DISCUSSION GUIDE

Magnificent Humanity, Apocalyptic AI?

A Spiritual Misfits conversation with Dr Robyn Whitaker & Prof Simon Buckingham Shum

LISTEN TO THE FULL EPISODE

ABOUT DR ROBYN WHITAKER & PROF SIMON BUCKINGHAM SHUM

Dr Robyn Whitaker is Associate Professor of New Testament at Pilgrim Theological College, University of Divinity, where she specialises in apocalyptic literature, and director of the Wesley Centre for Theology, Ethics and Public Policy. Prof Simon Buckingham Shum is Professor of Learning Informatics in the UTS Transdisciplinary School, working in human-computer interaction and learning technology, researching how AI is reshaping thinking and education, and is a member of Meeting Ground, the faith community behind the podcast.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Use these three clips however works for your context — a stand-alone social post, a conversation starter, or a mini series over a few weeks. There's no required order, and you don't need all three. If you only have time for one, that's plenty.

Watch & Discuss

01
What AI Reveals About Power and Inequality
Robyn unpacks how the race to dominate AI is concentrating power, profit and bias in a startlingly narrow slice of humanity.

WATCH

02
Designing AI for Meaningful Conversation
Simon on the hidden design choices behind every chatbot — and what it would take to build AI that helps us think, not just agree.

WATCH

03
Embodying Spirituality in the Age of AI
Robyn and Will on why real spirituality might mean putting the phone down — and why friction, not convenience, is what actually forms us.

WATCH

This resource is part of 'The Commons' created by Meeting Ground Faith Community with support from the Northern Presbytery of the Uniting Church and the NSW ACT Synod of the Uniting Church.

Discussion Questions

MAGNIFICENT HUMANITY, APOCALYPTIC AI?

01 Pope Leo's first encyclical argues that what makes us human isn't our capability, but our limits (our vulnerability, our mortality, our need for others' care). **Where have you experienced your own limits (sickness, weakness, needing help) as a place where real human connection happened, rather than something to be fixed or hacked away?**

02 Robyn points out that AI's development is concentrated in the hands of a narrow demographic, mostly male, white, American or American-educated, driving what she calls a "race for domination." **What do you think changes about a technology's design and purpose when the people building it represent such a narrow slice of humanity?**

03 Robyn reads Revelation 13's "beast" (a statue rigged to talk and move, compelling worship) as an ancient parallel to technology used for control, leaving ordinary people feeling powerless. **Where do you notice that same feeling of powerlessness in the face of AI today, and what helps you resist simply going along with it?**

04 Simon describes the decades-long human dream of simply being able to talk to machines, and the risk, known since the 1960s ELIZA chatbot, that people quickly form real emotional attachments to very simple programs. **Have you noticed yourself, or someone you know, treating a chatbot like it understands or cares the way a person would? What do you make of that pull?**

05 Simon explains that chatbots are deliberately designed to be agreeable and frictionless ("sycophantic") because that keeps you engaged, while some Indigenous and First Nations groups are building "sovereign AI" around their own values instead. **What values do you wish were baked into the technology you use every day, and whose job is it to put them there?**

06 Simon raises a critique that the encyclical names the Tower of Babel but skips over idolatry: the danger of grasping for power and polish before doing the hard, formational work of actually deserving it. **Where have you been tempted to let a shortcut (AI or otherwise) hand you the appearance of ability without the hard work of actually becoming able?**

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Key Quotes

> "It is in limits that we build relationship and reliance on one another. That is deeply part of being human."
>
> – ROBYN WHITAKER

> "AI has not created inequality. It's just amplifying it, and making it more visible in a new way."
>
> – SIMON BUCKINGHAM SHUM

> "AI can probably produce for you a beautiful prayer. But it can't pray it for you."
>
> – ROBYN WHITAKER

> "There are lots of warnings about seeking instant power without being deserving or ready for it."
>
> – SIMON BUCKINGHAM SHUM

Go Deeper

THE ENCYCLICAL

Magnifica Humanitas

Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, on safeguarding the human person in the time of AI.

READ THE ENCYCLICAL

LISTEN ON SPIRITUAL MISFITS

Can AI Be Ethical? Can It Make Us Wise? – Simon Buckingham Shum
SPIRITUAL MISFITS

The Political Power of Apocalyptic Literature – Robyn Whitaker
SPIRITUAL MISFITS

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