Relationships Between Data Science and Religion: Diverging Conceptions on

Nearly Universal Topics

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Introduction.

While there has been some artistic work on religious elements found within data science (*Serial Experiments Lain*), there hasn't been enough approachable or academic work done on this complex dynamic of aesthetic and structural similarity. The symbiotic relationship between religious studies and data science is useful in understanding both fields and can provide valid critiques on the technological state of the world. By using old theoretical models and adapting them to new technologies, an at least heuristic understanding of the newer technologies can be reached. Understanding this relationship yields both an improved understanding of the role religion has played in people's lives and how the drives that this role once fulfilled could possibly be fulfilled instead by data structures. In my research, I will attempt to synthesize a relationship between direct sources that apply to this question and those that touch on it in a non-direct or abstracted way. These tangential sources will reside in the realm of technological or religious commentary and can often serve to broaden the implications of my studied topic. I will be using material similarities between data structures and religious structures, as well as the philosophical tendencies linking these two subjects together. My own findings will also be compared to popular assertions about the rise of Big Data and the implications this has on older institutions like traditional churches. I hope to encompass a wide array of perspectives on the relationship between religion and data.

In order to progress in this research and to acquire an understanding of the contents, we must first understand the aesthetic nature of this research and therefore the slippery slope of explicit reliability when it comes to work done on the topic. All of the sources I will be using fall on a gradient between strict, peer-reviewed work and blog posts from an unknown author. While trying to maintain a base of scholarly sources, the more aesthetically circumstantial works will

be used to build off of the concepts presented in the more traditional sources. These are helpful, though, as they provide a more holistic understanding of the field and are sometimes better at presenting ideas on the subject. These employ concepts that are difficult to tackle in a scholarly form, such as the aesthetic similarities between data structures and religious traditions. This is especially true here when the scholarly base of work on this subject is so small.

Artistic and Theoretical Interpretations.

My first direct encounters with this subject were all pieces that sought to construe a divine or meaningful aesthetic around the internet or networked computers. One of the more popular works covering this subject, though it is subtle, is the anime *Serial Experiments Lain*. This piece of media presents a Jungian understanding of the internet and its mechanisms as being the hosts to a large popular unconscious (Carmichael, 2015). In this show, Lain Iwakura successfully integrates with the network and eventually plays a powerful role on this network and her role within it becomes more and more convoluted. Over the first half of this show, the ideas of God found within technology are subtle, but in the second half they are made relatively clear to the viewer. Through 'the wired'—essentially the internet—users can influence the real world and therefore the boundaries between the wired and the real world are blurred. Lain, the main character of the show, is gradually revealed to be a contrived deity within the wired, created in both software and physical forms in order to inflict a sort of singularity upon the wired and therefore the world. While the broad plot of this show relates heavily to a divine consciousness being present within the internet, there are also more direct instances where the actual structures powering this consciousness are dwelt on. A common motif in the show are fiber optic lines, which span every street that the characters traverse. These give off ominous noises to Lain; in later episodes even combining to create ominous chords of static. Acknowledging these

structures as combining to make what is found on the internet is especially important and the portrayal given in this show is an effective means to communicate this micro-macro relationship between the grand internet and the small structures that it is made up of. These concepts are especially reminiscent of hermetic theology and general gnostic frames of thought. Enlightenment, rather than being found in the temple, is found on a network accessed via one's own computer or gate way.

An instrumental resource in understanding the mechanisms of Big Data from a largely Marxist Hegelian perspective is Byung-Chul Han's *Psychopolitics*. This book covers a variety of topics relating to the title, meaning that it deals with new means of power and the philosophy related to these means. Chapter 11, titled "Big Data", deals specifically with how data structures have been designed and the ways in which they shape our daily lives. Han's approach is not one of data science or religious studies, but his area of philosophy is heavily interlinked with religious studies. Han's Hegelian approach addresses the collapse of self within data structures, data's function as capital, a digital unconsciousness, and data's lack of adequacy in Hegel's concept of synthesis. He claims that data, in the way it is collected, can form no proper syllogism and can only create some kind of bastardized abstraction. "Dataism, it turns out, is amounting to digital Dadaism. Dadaism also takes leave of meaningful contexts of every kind," states Han on page 159 of *Psychopolitics*. This is particularly important, as it seems to be Han's main critique of Big Data (capitalization is used by Han, pointing to its independence and therefore lack of ability to be controlled). This functions as Han's critique of data forming a coherent, encompassing deity, at least in terms of the data which is harvested by data corporations.

While Han's notion of a digital unconsciousness is common, presented in shows like *Serial Experiments Lain* and texts like Sarah Chekfa's "Stop Believing: The Data Center as

Religious Monument", he presents the harvesting of this unconsciousness by Big Data companies in a unique light. This is done through a Marxist analysis of Big Data firms, especially the company Acxiom. Han posits that these companies, in their vast exploitation of the digital unconsciousness, categorize humans into marketable groups and then sell the data of these groups to other companies. This shows how the vast amount of trust that people place into data as a universal institution can have real, lasting consequences. It is important to understand the material implications of the theoretical topics that we are dwelling on.

