

From *Imago Dei* to Imago Digitalis: How AI and theology cohere in dialogue

**Author:**Zia Ul Haq¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Foundations of Religions, College of Shari'ah and Islamic Studies, University of Sharjah, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

Corresponding author:

Zia Ul Haq,
zulhaq@sharjah.ac.ae

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Critical traditionalists often consider artificial intelligence (AI) and theology rival paradigms, arguing that AI poses a threat to the conventional theological theory of intelligence, which reduces our cognition to that of machines. This article explores the possibility of a coherent dialogue between the two discourses, examining how they articulate a coherent understanding of intelligence through metaphorical frameworks. Three pairs of AI and theological metaphors were selected and comparatively analysed in the light of the seven principles of Paul Thagard's model of explanatory coherence to examine the interrelationship of the metaphors in a systematic explanatory structure. The results show that these metaphors satisfy the Thagardian principles, forming a unified explanatory network in which AI and theology converge to illuminate the nature of intelligence.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article concludes that a new theo-tech anthropology can emerge when intelligence is interpreted as both structured rationality and objective teleology that operates entirely within divine wisdom and artificial reasoning.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; theology; explanatory coherence; *Imago Dei*; algorithms.

Introduction

From a technical curiosity to an existential mirror of humanity, artificial intelligence (AI) transformed to a level at which it translates languages, writes poetry, and even gives moral advice. These tasks were once considered the exclusive ability of conscious beings. It is important to note that the developments in the digital world are progressing with unprecedented speed, necessitating a new theological framework just to respond to a very simple question: What does it mean to be human if intelligence is no longer uniquely biological?

As human beings, our intelligence and cognitive abilities are always interpreted in relation to divine rationality. The Bible testifies: 'Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being' (Gn 2:7, NRSV). The Qur'an advances this biblical vision to its fuller theological realisation and states: 'So when I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him' (Qur'an, 15:29, Yūsuf 'Alī 2007). These verses clarify that both biblical and Qur'anic accounts confirm that we are not merely biological organisms, but rather a combination of dust animated by transcendence, receiving our physical bodies from the dust and our intellect, meaning and rationality from the divine.

It is a matter of fact that theology has engaged with every scientific revolution that raised challenges to our values and identity, starting from Aristotelian cosmology to Darwinian biology. Several critical and cautionary believe that AI is the most significant challenge that we ever faced in history as it challenges our creativity, intelligence and cognitive identity. The previous technological revolutions have only extended our perception and never posed any challenge to our cognitive abilities. Therefore, it is a time for theology to play its role and critically engage with artificial forms of intelligence to preserve the distinctiveness of our cognitive abilities.

Contemporary theology reveals two major positions in response to the new AI challenges. The constructive theologians of intelligence consider AI a direct threat to the distinctive cognitive abilities of humans and suggest that it would be wise to limit the function of AI so that we may not find ourselves enslaved by the very tools that we have created (Bentley 2025:5). A group of contemporary theologians regards both AI and theology as two rational frameworks that interpret our intelligence in a complementary perspective. They argue that theology explains the moral

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dimension of our cognitive abilities, while AI explains its operational logic. Therefore, they need not be treated as rivals (Clayton 2006:3–7, 45–49).

This study emphasises the need to move beyond a polarisation of the two rational frameworks. It integrates AI and theology within a single epistemic framework through the application of Paul Thagard's model of explanatory coherence on a set of AI and theological metaphors, such as algorithm, *Imago Dei*, code, covenant, prediction, pilgrimage, and other local connections, to see how their interplay advances a deeper epistemological reading of human intelligence. The aim of this study is to re-envision theology as a mutual dialogue partner with the cognitive frameworks of emerging AI technologies.

Literature review

In classical Christian theology – Augustinian, Thomistic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions – intelligence is always interpreted as an extension of divine reason itself. The concept of *Imago Dei* has shaped the theological understanding of intelligence and remained central to Western scholarship, evolving from the writings of Augustine (470 CE) through the theology of Karl Barth (1968 CE). However, the rise of AI challenges this classical Christian view of *Imago Dei*, as AI systems begin to show exceptional cognitive abilities traditionally attributed solely to humans. As AI systems start to imitate our intelligence and cognitive abilities, the belief that *Imago Dei* reflects only in our intellect has faced new, serious questions. For example, if AI systems can reason, learn, show empathy, and give moral advice, should the *Imago Dei* extend to them as well?

