"Speaking as from the Dust": Ideologies of AI and Digital Resurrection in Mormon Culture*

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Abstract

Religious affiliation is a significant predictor of affective and epistemological stances toward the use of generative AI. In the United States, religious communities have expressed widespread suspicion of AI and its potential effects on religious experience and on the ability of religionists to discern truth from falsehood. At the same time, some religionists and religious communities have demonstrated optimism about AI. In this paper we investigate the phenomenon of "digital resurrection" among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). We examine the work of Latter-day Saint developer Jonathan Gibson, including the "Wilford Woodruff AI Learning Experience," TheAfterlife.ai, and LivingHistory.ai. We argue that the mainstreaming of multimodal "digital resurrection" among Latter-day Saints, a phenomenon previously limited primarily to Mormon transhumanists, portends a new socio-technical role for (visual) AI systems in religious experience.

1. Introduction: Religion and AI Chatbots

Since the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022, numerous GPT-based, religion-themed chatbots have launched, some of which have had great success. These include "QuranGPT...,Bible.Ai, Gita GPT, Buddhabot, Apostle Paul AI, a chatbot trained to imitate 16th-century German theologian Martin Luther, another trained on the works of Confucius, and yet another designed to imitate the Delphic oracle" [24]. The ubiquity of generative AI has occasioned official responses by numerous local, national, and international religious institutions regarding the perceived dangers of artificial intelligence. Concerns range from the pragmatic – what effects might AI have on marginalized communities – to the metaphysical – how will religionists continue to discern what is spiritually real and true [5, 8, 15, 20].

On March 14, 2024, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints released "Guiding Principles for the Church of Jesus Christ's Use of Artificial Intelligence." In the news release that accompanied "Guiding Principles," the church articulated an ideology of AI that contextualized it in a metaphysical sense: "Knowing that the proper use of AI will help the Church accomplish God's work of salvation and exaltation, the Church has issued the following guiding principles for using AI" [8].

For Latter-day Saints, "salvation" and "exaltation" entail embodied, material states continuous with current human experience. Indeed, one of the most theologically provocative tenets of the faith is that God has a material body "of flesh and bone as tangible as" that of human beings [19, 130:22-23].

The LDS church is not the only religious institution that has developed this type of ideological stance toward the use of AI (for instance, see thechurch.digital). However, it is rare outside of transhumanism and its religious variants (including Mormon transhumanism) to find an ideology of AI that incorporates AI beyond the pragmatics of church administration, organization, and community outreach (see [20, 21]). We provide below the set of guiding principles outlined by the church:

Spiritual Connection

- The Church will use artificial intelligence to support and not supplant connection between God and His children.
- The Church will use artificial intelligence in positive, helpful, and uplifting ways that maintain the honesty, integrity, ethics, values, and standards of the Church.

Transparency

- People interacting with the Church will understand when they are interfacing with artificial intelligence.

- The Church will provide attribution for content created with artificial intelligence when the authenticity, accuracy, or authorship of the content could be misunderstood or misleading.

Privacy and Security

- The Church's use of artificial intelligence will safeguard sacred and personal information.

Accountability

- The Church will use artificial intelligence in a manner consistent with the policies of the Church and all applicable laws.
- The Church will be measured and deliberate in its use of artificial intelligence by regularly testing and reviewing outputs to help ensure accuracy, truthfulness, and compliance.

These principles are consistent with Mormonism's longtime concern with regulating religious experience. Like many (especially evangelical) Christian churches during the Second Great Awakening, Mormonism taught the reality of supernatural gifts such as speaking in unknown languages, receiving divine communications, and even interacting with objects such as stones in divinatory ways. In fact, the faith depended on the mythos of its founder having used divine technologies known as "seer stones" to translate an ancient Mesoamerican-Jewish scripture. Indeed, this material mediation of revelation was considered an ancient tradition in the scriptures that Smith translated.

