Studies on Religion and Philosophy, 2025, 1(4), 53-62
https://doi.org/10.71204/yv2h3253

Artificial Intelligence and the Religious Imagination of the Future: A Comparative Study of Eschatology, Soteriology, and Technological Utopianism

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Received: 10 December 2025/ Accepted: 26 December 2025/ Published online: 31 December 2025

Abstract

Contemporary discourses surrounding artificial intelligence are increasingly framed in terms of radical futures: superintelligence, existential risk, human transcendence, and civilizational rupture. These narratives often present themselves as secular and scientific, yet they display striking structural similarities to classical religious doctrines of eschatology and soteriology. This article offers a philosophical and comparative analysis of artificial intelligence futures through the lens of religious studies, arguing that contemporary AI imaginaries reproduce key elements of religious end-time and salvation narratives in a secularized form. By comparing AI discourse with traditions of eschatology, soteriology, and apocalyptic expectation, the study reveals the implicit religious dimensions embedded within technological utopianism and catastrophe narratives. The paper further argues that these AI-driven future visions reshape contemporary understandings of hope, redemption, and responsibility, often displacing ethical agency from communal and moral practices to technical systems. Rather than dismissing AI futures as mere ideology, the article contends that recognizing their quasi-religious structure is essential for critically assessing their cultural power and normative implications.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Eschatology; Soteriology; Technological Utopianism; Religion and Technology; Futures Imaginaries

1. Introduction

Few contemporary technologies have generated as many speculative future narratives as artificial intelligence. Public and academic discussions of AI frequently invoke scenarios of civilizational transformation: the emergence of superintelligence, the obsolescence of humanity, the end of work, or the dawn of a post-biological era. These narratives are often framed as rational

projections grounded in scientific extrapolation. Yet their rhetorical structure, moral stakes, and temporal orientation suggest that something more than technical forecasting is at work.

This paper begins from the observation that contemporary AI discourse is saturated with ultimate futures. AI is not merely presented as a tool that will improve specific domains; it is portrayed as a force that will decide the fate of humanity as such. This framing bears a striking resemblance to religious traditions in which history is oriented toward an ultimate horizon—whether judgment, redemption, or cosmic renewal. The central question of this study is therefore not whether AI is a religion, but whether AI futures discourse functions as a secularized form of religious imagination.

Recent scholarship in religion and technology has increasingly noted these parallels (Geraci, 2018; Tirosh-Samuelson, 2021; Noble, 2020). However, much of this work remains descriptive or metaphorical. What is still lacking is a systematic philosophical comparison between AI futures and classical religious doctrines of eschatology and soteriology. This paper seeks to provide such a comparison by focusing on three interrelated dimensions: (1) temporal structure, (2) redemption narratives, and (3) moral agency.

2. Eschatology and AI Futures: The End as Singularity or Catastrophe

2.1. Classical Eschatology: Structure and Meaning

In religious traditions, eschatology refers to doctrines concerning the "last things": the end of history, final judgment, resurrection, or cosmic transformation. Importantly, eschatology is not merely about chronology or speculative futurity; it is fundamentally about meaning. As Karl Löwith (1949) famously argued, eschatological thinking provides history with direction, coherence, and intelligibility by orienting it toward an ultimate horizon. Similarly, Jürgen Moltmann (1993) emphasizes that eschatology is not an appendix to theology but its organizing center, shaping how the present is understood and lived.

Eschatology structures time teleologically rather than causally. Historical events do not merely follow one another; they are interpreted in light of an anticipated end. This orientation transforms the present into a space of decision, responsibility, and expectation. Human action acquires significance not because it accumulates progress, but because it is lived toward an ultimate fulfillment or judgment. In this sense, eschatology is deeply practical: it motivates ethical commitment, endurance, and hope.

A defining feature of eschatological time is its discontinuity. The end does not emerge smoothly from historical development but interrupts it. Apocalyptic traditions in Judaism and Christianity, for example, portray the end as a radical break in which existing structures of power, injustice, and suffering are overturned. This rupture carries moral weight. Judgment separates good from evil, the faithful from the unfaithful, and truth from illusion. History is thus lived under the sign of the end—not as passive waiting, but as charged anticipation.