The theological responses to this question vary across disciplines, offering a range of interpretations and critiques. Some scholars resist the claim that *Imago Dei* might extend to machines. According to them, AI systems may mimic certain human characteristics, but they are mere objects, never subjects like you and me (Shatzer 2021:135). Therefore, we must stay coherent theologically and should not surrender to transhumanist visions that risk a distinction between creature and creator. Such visions pose a danger to the doctrine of salvation, converting it to human engineering.

Swinburne and Plantinga lend more weight to this notion through their discourses on consciousness. According to Swinburne (1997:154), consciousness must entail a nonphysical soul. This view means that AI systems are ontologically distinct from human subjectivity. In the same way, Plantinga (1993:225) believes that the theistic source is necessary for the reliability of our rational faculties because rationality itself is grounded in divine design.

On the other hand, naturalist thinkers like Turing (1950) and Dennett (1991:107) propose an anti-dualism framework and argue that rationality can be reduced to computers as well. In this context, Turing (1950:436) maintains: 'The idea behind digital computers may be explained by saying that these

machines are intended to carry out any operations which could be done by a human computer'. What Turing wants to say is that if a computer's reasoning is indistinguishable in conversation from that of a human, it should be recognised as an intelligent being. Dennett strongly supports this argument and writes: 'There is no single place in the brain where consciousness happens' (Dennett 1991:107). However, this naturalistic view is strongly refuted, based on the first-person reality of consciousness as AI systems operate in the third-person mode, processing data without having an inner sense of meaning or selfhood.

Despite the fact that AI can now perform advanced cognitive tasks, we cannot reduce our identity to cognition alone, as cognition is a derivative faculty of embodied, relational, and morally accountable life, which AI lacks. Our identity is more than cognition, according to biblical and Islamic tradition.

Islamic theology addressed this question within the concept of *Kashb* [acquisition] for human agency and maintains that our acts occur through divine creation, yet are appropriated by individuals. So, the generation of any act is attributed to God in a purely deterministic way without giving any choice to us, and the *Kashb* is attributed to us with absolute autonomy, in which God's intervention is excluded (Leaman 1994:230). This view indicates that the Qur'an defines intelligence within a moral discourse without attributing it to cognitive ability alone. The Qur'an maintains that 'God taught Adam the names of all things' (Qur'an, 2:31), portraying intelligence as divinely gifted and morally purposeful. This perspective on intelligence inspires Islamic theologians like Ghazālī (1980:167) and Iqbal (1930:123), as the former believes that causation itself is contingent upon divine will, and the latter considers it a participation in divine freedom. It is important to note that Ghazālī's occasionalism and Iqbal's creative theism matter here as both affirm the fact that while AI may replicate our many capacities, it functions within divine intentionality. This analysis affirms that comparative theology recognises the interrelation between the biblical and Qur'anic accounts of human intelligence. Both scriptures describe it within a dual ontology of matter and spirit.

Despite this rich theological scholarship on the potential harmony of theo-tech intelligence, the contemporary critics continue to interpret AI as a profound challenge to human cognitive distinctiveness and the integrity of their rational identity. Scholars are cautious about the possibility that AI may unsettle the traditional doctrines of the *Imago Dei* and the cognitive uniqueness of humanity (Dorobantu 2022:180). The recent philosophical discussions further consolidate this view, as functionalist models of cognition define intelligence in computational terms without leaving any space for *Imago Dei* and interior consciousness (Dennett 1991:33). In the same way, some philosophical humanists and phenomenologists believe that AI systems misrepresent our intelligence, adopting a formal and rule-based mechanism and neglecting the intuitive and context-bound nature of our wisdom (Dreyfus 1972:xvii). In the same line of reasoning, epistemological discourses share the same

fear, suggesting that AI systems promote an outsourcing of thought in which our intelligence becomes fragmented by algorithms. This situation compromises our epistemic autonomy (Carr 2010:118).

The above discussion suggests that the contemporary philosophical and theological frameworks consider AI a threat to human cognitive distinctiveness and that AI reduces intelligence to machinic processes, undermining the embodied dimension of our cognitive identity, reducing knowledge to efficiency, and thereby eroding the spiritual depth of our intelligence. These perspectives altogether alert that not only does AI imitate our cognition but also it displaces us as the sole owners of rationality and moral intelligence.