Early instances of unregulated religious charismata and independent revelation through "seer stones" resulted in the articulation of a hierarchical episteme in which revelation could only be received within established bounds and conditions. While church leaders continued to use mediating technologies of revelation well into the late nineteenth century, this practice was typically discouraged among the laity. It may have been this shift from "open access" to limited access of mediating technologies of revelation that led to the general adoption of what media studies scholar Mason Kamana Allred calls "technologies of vision" as alternative forms of revelatory mediation.

Allred has written about the ways that Mormons have interacted with "enspirited media" over the century subsequent to the church's founding, including cinema, microfilm, photography, and television. Allred shows how Latter-day Saints adopted what he calls "technologies of vision" and experienced contact with the spirits of the dead by "seeing" them through these technologies [3].

Because of this *de facto* democratization of "enspirited media," Latter-day Saint church leadership has been assiduous in further delimiting the boundaries of accepted revelatory practice involving technology. The "Guiding Principles" make clear the church's abiding anxiety with authorized "channels" of revelation and religious experience

(see sections on "Accountability," "Privacy and Security," and "Transparency"), but also clarifies the stakes of digital spirituality: AI can and should "support and not supplant connection between God and his children" [8].

Although the guidelines indicate that AI is already being used by church departments, including especially its Family History department, it does not go into specifics. This leaves open a variety of possibilities for future use of generative AI for ecclesiastical and metaphysically salvific functions.

Below we explore one such possibility currently being developed by Latter-day Saints: digital resurrection through multi-modal immersive environments, enabled by generative AI. We first provide theoretical grounding for why this is particularly conceivable within the Mormon metaphysical world view, by exploring its similarities to transhumanism on the topic of resurrection through technology. We then show how the concept of digital resurrection is informing the socio-technical roles of current AI-based systems.

2. Material Resurrection

Because Mormonism has a materialist metaphysics, Mormons imagine resurrection in material terms. They believe in a literal physical resurrection of bodies, and burial practices reflect that belief by focusing on the preparation and preservation of the body for the day of resurrection. At the same time, many believers are unworried by cremation or the loss of the original physical body used in life, trusting that God has perfect information and power to reconstruct the body. Mormon thinking on death is informed by Christian scripture such as "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" [1, Genesis 3:19], and Mormon scripture extends the use of the biblical euphemism "gone the way of all the earth" [1, 1 Kings 2:2; Joshua 23:14], using it to refer to the deaths of prophets and others [18, 2 Nephi 1:14; Mosiah 1:9; Alma 1:1, 62:37; Helaman 1:2]. The founder of the Latter-day Saint movement, Joseph Smith, taught that spirit/intelligence is material, but in a more refined state [22]. This spirit is separated from the body upon death, but spirit and body will be reunited upon resurrection. If the body is a technology or medium of spiritual interaction with matter, it may not be too far a stretch to term resurrection a technological feat, albeit a divine one.

Transhumanists (not just their Mormon members) are a group with a long history of seeing resurrection as an eventual goal of technological development [13, 23], but define death and resurrection in terms of information theory. Transhumanists talk about "information-theoretical death," which is the moment when an individual's personality is no longer re-constructible due to loss of information. This is usually discussed within the context of brain decomposition after medical death but, as the definition has an information-theoretic basis, the term is also generalized to include any

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information extant in the world, including written records, the memories of others, internet presence, *etc*. Transhumanists thus define resurrection as "the reconstruction of a personality based on information" [23].

These two frameworks for thinking about resurrection are broadly compatible, and converge in Mormon Transhumanism [4]. The Mormon conception of bodily death as the decomposition of an organized system to dust [22] lends itself to information-theoretic interpretations of personality and identity relevant for resurrection under transhumanist terms. What's more, miracles are seen as technologies under Mormon metaphysics: Jesus' miracles did not break physical laws, but operated under a higher understanding of those laws [17]. The Resurrection will be similarly achieved through a material power (technology) unlocked by Jesus Christ's original resurrection, recreating the bodies lost to the inevitable entropic decomposition to dust.