Crucially, classical eschatology also introduces limits to human control. The end is not something humanity engineers; it arrives as an event that exceeds human mastery. Even in

traditions that emphasize human cooperation with divine purposes, eschatological fulfillment ultimately transcends technical calculation. This feature distinguishes eschatology from modern notions of progress. Whereas progress assumes continuous improvement through human effort, eschatology insists on a decisive moment that redefines the meaning of all preceding history. From a philosophical perspective, eschatology thus performs a double function: it critiques present arrangements by measuring them against an ultimate horizon, and it resists the reduction of the future to technical planning. These functions will prove crucial when comparing religious eschatology with contemporary AI futures.

2.2. AI Eschatology: Singularity, Extinction, and Rupture

Contemporary discourse surrounding artificial intelligence reproduces the basic structure of eschatological thinking with striking consistency, even as it presents itself in secular and scientific terms. Central to this discourse is the notion of radical rupture—the idea that AI development will lead to a point at which existing historical categories no longer apply. The concept of the technological singularity, popularized by Ray Kurzweil (2005) and widely debated in subsequent literature, exemplifies this logic. The singularity marks a threshold beyond which human intelligence, agency, and social organization are fundamentally transformed or rendered obsolete. Like religious eschatology, AI singularity discourse is not merely predictive but meaning-laden. It reorients the present by framing current technological development as movement toward an ultimate horizon. Ordinary political, ethical, and social concerns are reinterpreted as preparatory stages for an impending transformation. The future thus becomes the decisive site of meaning, and the present is evaluated in terms of readiness for that future.

In parallel, existential risk narratives frame AI as a potential agent of catastrophic rupture. Scholars such as Nick Bostrom (2014) and Stuart Russell (2019) argue that advanced AI poses an unprecedented threat to human survival. Here again, the future is imagined in binary terms: salvation or annihilation, flourishing or extinction. This framing closely mirrors apocalyptic dualism, in which history culminates in final division. There is little room for gradual adaptation or plural futures; the end is total. Importantly, these narratives introduce moral urgency. Like religious apocalypticism, AI eschatology mobilizes fear and hope to motivate present action. Calls for alignment research, governance frameworks, and global coordination are often justified by reference to the stakes of the end. The future catastrophe or salvation functions as a regulative horizon that disciplines present behavior.

Recent critical scholarship has emphasized that such narratives are not neutral forecasts but moral imaginaries shaped by cultural assumptions and normative commitments (Danaher, 2020; Cave & Dihal, 2020). They tell stories about what ultimately matters, who bears responsibility, and what kind of future is worth striving for. From a religious-studies perspective, this reveals AI eschatology as a secularized form of apocalyptic expectation. The divine is replaced by technology, but the structure of ultimate concern remains.

2.3. Continuities and Transformations: Secularized Apocalypse

The comparison between classical eschatology and AI futures reveals both continuity and transformation. On the one hand, AI discourse inherits key eschatological features: an ultimate

horizon, a decisive rupture, moral urgency, and a reorientation of the present. On the other hand, it transforms these features by relocating agency and meaning within technical systems. One crucial difference lies in the source of rupture. In religious eschatology, the end arrives from beyond history—it interrupts human control. In AI eschatology, by contrast, rupture emerges from within human technological activity. Humanity becomes both the agent and the object of eschatological transformation. This internalization of the end marks a significant shift in the structure of responsibility.

Furthermore, AI eschatology often collapses transcendence into immanence. There is no beyond-history judgment; there is only system optimization or failure. The moral horizon narrows accordingly. Ethical questions become problems of risk management, alignment, and control rather than questions of justice, repentance, or reconciliation. As a result, the end loses its capacity to radically critique the present; instead, it reinforces a technocratic orientation toward governance and prediction. At the same time, AI eschatology preserves the affective power of apocalyptic thinking. It generates awe, anxiety, and hope, often amplifying them through media and institutional discourse. This affective continuity explains why AI futures resonate so strongly in contemporary culture. They respond to enduring human concerns about finitude, meaning, and destiny, even as they translate those concerns into secular language. From a philosophical standpoint, recognizing the eschatological structure of AI futures allows for a more critical engagement with their normative implications. It becomes possible to ask not only whether AI predictions are accurate, but what kind of future they imagine as ultimate, and what they ask humanity to sacrifice in the present.