On the other hand, a considerable body of scholarship demonstrates that there is no clash between AI and theology. They can coexist in a shared vision of intelligence. Studies in science and theology suggest that AI can extend the theological understanding of human creativity, and in turn, theology can guide AI in the ethical domain, ensuring the fact that the development of intelligence should preserve our unique nature and dignity (Peters 2025:10). According to this view, AI supports the theological narrative which considers humans co-creators within *Imago Dei* and that our intelligence is not limited merely to computational ability but in relational love and spiritual depth, which cannot be simulated by algorithms (Hefner 1993:27). Philosophical theologians further reinforce this notion, arguing that intelligence presupposes a non-material source. Therefore, AI can never generate subjectivity, no matter how sophisticated it may be (Searle 1980:33). Together, these frameworks suggest that AI is not a threat to human cognition. But conversely, AI can illuminate our distinctive participation in divine reason rather than undermining it.

Main argument

This study acknowledges the fact that AI and theology are two rational frameworks. Each explains realities, including our intelligence, in different but complementary ways of explanation. It is argued that both AI and theology are not epistemic rivals, but rather coherent partners and satisfy the principles of explanatory coherence. Although the existing scholarship emphasises the coexistence between AI and theology, it remains widely descriptive and thematic, falling short of engaging with the topic through analytical and systematic ways, either focusing on the moral implications of AI or emphasising the need for the reconstruction of theological doctrines without providing a unified epistemic discourse. For instance, while Ted Peters (2019) affirms human co-creativity within divine intentionality, Shatzer (2021) and Waters (2019) caution against technological idolatry, their discourses do not touch the metaphorical domains through which both AI and theology affect our intelligence and generate meanings. In the same way, Islamic theological reflections provide rich ethical discourses on the topic, but do not present a systematic model for understanding how AI and

theological concepts are meaningfully integrated rather than merely existing side by side

This study addresses these limitations through the application of Thagard's (2000) model of explanatory coherence as a comprehensive epistemic framework to examine the interrelations between AI and theology. This model offers a comparative coherence analysis that reconceptualises AI and theology as a complementary articulation of divine intentionality and enables us to compare the AI and theological metaphors and their joint role in elucidating our intelligence and rationality. The originality of this framework lies in its systematic integration of AI and theological metaphors with a cognitive philosophical method that represents the first unique attempt to examine the inter-metaphorical coherence between AI and theology within a systematic model of justification.

Theoretical framework

Before we apply Thagard's framework, firstly, it is important to understand why AI and theology need metaphorical language to express different realities. Scholars believe that the reason for a metaphorical language for AI and theology lies in their invisible functionality and the complex nature of the objects they deal with. The inner functionality of AI and theology is beyond our sensory observation, as theology deals with the metaphysical issues of God, revelation or divine agency, while AI systems proceed with invisible algorithmic structures and data processes that cannot be translated into literal languages. For instance, both AI and theological metaphors mediate this invisibility and enable us to capture abstract realities in clear imagery.

It is important to note that metaphors are not mere tools for linguistic decoration. They are fundamental mechanisms of our thought through which we conceptualise invisible realities. In this regard, Lakoff and Jhonson (1980:5) argue that our understanding is metaphorically structured, and it re-describes reality by adding imaginative power to our rational faculties in order to grasp what exceeds the capacities of literal vocabulary. In the same way, McFague (1982:37) maintains that doctrines are sustained by metaphorical language because the nature of the divine cannot be captured by univocal language. Hence, theology employs different symbolic metaphors like *Imago Dei*, *agápē*, pilgrimage, covenant and logos to express unseen realities like God, intelligence, creativity and identity. These metaphors, while expressing beliefs, help us simultaneously shape our understanding of many unseen realities. For example, the metaphor of *Imago Dei* considers human intelligence as a reflection of divine intellect and as participation in divine creativity. In the same way, AI also relies on metaphors analogously, as the computational processes are not visible, such as neural networks, profiles, codes, prediction, among others. The metaphors make the digital domain understandable. It is important to note that these metaphors make AI capable of making normative judgements regarding

our intelligence, creativity and identity. When AI systems become eligible to profile our behaviour, they simply reshape our agency and identity on a statistical basis (Coeckelbergh 2020:48). Therefore, it could be argued that both AI and theological metaphors shape our imagery about metaphysical and invisible realities.

