# The world of love and fear and AI

We have a lot of tough choices before us. If you thought the referendum was tough and divisive, just wait for the next election. I'm going to work through some of the conundrums we been faced with this week and then zero in on the Bible readings today and hopefully finish with a way forward.

This has been a week of sad farewells. I am exhausted by the grief that surrounds us. The loss of these two wonderful women weighs on us as we think of their families and in particular Peter and Ian. And we carried confused sadness into these funerals. If you are like me, you are sad for the Israeli victims and in fear for the people living under constant rocket attacks. Yes, Tel Aviv is also being hit nightly – but that isn't making much news. You are sad for the Palestinians. You are angry with Hamas for being cowards in hiding while letting their people take the pain and you are angry at the Israeli government for punishing civilians. I am angry and I am sad.

Meanwhile, quietly on the inner pages of various newspapers, you will read that our government, along with governments around the world, are racing to put some parameters around AI (artificial intelligence). We have no laws, no oversight body, no ethical standards or controls on its development or use.[1] But why should we worry?

I read an article a couple of weeks ago about the United States presidential election. The democrats and the republicans have already released their ad campaigns. The Democrats have a lot of nice pictures about America as it should be. It appeals to people's common sense and best nature and it describes a place where freedom and equality reign. The Republican ad begins with a series of photos that shows what a dangerous world we live in. There are pictures of riots and crime and chaos and the gist of the ad is a call to arms to protect ourselves and the things we love. The problem is, none of the photos used are real. They are generated by AI. Through AI data and using programs like photoshop, you can create a picture of a riot in any location you like. I can put it in your backyard.

The purpose of the ad is to create fear – because in the voting world, fear will always trump love. We've seen it in the past and we will see much more of it in the coming campaigns. The problem is, it works…and in political terms, if something works, turn up the volume.

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[1] If you really want to have a Halloween scare, think of someone like Elon Musk or Murdock totally in charge of AI. It's like a plot of Marvel or James Bond film where one person controls all information and commerce.

The sinister background to this is that using AI technology, campaign directors have access to survey and demographics that can automatically create Facebook[2] memes and ads that address your specific fears, or of any given audience. What appears in your browser as a 'news story' or on Facebook 'newsfeed' is tailored to influence your thinking and reinforce specific doubts or worries.[3]

Fear is what dictators use to control populations and even make good people do bad things.

But AI has so much potential. It can do wonderful things. It really can. So what's the problem? Sin. You heard me, sin. We don't like to use that word anymore but it does exist. "Not as a list of naughty indulgences one must avoid to be seen as "good" but as a "condition under which human lives exist. Sin is a way of describing the fact that there is a fundamental flaw in the human system and is an explanation for why that system keeps throwing up errors... plans go wrong, communications fail, good intentions decay and corrupt—"[4]... There is something in the human psych that has a slight tilt towards the perverse and the cruel." We are programmed to put self-interest over other people's needs. It is a default setting[5].

"What theologians have always called "sin" hasn't gone anywhere, it is hiding in plain sight as what social psychologists call "cognitive bias": the ways we stray from rational thinking and begin to see the world according to our subjective beliefs, opinions or interests and opinions. While this may not be based on any kind of objective truth we can convince ourselves it is REALITY. For example, when I was pregnant, I noticed there were sooo many pregnant women in Sydney, it would be safe to assume it was a baby boom. It wasn't. I was just geared by my rounded state to notice other watermelons. It is the thing that makes us assume if 3 different people have told us something – then everybody knows or it must be right...because that is our experience.

**Humans ignore data that doesn't suit our self-interest**.[6][7] Or doesn't fit the story we have already written. If we see a story to the contrary – we don't read it.

What does this have to do with AI – well, in two ways. First, as humans, we have a drive to meet our own needs but we also have competing, controlling factors such as our faith; what will the neighbours think?; the values we have been raised withand if

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[2] And all social media

[3] AI generated stories can imitate everything about a legitimate source, the masthead, the font and the writing style so you don't know it is not a genuine scientific article or a Sydney Morning Herald article you 'missed'

[4] Nadia Boltz-Webber, The corners

[5] Note the increase of looting after natural disasters

[6] That's how conspiracy theory works. If your deepest fear is losing your job and I come along and tell you migrants are stealing your jobs – then almost any conflicting data will be ignored – even if there are no migrants in your area.

[7] Simeon Zahl quoted from The Corners Oct 2023, Simeon Zahl is Professor of Christian Theology in the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University

nothing else, the pub test –…all these factors influence our decision-making. They are controlling factors. When you elevate your needs above these universal norms, you know it. It puts you out of step with society and can even be seen as evil. In defence, the majority of people have a myriad of controls that modify their behaviour.

AI is self-learning. We can program a robot with rules and prioritise those rules but in AI, the machine takes in all the rules that we have programmed PLUS all the information about how often we ignore our own rules and then makes offerings or solutions based on all of our human fallibility. So in fact, it has the capability to amplify our un-conscious bias. In other words, we have built in the human flaw that limits love as well as goodness, kindness and compassion.

By now, you should be asking what does this have to do with the text? At a helicopter view, we are aware of the tension between the Old Testament and the New is a God who controls by fear and a generous god who would walk among us and suffer the human condition to prove love can overcome fear and even death. We choose to teach more about the God who loves than the God we fear.

As we zero in on this text we get glimpse of how Jesus recognised the flaw that is our sin.

Matthew[8] is not railing against the Jewish religion – not at all. He is having a go at the Scribes and Pharisees who have put themselves above everyone else. The ones who want to wear the fine robes and have the honour of special titles and places to sit; the ones who eat well when other cannot; who subvert the masses to elevate themselves; who hold themselves as the arbitrators of religious law but don't adhere or practice what they preach. In other words, they reinvented the exact hierarchy and privilege held by pagan priests and maintained their position using fear. What we saw was unconscious bias. We do what we know. We recreate what was.

Jesus wanted us to be leaders and to be servants humbling teaching each other. It was to be an egalitarian community. "The apostle is simply an agent and not the gospel itself. What the apostles proclaim is never their own action but the action of God in Jesus Christ".[9]

It didn't take long for the church to grow into the very thing Jesus was criticising in this passage. That is why 508 years ago Martin Luther nailed his complaints to the door. The masses were being oppressed by the demands of the church: the denunciations and restrictions; the tithes and the price of blessings. The priests were

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[8] Matthew 23:1-12: *Jesus denounces scribes and pharisees.*
[9] Brueggemann, Cousar et al , Texts for Preaching. Year A p. 549

wearing finery, and expecting gifts while dining well on the food others could ill afford.

And over the centuries, the church in many forms grew and repeated the same sins oppressing others and controlling with fear.  This is not the love of Jesus.

We created it – we, just as we create AI. We, the flawed, are not Gods.

No one should say rules are bad. Jesus was not saying that. He was pointing out that the scribes and pharisees did not always adhere to the rules they enforced on others. We need rules as part of the controlling factors – and so we need rules for AI to direct the new technology towards good – rather than evil.

Now is the time, like no other, to discover that love can transform. Now is the time we must gather our strength to be aware of how powerful fear is when weaponised for manipulation. Now we must hold onto to what it is to be human – even as it sometimes makes us sad and angry. We must recognise that we are flawed and susceptible to callousness and that's why we must hold a love for humanity as God loves us.

And I remember Mary Oliver's paradoxical resolution:

*To live in this world*
*you must be able*
*to do three things:*
*to love what is mortal;*
*to hold it*
*against your bones knowing*
*your own life depends on it;*
*and, when the time comes to let it go,*
*to let it go.*

Amen