensuring AI strengthens faith communities while honoring God's mission.

Practical steps include: introducing AI ethics in seminary curricula, establishing cross-denominational task forces on technology and mission, and fostering collaboration between Asian churches and Christian technologists.

CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is reshaping Asia in profound ways. For the church, AI represents both opportunity and danger. Properly harnessed, it can accelerate translation, extend theological education, and support pastoral care. Misused, it can deepen inequality, distort discipleship, and even become an idol. "What is the difference between a man who exists and a machine that functions? ... This is perhaps the greatest question of these times, because we are witnessing a challenge ... with a machine that is humanizing" (Friar Paolo Benanti, Vatican ethics advisor, Jan 18, 2024). The Church in Asia must neither idolize nor reject AI. Instead, it must adopt a stance of critical embrace, discerning how to use AI as a tool that serves God's mission. Rooted in Scripture and guided by the Spirit, the Asian church can model a faithful, ethical engagement with technology that both honors God and advances His kingdom.

Practical Implications

- For Churches: Churches should organize digital ethics workshops for pastors and leaders, equipping them to engage responsibly with artificial intelligence. Such training fosters biblical discernment, safeguards against misuse, and ensures that technology supports discipleship, evangelism, and community life rather than undermining them.
- For Seminaries: Seminaries should integrate artificial intelligence and missiology into their curricula, preparing future leaders to engage critically with technology. This equips students with theological discernment, ethical awareness, and practical skills to apply AI responsibly in evangelism, discipleship, and mission strategy.
- For Mission Organizations: Mission agencies should apply AI tools for Bible translation, discipleship, and ministry communication, but always under strong human oversight. This ensures that technology enhances mission effectiveness without replacing spiritual

discernment, pastoral accountability, or the relational essence of Christian witness.

- For Global Partnerships: Churches and mission organizations must collaborate across denominations and national borders to develop and share ethical AI practices. Such partnerships encourage accountability, foster innovation, and ensure that technology strengthens the global witness of the Body of Christ in unity.

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