2.4. Eschatology without Transcendence: A Critical Assessment

The secularization of eschatology in AI discourse raises a final critical question: what is lost when eschatological structure is detached from transcendence? Classical eschatology, for all its diversity, typically situates the end beyond human calculation and control. This distance creates space for humility, ethical responsibility, and critique of present power structures. AI eschatology, by contrast, risks absolutizing technical rationality. The end becomes a problem to be solved rather than a mystery that judges the present. This shift may undermine the critical function of eschatology by aligning ultimate meaning with system success. Salvation becomes survival, and judgment becomes optimization failure. From the perspective of religious studies, this transformation warrants careful scrutiny. AI futures do not simply replace religious eschatology; they inherit its power while reshaping its moral logic. Understanding this continuity and rupture is essential for assessing how contemporary societies imagine their ultimate futures—and how those imaginaries shape present ethical and political choices.

3. Soteriology and Technological Redemption: AI as a Secular Promise of Salvation

3.1. Classical Soteriology: Salvation, Transformation, and the Limits of Human Agency

In religious traditions, soteriology concerns the question of salvation: how human beings are delivered from conditions perceived as fundamentally negative or threatening, such as suffering, guilt, finitude, and death. While doctrines of salvation vary widely across traditions, they share

several structural features. First, salvation is not merely improvement but transformation. It entails a qualitative change in the human condition—new life, liberation, reconciliation, or enlightenment. Second, salvation is not fully reducible to human effort. Even where ethical practice is central, salvation typically involves grace, transcendence, or participation in a reality that exceeds instrumental control.

In Christian theology, salvation addresses the problem of sin and alienation, culminating in reconciliation with God and the renewal of creation. In Buddhist traditions, liberation (nirvāṇa) concerns release from suffering and ignorance through transformative insight rather than technical mastery. In both cases, salvation presupposes an acknowledgment of human limitation. The human condition is marked by vulnerability and dependency; salvation cannot be engineered through technique alone.

Philosophically, this structure imposes limits on human agency. Salvation requires transformation of desire, perception, and orientation, not merely the optimization of existing capacities. It also introduces a moral dimension: salvation is inseparable from responsibility, ethical commitment, and self-reflection. Importantly, soteriology does not promise the elimination of all suffering through control; rather, it offers a way of meaningfully confronting suffering.

This framework stands in sharp contrast to modern narratives of progress, which tend to interpret human problems as solvable through technical intervention. The tension between soteriology and progress becomes especially pronounced in contemporary AI discourse.

3.2. AI and the Reimagining of Salvation as Optimization

Contemporary AI discourse increasingly presents artificial intelligence as a solution to humanity's deepest problems. AI is expected to cure disease, eliminate poverty, optimize governance, and even overcome death through life extension, cognitive enhancement, or digital immortality. In these narratives, salvation is reimagined as the successful optimization of biological, cognitive, and social systems. This technological vision of salvation differs fundamentally from religious soteriology. Rather than transformation through ethical or spiritual reorientation, AI promises redemption through enhancement. Human limitations are reframed as technical constraints, and suffering is treated as a system failure. Mortality becomes a bug to be fixed rather than a condition to be interpreted. Scholars have described this orientation as a form of "technological messianism" or "secular soteriology" (Geraci, 2018; Tirosh-Samuelson, 2021). AI occupies the role once assigned to divine or transcendent agents. It is imagined as the force that will redeem humanity—not by calling it to moral transformation, but by redesigning its conditions of existence. Crucially, this form of salvation is immanent. There is no appeal to transcendence beyond history; redemption unfolds entirely within technological development. This immanence reshapes the meaning of hope. Hope becomes confidence in innovation rather than trust in transformation. The future is no longer awaited; it is engineered. Recent journal literature has noted that such narratives often obscure their normative assumptions. By framing salvation as optimization, they privilege efficiency, control, and scalability as ultimate values (Danaher, 2020; Floridi, 2022). Questions of justice, meaning, and vulnerability are subordinated

to system performance. From a religious-studies perspective, this represents not merely secularization but a redefinition of what counts as salvation.

3.3. Transhumanism, Immortality, and the Denial of Finitude

The soteriological dimension of AI discourse becomes especially visible in transhumanist visions of radical enhancement and immortality. Advocates of mind-uploading, digital consciousness, and post-biological existence often frame these projects as liberation from the constraints of the human body. Death, in this context, is no longer an existential horizon but a technical obstacle. Such visions echo religious longings for eternal life, yet they diverge in crucial ways. Religious traditions typically interpret immortality symbolically or relationally—life beyond death is meaningful because it is reconciled, judged, or transformed. In transhumanist discourse, immortality is primarily quantitative: more time, more capacity, more control.