Secondly, to explore any type of coherence or meaningful relationship between AI and theology, it is important to see specific conceptual correspondences that can bridge the two rational frameworks because coherence emerges not from isolated interpretations but from local integration of mutually supportive local connections that lead to a global coherence between two discourses (Thagard 1989:435). Building on this logic, we have selected three pairs of AI and theological metaphors, which serve as interpretive links through which broader coherence could be achieved.

Research methods and design

This study employs a qualitative and comparative method to examine how AI and theological metaphors cohere in explaining intelligence. It aims to study the conceptual intersection and tension between the two frameworks in the light of Paul Thagard's model of explanatory coherence. Artificial intelligence tools were used solely to clarify technical aspects of AI functions such as prediction and optimisation. The investigation is conducted in full compliance with the AOSIS AI policy and accepted academic standards.

Applying Thagard's model to artificial intelligence–theological metaphors

Thagard defines coherence as the satisfaction of multiple interacting constraints that might be determined through seven principles as articulated in E1 to E7 (Thagard 2000:12). The application of the seven principles of Thagard to a set of AI and theological metaphors will help us to structure our argument in a systematic way. The following section is devoted to a comparative analysis of three metaphorical pairings in the light of Paul Thagard's model of explanatory coherence to determine how they mutually support each other. The aim is to investigate how these local connections between AI and theology contribute to a unified understanding of human intelligence.

E1: Symmetric coherence between artificial intelligence and theology

According to Thagard, the acceptability of a statement depends upon symmetry. He maintains: 'Explanatory coherence is a symmetric relation, unlike, say, conditional probability. That is, two propositions *p* and *q* cohere with each other equally' (Thagard 2000:37). This statement simply means that if *A* and *B* cohere, they cohere equally.

When E1 is applied to the metaphors of *Imago Dei* (theology) and algorithms (AI), it becomes evident that both of the frameworks affirm intelligence as an intelligible act of

command and meaning; therefore, they cohere symmetrically and satisfy E1 as both of them sustain one another in articulating a coherent understanding of human intelligence. The theological concept of *Imago Dei* identifies our intelligence and creativity as reflections of divine order (Gunton 1993:195). Likewise, the algorithms are described as structured rationality, as they provide a disciplined form of reasoning, putting complex data into something understandable in a formalised expression of rational order. This is the same order that theology attributes to divine rationality. To put it systematically, we can say that algorithms exemplify the ordered creativity in an empirical form that is implied in the theological vision of divine rationality. In turn, *Imago Dei* endows algorithms with teleological depth. However, it does not mean that the algorithms operate within a divine purpose by themselves; rather, the algorithmic teleology comes from human intentionality. This interrelation leads to a mutual understanding of intelligence in which divine and digital rationality cohere as a complementary expression of a single reality. Any attempt to understand the computational rationality beyond the concept of *Imago Dei* creates confusion. However, it is quite logical to say that the computational rationality can function as a participation in divine creativity and that both algorithm and *Imago Dei* could be interpreted as two mirrors reflecting the human creativity rooted in divine rationality (Sayari, Mamat & Hasbullah 2019:174). The computational rationality is actually an extension of our creative participation in divine reason, and the algorithmic design could be clearly situated within the teleological framework of *Imago Dei*, affirming that artificial rationality does not contradict the theological notion of human cognitive uniqueness; rather, artificial rationality places computational reality within the procedural expression of modern creativity. Therefore, it could be argued that AI and theology cohere in a mutual explanatory framework, and each of them reveals in its own terms the ongoing human participation in the divine rationality of ordered creation. This understanding confirms the theoretical parameters of E1 of the Thagardian model, as both metaphors equally contribute to a mutual explanatory system supporting one another towards a unified notion of intelligence.

In the same way, the principle of symmetry extends beyond *Imago Dei* and algorithms and is equally applicable to other AI and theological local connections, making a wider coherence discourse between the two rational frameworks. It is important to note that E1 is about a symmetric relation between two propositions. Therefore, their relationship should not be one-sided. It should be a reciprocal conceptual illumination in which each metaphor contributes to the intelligibility of the other in an equal way. For example, the metaphorical symmetry between optimisation (AI) and *agápē* (theology) demonstrates that both AI and theological frameworks are oriented towards perfection. While optimisation maintains processual rationality towards maximum efficiency, the *agápē* refers to moral intentionality towards divine love. For instance, they are not contradictory, but symmetrically coherent manifestations of the same divine impulse towards order and goodness. In fact, technological

