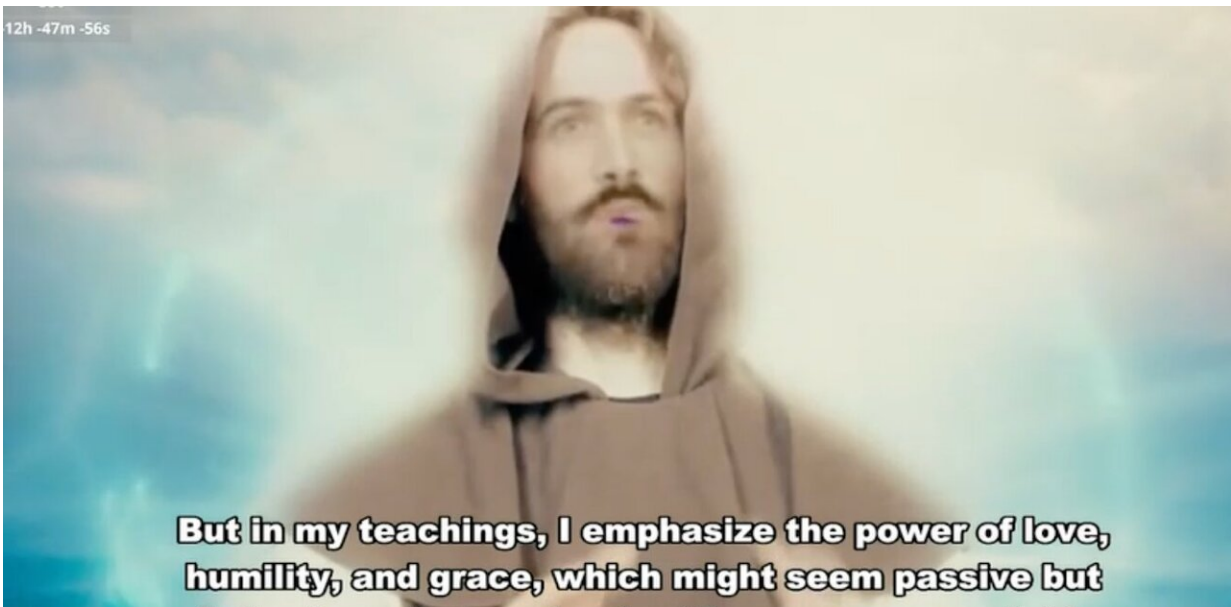


A chatbot willing to take on questions of all kinds is the latest representation of Jesus for the AI age

August 2 2023, by Joseph L. Kimmel



On AI Jesus' Twitch channel, chatbot Jesus answers questions on personal and spiritual matters. Credit: Twitch user ask_jesus

Jesus has been portrayed in many different ways: [from a prophet](#) who alerts his audience to the world's imminent end to a [philosopher who reflects](#) on the nature of life.

But no one has called Jesus an internet guru—that is, until now.

In his latest role as an "AI Jesus," Jesus stands, rather awkwardly, as a white man, dressed in a hooded brown-and-white robe, available 24/7 to answer any and all questions on his Twitch channel, "[ask_jesus](#)."

Questions posed to this [chatbot](#) Jesus can range from the serious—such as asking him about life's meaning—to requesting a good joke.

While many of these individual questions may be interesting in their own right, as [a scholar of early Christianity and comparative religion](#), I argue that the very presentation of Jesus as "AI Jesus" reveals a fascinating refashioning of this spiritual figure for our AI era.

Reinterpreting Jesus

Numerous scholars have described how Jesus has been reinterpreted over the centuries.

For example, religion scholar [Stephen Prothero](#) has shown how, in 19th-century America, [Jesus was depicted as brave and tough](#), reflecting white masculine expectations of the period. Prothero argues that a primarily peaceful Jesus was perceived to conflict with these gender norms, and so Jesus' physical prowess was emphasized.

By contrast, according to scholar [R.S. Sugirtharajah](#), around the same time in India, [Jesus was represented as a Hindu mystic or guru](#) by Indian theologians like Ponnambalam Ramanathan in order to make Jesus more relatable for Indian Christians and to show how his spiritual teachings could be usefully adopted by faithful Hindus.

A third presentation of Jesus is reflected in [theologian James Cone's](#) work. Cone depicts Jesus as Black [to highlight the oppression he endured as a victim of political violence](#). He also shows how the "Black Christ" offers hope for liberation, equality and justice to oppressed people

today.

The point is not that one of these representations is necessarily more accurate than the others, but instead that Jesus has been consistently reinterpreted to fit the norms and needs of each new context.

The AI Jesus who engages individuals online in the form of a chatbot is the latest in this ongoing pattern of reinterpretation, geared to making Jesus suited to the current times. On AI Jesus' Twitch channel, users consistently treat this chatbot Jesus as an authority in both personal and spiritual matters. For example, one recent user asked AI Jesus for advice about how best to stay motivated while exercising, while another person wanted to know why God allows war.

AI Jesus at work

AI Jesus represents one of the newest examples in the growing field of AI spirituality. Researchers in AI spirituality study how human spirituality is being shaped by the rising influence of artificial intelligence, as well as how AI can help people understand how humans form beliefs in the first place.

For example, in a [2021 article on AI and religious belief](#), scholars [Andrea Vestrucci](#), [Sara Lumbreras](#) and [Lluís Oviedo](#) explain how AI systems can be designed to generate statements of [religious belief](#), such as—hypothetically—"it is highly likely that the Catholic God does not support the death penalty."

Over time, such systems can revise and recalibrate these statements based on new information. For example, if the AI system is exposed to new data challenging its beliefs, it will automatically nuance future statements in light of that fresh information.

AI Jesus functions very similarly to this kind of artificial intelligence system and answers religious questions, among others.

For example, in addition to fielding questions referring to war and suffering, AI Jesus has responded to questions about why sensing God's presence can be difficult, whether an action that causes harm yet was done with good intentions is considered a sin, and how to interpret difficult verses from the Bible.

This AI Jesus also adjusts his responses as the chatbot learns from user input over time. For instance, as part of the running stream of questions from some weeks ago, AI Jesus referenced past interactions with users and nuanced his responses accordingly, saying: "I have received this question about the Bible's meaning before. ... But in light of the question you have just posed, I want to add that"

AI spirituality beyond AI Jesus

This chatbot guru is facing increasing competition from other sources of AI spirituality.

For example, [a recent ChatGPT church service in Germany](#) included a sermon preached by a chatbot represented as a bearded Black man, while other avatars led prayers and worship songs.

Other faith traditions are also providing spiritual lessons through AI. For example, in [Thailand](#) a Buddhist chatbot named Phra Maha AI has [his own Facebook page](#) on which he shares spiritual lessons, such as about the impermanence of life. Like AI Jesus, he is represented as a human being who freely shares his spiritual wisdom and can be messaged on Facebook anytime, anywhere—provided one has an internet connection.

In Japan, another Buddhist chatbot, [known as "Buddhabot,"](#) is in the end

stages of development. Created by researchers at Kyoto University, Buddhabot has learned Buddhist sutras from which it will be able to quote when asked religious questions, once it is made publicly available.

In this increasing array of easily accessible online options for seeking spiritual guidance or general advice, it is hard to tell which religious chatbot will prove to be most spiritually satisfying.

In any case, the millennia-old trend of refashioning spiritual leaders to meet contemporary needs is likely to continue well after AI Jesus has become a religious presence of the distant past.

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