

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 state of the world. Understanding this relationship yields both an improved understanding of the role religion has played in the lives of people 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. 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. This is especially true here when the scholarly base of work on this subject is so small.

## Literature Review.

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, *Out There Cinema*). 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.

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. This last part 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).

While Han's notion of a digital unconsciousness is common, presented in shows like *Serial Experiments Lain* and texts like Chekfa's "Stop Believing", the harvesting of this unconsciousness by Big Data companies is presented in a unique light by him. 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, Sarah Chekfa's "Stop Believing: The Data Center as Religious Monument" does a good job at portraying the complex relationship between data and religion. This work uses a theoretical approach on the potentially unreliable platform of Substack. This location of publishment is a flaw in this source, as well as the broad range of lenses that it looks onto this topic with. 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 she 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.

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. 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.

To build upon the perspective of religious peoples on data structures, the article "How the internet is taking away America's religion," published by a user named arXiv in the MIT Technology Review, can be helpful. 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 is largely 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".