development should not be seen as a deviation from nature. It is rather the extension of our same creative trajectory that guides us towards biological and moral evolution. In this regard, studies suggest that technological creativity can be understood as a continuation of the evolutionary impulse towards relational and moral optimisation (Diallo, Shults & Wildman 2021:49). In a parallel fashion, code (AI) and covenant (theology) reinforce one another in an ordered relation. The correspondence between code and covenant presents our intelligence in a relational order. In computational discourse, intelligence operates through structured logic that generates creative functionality. Following the same logic, the covenant expresses a similar notion that our cognition captures meaning within divine moral order. On the basis of this logic, it is quite logical to say that both define intelligence as a disciplined capacity oriented towards the divine order.

Similarly, prediction (AI) and pilgrimage (theology) point towards a shared direction. Both describe movement towards a future fulfilment. Prediction describes movement towards a future fulfilment through algorithmic anticipation, while pilgrimage does so through a spiritual journey. Barbour (1997:88) calls this type of correspondence ‘analogical correspondence of structure and aim’ between science and theology. In this context, I view this relation as a mutual resonance of divine and human creativity, in which both participate in shaping reality. This resonance reveals a co-creative dynamic as our agency participates as an interpretive agent to fulfil God’s creative intentionality. In this sense, our pursuit of knowledge and movement towards transcendence are only expressions of the same creative logos.

Building on these insights, one can persuasively argue that the rationality underlying AI and theology reinforces one another, contributing to a unified understanding of intelligence in which the empirical and teleological grammar converge within a coherent framework of justification as described under E1 of the Thagardian model of justification.

E2: Explanatory coherence between artificial intelligence and theology

The second principle is related to the joint explanatory relationship between two hypotheses and suggests that hypotheses that explain a proposition together are mutually coherent. This principle is articulated under E2 as: ‘Hypotheses that together explain some other propositions cohere with each other’ (Thagard 1989:437). For example, if P or P’ explain Q, then P and Q cohere; P and P’ cohere; and the degree of coherence according to Thagard is inversely proportional to the number of propositions.

When applied to *Imago Dei* and algorithms, E2 clearly reveals a strong coherence between them as both explain intelligence as structured rational activity. The *Imago Dei* asserts that human intelligence reflects the divine rationality through which creation is ordered as formulated in Barth’s writings (Barth 1958:116). In turn, an algorithm represents the structural logic that enables AI systems to generate outcomes

as presented in Russell and Norvig’s (2020:3) systematic reflection. Therefore, both frameworks satisfy E2, explaining how our cognitive abilities arise from structured rationality, offering a unified discourse on intelligence as participation in divine order translated through AI systems.

In the same way, optimisation and agápē cohere in a sense that the former refers to procedural refinement in which AI systems filter their internal parameters to reach a maximum efficiency. This filtering procedure is not in the human sense, but in the mathematical turning process to find the most efficient configuration (Goodfellow, Bengio & Courville 2016:271). In turn, agápē represents the perfection of our will in connection with divine purpose. In short, we can say that both frameworks describe a process of refinement towards an ideal state, describing the same teleological orientation towards technical and moral perfection, thereby satisfying the second principle of the Thagardian model of coherence.

This equally applies to other metaphorical pairings, such as code and covenant. Code embodies logical order that governs system behaviour, and on the other hand, covenant relates to the divine law governing the moral behaviour. E2 also includes prediction and pilgrimage in the same line of reasoning. According to Domingos (2015:57), prediction in AI systems extrapolates from past data towards the probable future. Meanwhile, the purpose of pilgrimage in theology is a transcendent fulfilment through a spiritual journey. Therefore, it is learned that both metaphors depict intelligence as a purposive journey towards the realisation of meaning. Both jointly explain intelligence as forward-oriented. They are not competing frameworks, but rather cohere and mutually reinforce a single coherent understanding of our intelligence, thereby satisfying the E2 of the Thagardian model.

E3: Analogical coherence between artificial intelligence and theology

Another principle, as proposed by Thagard, is analogical coherence, which maintains that ‘Similar hypotheses that explain similar pieces of evidence cohere’ (Thagard 2000:37). To put it in another way, we can say that if P_1 explains Q_1 , P_2 explains Q_2 , P_1 is analogous to P_2 , and Q_1 is analogous to Q_2 , then P_1 and P_2 cohere, and Q_1 and Q_2 cohere.

