

Daily Meditation 6-01-26

Pope Leo on the Limits, Dangers & “Disarming” of AI

Good morning.

Today I want to continue my reflections with you on the Pope’s encyclical on “Magnificent Humanity.” I’ve dealt with this in two or three of the daily meditations this week. And the encyclical is significant for a lot of reasons. One reason, obviously, is that this is the first American pope ever, and clearly he’s passionate about what he has to say. And the timing of this encyclical is very important, very pertinent.

Just this morning, there was an article about a talk at Oxford University that Jack Clark, who’s one of the co-founders of Anthropic, which is one of the oldest AI companies. And he warned, and this is a quote: *There is a nonzero chance of killing everyone on the planet on the AI technology that his own company is promoting. It’s important to clearly state that that risk has not gone away, he said,* unquote. So here we have the co-founder of the leading AI company, saying that there’s a real and present threat from the very technology that he is developing. And if they’re charging away with developing it still more, something that could fundamentally kill all of us.

So clearly, the timing of the Pope’s encyclical is real. And it is so important to balance the power, the expertise, the money of those who are involved in AI, with some issues of wisdom and questions about how good is this for humanity? how good is this for the planet? and why do we have to rush into it? Can we not slow things down and do mutual reflecting about this? Can we not leave it all in the hands of the few billionaires who run these companies, to make all the decisions? And some countries are already making their governments make decisions about what is and is not safe for the children, for example, rating for the adults at large. But America, so far, has not moved on that. Our Congress has not moved on certainly the leadership in the current White House, to talk about it.

So from that point of view too, the Pope’s encyclical is important: that public voices that speak out and ask the questions that the corporations who are pushing this and getting super rich or intending to get super rich from it, are not asking. And especially in a democratic, or so-called democratic society, it’s expected that big decisions like this be debated, and not just forced down our throat.

Now, Pope Leo is really explicit about the name he deliberately took, Leo the 14th, because Leo the 13th, Pope in the late 19th century, spoke out very strongly about the ethics and the spirituality of capitalism without unions, versus the needs and rights of the

workers. And Pope Leo actually signed this document on the very date, 135 years ago, of Pope Leo the 13th's encyclical. So clearly this has been on the new Pope's mind for some time, even in the taking of his name, that healthy religion had to stand up to speak out along with others, about the shadow side to AI, and it is considerable.

And he begins his encyclical, in the very second paragraph, he says “we wish to engage dialogue with all men and women of our time, with whom we share in the events, questions, and aspirations of humanity.” So this encyclical, like the Second American Council, begins by saying he wants to speak not as just Pope to Catholics relating to other Christians, but to humankind as a whole. And his commitment to interfaith, indeed to humanism, comes through strongly in many places in the encyclical. And in the fact that he, alongside him, when he delivered it, made it all public, there was an atheist founder of an AI company who was with him, and helped coach some of the questions and so forth that are coming through.

So for a pope to deal side-by-side with an atheist or entrepreneur, is itself ecumenical: that we as human beings be questioning together the spiritual implications of our various inventions, especially inventions as profound as AI. And he cautions up front that *in the past, it was largely up to the state to guide and direct innovation. Today, however, the main drivers of development are private, often transnational parties, that are endowed with resources and capacity to intervene, that surpass those of many governments. In this way, technological power takes on an unprecedented and predominantly private aspect, which makes it even more challenging to discern, govern, and direct such power toward the common good.*

And that phrase, the common good, as I point out, comes up explicitly 72 times in the encyclical, and in other times as well, sometimes it just talks about the good in the good community, and so forth. So that theme is everywhere, as well it should be, as a basis of our shared politics, shared ethics. *Where are we going? Toward what goal we wish to orient ourselves? What directions should we choose, as a people and as a human community? These are the questions raised by AI, and all of us have a right to participate in answering them, and imposing other questions as well.* So truly what he's calling for is a global debate and discussion. And he's not saying that new technology is not useful, but he is warning that it can be very dangerous if you don't have any curbs on it.

Now he ends his encyclical talking about what he calls “the civilization of love versus the culture of power.” Civilization of love versus culture of power. And by love, he's made clear that justice and compassion need to be guidelines for whatever humanity, whatever directions humanity choose to go in. And he talks, as I pointed out in my daily meditation, about disarming AI to direct it to the common good. One person has called

this encyclical a sweeping encyclical, and it is: it's big, it's long, it's 42,000 words, which is the size of a book, a small book. And he covers up front, the first section, the history of social doctrine in the Catholic Church, especially since Pope Leo the 13th. And he applies principles such as accountability, such as a principle of subsidiarity to the current issue of AI. But he also ends the encyclical, and many times he's taking on patriarchy by talking about a cultural power, and he uses the word dominance a lot, like "culture of dominance." He is really critiquing, I think, what many of us call patriarchy, a philosophy of really the reptilian brain that wants to dominate others, and he's critiquing that.

And he ends the entire encyclical with an endorsement, if you will, of Mary's Magnificat at the end of the first chapter of Luke. And I point out the connection of the word Magnificat and Magnificent, which is in the title of his encyclical. And this passage in Mary is most likely the most radical political statement in the entire Gospels. She says, *The Almighty has done great things for me, holy is his name, and his mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him. He has shown the power of his arm. He has melted the proud of heart, pulled down princes from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. The hungry are filled with good things, the rich sent empty away. He has come to the help of Israel, his servant, mindful of his mercy, according to the promises made to our ancestors, as promised to Abraham and his descendants forever.* So clearly she's on the side of the dispossessed and the poor, and those who would be so affected by decisions by AI, but in no way would be invited to participate in these very earth-shaking decisions.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.