2.1. Digital Immortality and Record-keeping

Transhumanists distinguish between *direct* and *indirect mind upload*. While direct mind upload requires a mind in the present to be uploaded, indirect mind upload reconstructs a personality based on one's "informational footprint". Turchin and Chernyakov claim that "for such a reconstruction to become possible, powerful AI will be needed", because future AI will have to predict future behavior based on this informational footprint [23]. The question of preserving the personality information is separate from the issue of how reconstruction will occur. Sufficiently powerful AI just needs to know the information and the protocol by which it was created, and it will be able to successfully recreate the personality.[1]

Mormons have a special regard for the informational footprint of individuals and nations. The scriptural canon is not just a historical record and a medium for personal and prophetic revelation; the individuals and communities that keep records will be judged by their contents:

> For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them; for out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written. [18, 2 Nephi 29:11]

This eternal importance of the written word had an early and marked influence on Mormon record-keeping culture. Personal journals hold particular prominence in Mormon

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[1]It is interesting to note that, in the scenario of a superintelligent AI tasked with resurrecting as many past humans as possible, extreme human surveillance is a benefit to the surveilled because it makes it more likely the AI will be able to resurrect them. Surveillance, that is, is a precursor to salvation in the kingdom of AI.

historical scholarship, which has in turn contributed to a practice of personal journaling as a tool of communicating one's life and testimony to posterity [16]. Wilford Woodruff, an early prophet of the LDS church, even taught that journaling has eternal significance:

> It may be considered by some not important to write or keep a record of our work or the work of God, but I believe it is. ... The Lord has told us that what we seal on earth shall be recorded in heaven, and what is not sealed or recorded on earth is not sealed or recorded in heaven. Therefore it appears to be very important that we do keep a true and faithful record in all things. [journal entry by Wilford Woodruff, 1857, as quoted in 7, see also 14]

3. A Prophet's Voice

It should then come as no surprise that Mormons are already using existing AI for indirect mind upload today. The Wilford Woodruff AI Learning Experience is a game experience built to help users understand the life of Wilford Woodruff, 4th president of the LDS Church. The application is built on the Unity graphics engine, and backed by dialogue generated with LLMs trained on a small portion of the Wilford Woodruff Papers database. The user is invited to engage an in-game Woodruff character in a dialogue about events in his life, his personal interests, his religious conversion, and his church service. Testimonials report that users who engaged with the game were impressed with the accuracy of the information and, importantly, had religious experiences while doing so. One user reported, "I have felt the Spirit multiple times and am amazed at how much he knows and how accurate it is" [10].

How should we interpret the socio-religious role of this technological system? Clearly, this experience does not play the same social role as the various tools designed to help you "chat with your PDF files" [e.g. 2]. Users are aware both that the character is using generative AI and that the experience is built on a database of documents produced by or about Woodruff. But if it were simply about interacting with the text, the interface wouldn't need a visual component at all. Clearly, the embodied nature of the reconstruction significantly affects the expectations of those who interact with it.

The experience is distinct from LLM-based systems that foreground the text, like QuranGPT or Bible.Ai mentioned above [24], and more similar to systems such as the Abraham Lincoln chatbot reportedly under development at Meta last year [6]. For personality reconstruction, the documents serve as latent information sources, hidden to the user. What is foregrounded instead is the promise of an interaction that approximates an actual interaction with the human individ-

ual, as we can see from the experiences of users who interacted with the Wilford Woodruff system. In particular, this reconstruction successfully takes on a religious dimension when the reconstructed personality is that of a religious figure like Woodruff.