When applied to theological and technological metaphors, this principle shows that AI and theology both describe intelligence in different ways, yet with a similar logical structure. The theological metaphor of *Imago Dei* defines our intelligence as a reflection of a structured divine creativity. In the same way, algorithms operate within a rule-based rationality that signifies a procedural framework towards structured and ordered outcomes (Lindebaum, Vesa & Den Hond 2020:249). Although the sources of this structural creativity are different, divine in one and computational in the other, both affirm the fact that intelligence is not a chaotic activity, but rather an ordered procedure which has the capacity to transform information into meaning.

In the same context, optimisation and agápē cohere with each other as another pair of local connections between AI and theology. In AI, optimisation is used as a metaphor to describe the continuous iterative refinement of a system towards maximum efficiency, while agápē aims to elevate the moral order towards maximum good. So, the reality according to both discourses is teleological and meant for achieving maximum efficiency through improvement. In this regard, Polkinghorne (2009:163) considers divine creativity as an open process of continuing perfection, like the recursive optimisation process of AI. Building on this connection, one can argue that both AI and theology cohere and satisfy E3, as both teleologically converge and drive towards achieving absolute perfection through moral transformation or algorithmic refinement.

The same analytical logic extends to all other metaphorical parallels between AI and theology, such as code and covenant, as while the former represents the rational architecture that governs AI systems, the latter functions as a moral code maintaining our relationship with the divine. Brier (2017:413) describes this type of relation as a semantic closure or cognitive semantics to which both AI and theological frameworks are tied, supporting one another and creating a coherent order. In this regard, a similar correspondence emerges between prediction and pilgrimage as both anticipate the future and interpret intelligence as a journey from the known to the possible. Pilgrimage represents a journey towards ultimate meaning, just as data predict the possible future. This analysis establishes that hope and computation clearly share an anticipatory logic. In this way, knowledge becomes a forward-oriented movement for both frameworks, as the prediction informs us about the future possibilities while pilgrimage projects spiritual destinations. Based on this logic, the argument is that both frameworks seek coherence in present understanding and future fulfilment, thereby satisfying E3 of the Thagardian model, as both cohere based on their analogue structures and aims, interpreting intelligence as relational and purposive. It is further noted that the local connections between AI and theology demonstrate that theological and technological languages converge in describing intelligence as participation in an ordered teleological cosmos in which divine rationality is expressed through our cognitive faculties.

E4: Empirical coherence between artificial intelligence and theology

The fourth principle is about data priority as Thagard (1989:436) explains: 'Propositions that describe the results of observation have a degree of acceptability on their own'. This principle simply means that claims about intelligence and creativity must be detectable through our rational faculties. From a theological point of view, the *Imago Dei* perceives that our intelligence derives from divine intelligence. This is not a mystical claim; rather, it is visible in every way we create new forms of logic. On the other side, algorithms reveal the observable architecture of intelligence through data execution. Therefore, it could be argued that both metaphors

satisfy E4 as each of them grounds knowledge in data priority. Theology grounds its account of intelligence in divine illumination, and AI grounds it in coded structure. Both affirm that knowledge arises from ordered intelligibility rather than random processes.

An earlier section concludes about how optimisation describes the observable process of refinement through adjusting parameters in measurable ways that reduce errors. This capacity for self-correction and improvement clearly shows the empirical dimension of AI. On the other hand, in theology, the concept of agápē represents a similar pattern of moral refinement, as agápē manifests in relational change that can be discerned in action as much as in intention. If we build on this, it is evident that both agápē and optimisation describe transformation processes observable in computational and moral domains, thereby supporting one another towards the interpretation of intelligence as self-perfecting activity. In the same way, the E4 clearly reveals the connection between code and covenant. Code is an empirically testable structure that has the potential to generate observable outcomes. In the same way in theology, the covenant is not merely a doctrine but also a lived obedience that is evident in the lives of faithful individuals and communities. As we build on this logic, it is quite logical to say that both code and covenant link structure to logic and exhibit an empirical coherence. Artificial intelligence produces reliable output through code, while covenant produces ethical integrity through obedience. In each of the situations, intelligence expresses itself in a potentiality to translate structured order into meaningful effect. Likewise, the prediction and pilgrimage describe intelligence as directed awareness in an anticipatory and experiential mode. According to the scholars, AI's prediction is grounded in empirical data. It has the capacity to make probabilistic models from past observations (Larrañaga & Moral 2011:1512). In the same way, pilgrimage is a lived journey in which faith is enacted through movement and transformation. Therefore, they cohere as both depend on observable progress, demonstrating intelligence as a mode of embodied knowing that links the empirical with transcendence, thereby satisfying E4: the data priority principle of the Thagardian model.