Building upon Han's work, Chekfa's "Stop Believing" portrays the complex relationship between data and religion in a more creative manner. This work uses a theoretical approach on the potentially unreliable platform of Substack. This location of publishment is a flaw in this source, as it is not subject to intensive, unbiased peer review. This article is hosted on Do Not Research, though, which functions as a loosely organized publishing platform for various mediums. While not being peer reviewed in the traditional way, this article did make it past screenings and into publication. Chekfa references Marx, Abrahamic texts, as well as Hindu texts in her analysis of data structures. Through these analyses, Chekfa looks at both structural and aesthetic similarities between data as an institution and various religious beliefs. Referring to likenesses made in the past between data and data scientists to "unicorns"—a comparison based off what Chekfa describes as the juxtaposed purity, divinity, and seduction of both data and unicorns—she presents the mystic elements of data and data science to be evidence of its religious role in our lives and those of who follow what she refers to as "dataism". This term and her usage of it can be helpful in understanding and describing the tendencies of data and data scientists.

Applicability and Implications.

As opposed to Chekfa's piece, Michael Fuller's "Big Data, Ethics and Religion: New Questions from a New Science" approaches our topic in a more empirical, logical way than an aesthetic, emotional approach. Fuller also differs from Byung-Chul Han's secular approach by looking at the topic of data science from a religious perspective. This is fundamentally different from most other works residing in this intersection; often technological ideas are even projected onto religion. For example, on page 8 of "Big Data, Ethics and Religion", Fuller proposes a "binding oath" be taken by all data scientists that would be modeled after the oaths taken by priests of various churches. This would bind data scientists to a type of moral code, ensuring that their actions are for the benefit to society. While seemingly very different and to an extent weird, these sorts of new (or old) ideas regarding technology could be useful if tried. Data scientists hold similar power to what priests once held, but without any sort of nonarbitrary code of conduct. Fuller's background fits well with his emic approach in this article, as he is a lecturer at the School of Divinity at The University of Edinburgh. Ideas like these coming from within the theological community are indicative of the largescale power of data, as Fuller argues that data itself should be treated as religious powers are in the context of priesthood. Fuller's position within the theological community should be taken into account when observing this article and his other works, but it does not discredit his work within the academic discourse. This work was published in MDPI's *Religions*, a highly regarded and open-access peer reviewed journal.

Published in the MIT Technology Review, arXiv's "How the Internet is Taking Away America's Religion" dwells in the perspectives of religious peoples on data structures. Presenting data on the decline of religious affiliation and rise of technology over the last century, arXiv essentially poses the two as being against each other and serving opposite ends. However, while the data presented appears to be accurate, this argument hinges almost entirely upon the

assumption of a direct correlation between the rise in technology usage and the decline in religious affiliation. If this is deconstructed, a more open and less hostile relationship between technology and religion can be found. Friendlier relationships between technology and religion can commonly be found in both fields and in between.

A famous physical example of this relationship is the supercomputer, MareNostrum 4, which is housed in the Torre Girona Chapel in Barcelona, Spain. This is likely for a variety of reasons, such as effective cooling for components of the computer, as pointed out by Barbara Darrow in her piece, "Data Centers Get Religion". Not only does this aesthetically look

really appealing and provide some sort of affirmation for the users of this incredibly advanced hardware, but it is functional as well. As the high ceilings of chapels function could be perceived as providing more space for divine emanation, they now are effective at cooling a supercomputer with 48 servers racks and capacity for operations up to 11.5 petaflops per second. Interestingly, a picture of this supercomputer was recently used in a presentation done by an accelerationist group called e/acc. This is a political group with technocratic aims, founded largely on the ideas of Nick Land—who was practically pushed out of mainstream Academia and now is big into meth in Shanghai, China (needn't be said, but an interesting fellow). This utilization of divine aesthetics in corroboration with their messaging is dangerous. While straying from the point, weaponization of these sorts of relationships could have lasting and severe implications.

Conclusion.

While not being of the best nature, this e/acc presentations usage of the MareNostrum 4 demonstrates the real implications of this sort of research. Not only does the relationship between technology and religions have implications for religious institutions (most noted in the public conscious), but also for technologies and the societies in which they exist. Religions around the world have always found ways to relate themselves with other aspects of the world in which they occupy, this cannot be changed. Increasingly, we are witnessing the embrace of this axiom by technologists such as the members of e/acc, some of whom occupy real positions of power in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. The impacts of these largely aesthetic tendencies hold real weight and should not be shrugged off as being abstract or inconsequential.

In understanding the nature of these relationships, we as members of society can be more equipped to deal with problems in both the fields of technology and religion. For example, Michael Fuller's idea of a "binding oath" for data scientists in the style of the ones taken by priests is genuinely intriguing and should at least be considered. Combined understanding of these two fields can yield new and unthought of ideas like these that could potentially benefit, in this case, the field of data science and society as a whole. A combined understanding, or at least a sense of one, is already being adapted by those deep within the world of technology, so at least some comprehension of what they are talking about could also be useful in preserving a free view of the world. Intersectionality is too often overlooked in our academic world of specialization; the combination of vastly different outlooks can yield new and interesting results that could benefit all involved.