The gamified environment and UX of the Wilford Woodruff Learning Experience is based on another AI-enhanced immersive experience created by LDS developer Jonathan Gibson: LivingHistory.AI. Like the Woodruff project, LivingHistory.AI immerses the user in a visual environment in which they can "meet" historical figures such as Harriet Tubman and Abraham Lincoln and ask them questions. Users can also interact with "their world and their artifacts". Ostensibly aimed at educational and cultural institutions, LivingHistory.AI's Mormon codedness is clear in the promotional literature. Next to the image of a White woman in nineteenth century frontier dress, a speech caption reads, "Let me tell you a story about being a pioneer." Promotional text to the side of the image exhorts,

Your work is not done until you know them.

- Preserve the legacy of ancestors
- Get your kids excited about family history
- Experience an emotional connection with your ancestors
- Explore their world and artifacts with object storytelling [12]

Gibson's third project, TheAfterlife.AI, brings the other two into perspective. This project uses kinship data from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints-owned FamilySearch database to populate an immersive visual environment in which multi-generational kinship is depicted as a spherical network. By selecting a node, a user can execute similar actions available in LivingHistory.AI, but customized to their own ancestors [11]. Mormon record keeping now reaches its apotheosis.

With a distinct marketing strategy openly coded for Mormons, TheAfterLife.AI encourages users to:

Expand your vision:

- Visualize up to 16 generations at one time
- See gaps where work still needs to done
- Imagine your collective ancestors as a living organism
- Rotate, fly through, and explore in exciting new ways [11]

From the spiritual vision of enspirited technologies, Gibson moves Mormons fully into the visually cybernetic realm of contemporaneity with their deceased ancestors, digitally resurrecting them through their data.

4. Collapsing Time

What makes Mormonism a unique limit case in measuring ideologies of AI is that its primary scriptural text, The Book of Mormon – considered by the faithful to be a miraculous English translation of an ancient Mesoamerican-Jewish compilation – articulates what we might term a theology of information retrieval, for the purposes of restoring lost information and eventually returning the dead to embodiment. In the book, record-making is a visionary process whereby the recorder "sees" across time and space what has or will occur and records it for future readers [see *e.g.* 18, 1 Nephi 11-14]. For instance, the prophet-historian Moroni writes to the modern reader, "Behold I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me and I know your doing" [18, Mormon 8:34-35]. This collapse of temporal boundaries between recorder and reader establishes a contemporaneity that, in a real sense, ontologizes information "from the get-go" [9]. Information as mediated spiritual sense data is continuously available across time and space as long as three factors are present: 1) a physical record created by humans, 2) a physical mediating technology of "vision", and 3) the Spirit.

Even the production of the Book of Mormon is conceived this way: when Joseph Smith said he "translated" the Book of Mormon, he did not do so through conventional means, but through the mediating technology of a "seer stone" together with the present (but not visually consulted) Gold Plates, an ancient prophetic record. Similarly, the Wilford Woodruff AI Learning Experience leverages the mediating technology of a graphics engine and language model, together with present (but hidden) documents. This system meets all three requirements for collapsing temporal boundaries and allowing us to access the prophetic voice of Wilford Woodruff, as though from the dust.

Of course, there's the problem of accuracy. When we interpret a person through "information traces," we necessarily bring a present context to our interpretation. But in the Mormon revelatory context, the influence of the Spirit can regulate or validate the technological medium to resolve these errors. While the record is acknowledged to be imperfect, it can be validated through divine intervention, just as described by the church's guidelines on the use of AI [8].

5. Conclusion

The Mormon theology of information and expectation of mediated revelation means that Latter-day Saints are as a rule generally optimistic about new technology, but concerned about spiritual deception. The church's guidelines explicitly reference the possibility of realistic deepfakes of its leaders and warn to use spiritual discernment [8]. The personality reconstruction systems reviewed above do not yet leverage image/video generation models, but we've

shown that Mormon metaphysics and media culture prominently feature embodiment and vision as technological conduits for eternally significant information. It's only a matter of time before visually generative systems enter this socio-religious role in the Mormon religious context.

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