E5: Internal consistency between artificial intelligence and theology

The fifth principle says that 'If P contradicts Q, then P and Q incohere' (Thagard 1989:436). This condition seems to show a contradiction between AI and theology; however, this prima facie contradiction dissolves when each is approached within its proper ontological scope. Theology relates creativity to divine wisdom, and AI functions as a tool of discovery within creation. Therefore, the derivative and divine domains should be viewed as complementary rather than contradictory. If both rational frameworks are approached in this way, the apparent contradiction may result in absolute coherence. The same logic works when applied to the local connections, such as *Imago Dei*, which situate cognition

within divine intentionality. Meanwhile, algorithms innovate in the same order. This type of relation is always between scientific rationality and theological teleology. According to Barbour (1997:88), both share an analogical correspondence of structure and aim. Hence, they cohere as intelligence according to both frameworks, either transcendently sourced as in theology or empirically enacted as in AI.

As far as the optimisation and agápē are concerned, both cohere under this principle. According to the scholars, the former refines processes towards ideal performance (Goodfellow et al. 2016:272), while the latter refines the will towards divine goodness (Augustine of Hippo 426/427, ch. 33). Despite the fact that optimisation concerns efficiency and agápē concerns virtue, neither of them negates the other's teleology while aiming at perfection through self-correction. Therefore, it is assumed that the process of refinement in both frameworks is directed towards different modalities of the same cognitive pattern, which is a movement from imperfection to a greater coherence, order and purpose (Coakley 2013:324). In the same way, while code and covenant appear at first glance to occupy different spheres, both build structures of trust that make freedom meaningful. For example, code ensures reliable output within defined patterns, and covenant ensures moral reliability through divine order. In this regard, Hefner (1993:27) believes that 'Humanity is created as co-creator, bound by divine limits yet free to exercise creative agency'. Proceeding from this point of view, we can quite reasonably say that both code and covenant are consistent here as one reveals the coded law, and the other reveals the moral law, creating a rational discourse in which intelligence operates responsibly. The same rationale extends to other metaphorical pairs, like prediction that evaluates data to predict the future and pilgrimage that moves through moral experience towards transcendence. Therefore, both cohere as each of them defines intelligence as either statistical or spiritual anticipatory awareness, clearly satisfying E5 that demands a higher-order synthesis to resolve the incoherences. This synthesis lies in the fact that AI and theology, although seemingly distinct methodologically, cohere in consistent models of intelligence.

E6: Coherence through hypothesis competition

Regarding hypothesis competition, Thagard notes that 'If p and q both explain a proposition, and if p and q are not explanatorily connected, then p and q are incoherent with each other' (Thagard 2000:37). In other words, this view means that the acceptability of a proposition P in a system S depends on its coherence with the propositions in S; and if many results are unexplained, the acceptability of P that explains only a few of the propositions is reduced. This conclusion precisely supports what we argue in this study, as AI and theology give us the most coherent and acceptable explanation of human knowledge and creativity because intelligence is not merely the output of data in computers, nor is it solely the breathing of the divine spirit, but rather it integrates both mechanics (data) and the telos (*Imago Dei*).

This dual-aspect understanding of our intelligence explains many results as required in E6. Any attempt to understand the issue solely within AI or solely within theology violates the above principle of coherence.

When applied to the *Imago Dei* and algorithms, E6 at initial examination reveals both AI and theology as disconnected, as one is metaphysical, and the other is mechanistic. However, upon deeper consideration, they show strong coherence because both articulate intelligence as ordered creativity, as human rationality is considered the finite participation in God's creative rationality (McGrath 2008:200). The first corresponds to the origin of order, and the second describes its operational form, as both are complementary aspects of a unified reality.

Regarding the interplay between optimisation and agápē, their coherence lies in a shared teleology of perfection as both reveal self-correcting qualities. Teilhard de Chardin (1955:34) famously describes evolution as 'the rise of consciousness towards divine union'. This too is relevant here as it describes an upward movement of matter and mind towards increasing complexity, which ends at an omega point where creation is unified with the divine. Therefore, it could be assumed that both AI and theology share a teleological grammar moving from imperfection towards greater order.

Concerning the metaphors of code and covenant, although their domains are different, on deeper consideration, both establish order to enable meaningful actions. Without a covenant, human actions would be chaotic. True freedom, according to theology, is not the freedom from all limits but freedom for the good. On the other hand, the absence of code leads to the absence of rules, and without rules, no intelligent behaviour could occur. According to Floridi (2011:14), information ethics grounds responsibility within design. This view means that code and covenant are not rivals; rather, they are complementary expressions of a single reality that intelligence is most free when it appears in harmony with purpose. In the same manner, when it comes to prediction and pilgrimage, both of the metaphors describe intelligence as a movement oriented towards what lies ahead. In this context, Thurstone (1919:561) argues that intelligence is intrinsically anticipatory. This view means that a forward-looking nature is the deeper aspect of our intelligence. It is evident that both prediction and pilgrimage are connected through their shared focus on forward-looking awareness. Each describes intelligence as the ability to anticipate and work towards fulfilment through computational foresight in one case and spiritual aspiration in the other.

E7: Systematic coherence between artificial intelligence and Theology

Within the principles of Thagard, 'The acceptability of a proposition in a system of propositions depends on its coherence with them' (Thagard 2000:37).

This principle, while applied to AI and theology, shows a strong coherence between the local connections of both

frameworks, producing a global explanatory system in which both domains hang together and no longer appear as rivals. For example, when *Imago Dei* and algorithms are combined with other pairs of AI and theological metaphors, such as code, logos, covenant, optimisation, profile, and other local connections, they transform into a universal explanatory framework in which divine and computational rationality appear side by side, portraying intelligence as two faces of a single coin. For example, as described earlier, the key aspects of optimisation and agápē are the movement towards improvement. Optimisation moves to higher efficiency by refining its functions, while agápē perfects the will towards greater goodness because the divine creativity is an open process of continuing perfection. This view means that movement towards excellence belongs to both divine and human intelligences. Therefore, both cohere as both describe intelligence as a self-correcting process operating within one coherent teleology. In a comparable manner, the propositions of code and covenant cohere through the corresponding rationale of structured freedom, as code provides the formal conditions for digital actions in a structured way, and covenant affirms the moral conditions that make freedom accountable. In a single sentence, we can say that both ensure rational order, affirming the fact that actions should not unfold in chaos, but rather in an ordered and responsible way. If we build on this analysis, it is legitimate to claim that both metaphors reveal that intelligence is responsible precisely because it is ordered.

Similarly, prediction and pilgrimage cohere as they share the notion of anticipation. Artificial intelligence can anticipate the future through data analysis, while pilgrimage enacts this same anticipation as a moral journey towards fulfilment. In this way, both metaphors describe intelligence as a forward-oriented awareness. If we put it in a simple way, consider the intelligence of a self-driving car, which operates through the ability to project forward, modelling possible futures to act wisely in the present by calculating probable routes and the movements of surrounding motors. Likewise, a pilgrim's steps towards Mecca or Santiago are not random but sustained by a vision of fulfilment that lies ahead, yet already shapes the journey itself.

When these metaphorical connections are compared to each other, they clearly satisfy the principle of systematic coherence as described under E7 as optimisation, agápē, code, covenant, prediction and pilgrimage are not isolated correspondences; rather, they are mutually supporting elements within a single explanatory structure. The metaphors collectively form a network in which AI and theology describe intelligence in a unified manner. Therefore, they should not be seen as rivals; rather, they cohere with each other in a coherent explanatory system.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence and theology interpret intelligence in a coherent epistemic framework. Therefore, they are not competing paradigms. The study has demonstrated this fact through the application of Paul Thagard's model

of explanatory coherence and explored that the key AI and theological metaphors satisfy all seven principles of coherence and show strong interrelation between both frameworks. The findings suggest that a coherent AI-theo anthropology is possible to describe intelligence, both as a reflection of divine creativity and a continuation of it through artificial means. This integrative anthropology responds to the false dichotomy between theology and AI, proposing a mutual framework in which revelation and reason mutually illuminate the nature of intelligence. The study opens avenues for future investigations of theo-tech metaphors such as *creatio ex nihilo*, *Hikmah* or logos, among others that interact with emerging technologies like robotics, neuro interfaces and gene synthesis. The ethical studies could also explore how such coherence can reshape policies to create a human-centred technological future.

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CRediT authorship contribution

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