Philosophical critiques have argued that this denial of finitude undermines the very conditions that make meaning possible (Hauskeller, 2016). Finitude structures responsibility, urgency, and care. By attempting to eliminate finitude, technological salvation risks emptying human existence of its moral texture. Moreover, the promise of technological immortality raises questions of exclusion and inequality. Salvation through AI is contingent on access to technology. Unlike religious salvation, which at least normatively claims universality, technological redemption is stratified. This introduces a quasi-soteriological hierarchy in which some are saved by enhancement while others remain vulnerable. From a religious perspective, this development resembles what theological traditions would describe as false salvation: a promise that addresses symptoms while ignoring deeper conditions of alienation and injustice. The focus on survival and enhancement displaces questions of reconciliation, meaning, and shared responsibility.

3.4. Salvation without Transformation? A Critical Comparison

Comparing religious soteriology with AI-driven redemption narratives reveals a fundamental divergence in how salvation is conceived. Religious soteriology emphasizes transformation of the self and the community, often through practices that cultivate humility, compassion, and ethical responsibility. AI soteriology, by contrast, emphasizes transformation of systems rather than persons. The locus of change shifts from moral agency to technical infrastructure. This shift has significant ethical implications. When salvation is outsourced to systems, human responsibility is attenuated. Moral failure becomes system failure, and ethical deliberation is replaced by technical correction. As several recent studies have argued, this displacement risks depoliticizing and de-moralizing social problems (Benjamin, 2019; Crawford, 2021).

At the same time, the persistence of soteriological structure in AI discourse indicates that secular modernity has not abandoned questions of salvation. Rather, it has relocated them. The longing for deliverance from suffering, finitude, and uncertainty remains, but it is expressed through technological imagination. Recognizing this continuity allows for a more nuanced critique. The problem is not that AI aspires to alleviate suffering, but that it often does so by narrowing the meaning of salvation to what can be optimized. Religious traditions remind us that salvation, if it is to be meaningful, must address not only conditions but orientation—how humans relate to one another, to time, and to their own limits.

4. Technological Utopianism and the Moralization of the Future

If the previous chapters have shown how contemporary AI discourse reproduces eschatological rupture and soteriological promise, this chapter examines how these elements converge into broader forms of technological utopianism. Utopian narratives do not merely describe desirable futures; they prescribe values, legitimize power, and orient collective action. From a religious-studies perspective, technological utopianism functions as a secularized moral horizon that reshapes how societies understand progress, responsibility, and the good life.

4.1. Utopia as Secularized Hope: From Religious Futures to Technological Horizons

Utopian thinking has long been intertwined with religious eschatology. Ernst Bloch famously argued that modern utopian imagination inherits the structure of religious hope even when stripped of explicit theological content (Bloch, 1986). The anticipation of a radically transformed future—free from suffering, conflict, and scarcity—originates in religious visions of redemption and the coming kingdom. Modernity did not eliminate these hopes; it translated them into secular idioms. Technological utopianism represents one of the most influential contemporary translations of this religious inheritance. In AI discourse, utopia is no longer grounded in divine intervention or moral renewal but in technological acceleration. Intelligent systems are expected to resolve social conflict, optimize governance, and eliminate inefficiency. The future is imagined as a state of systemic harmony achieved through computation rather than conversion.

This transformation reshapes the meaning of hope. In religious traditions, hope is often tied to patience, endurance, and ethical struggle in the present. It acknowledges uncertainty and the limits of human control. Technological hope, by contrast, is oriented toward prediction and planning. The future becomes a design problem rather than a promise that judges the present. This shift has profound normative implications: hope is no longer a virtue cultivated through practice, but a confidence placed in systems. Recent scholarship has noted that such utopian narratives tend to naturalize particular visions of social order by presenting them as technologically inevitable (Danaher, 2020; Cave & Dihal, 2020). From a comparative perspective, this mirrors religious millenarian movements that treated the coming kingdom as imminent and unavoidable. In both cases, the future acquires moral authority over the present.

4.2. AI Utopianism and the Reconfiguration of the Good Society

Technological utopianism is not merely about individual salvation; it articulates a vision of the good society. AI is frequently presented as the solution to structural social problems: biased governance, inefficient markets, human error, and moral inconsistency. Algorithmic systems promise fairness through data, neutrality through automation, and harmony through optimization. From a philosophical standpoint, this vision entails a significant redefinition of justice. Justice is increasingly framed as correct system behavior rather than as a contested moral ideal. Political disagreement appears as noise to be minimized, and ethical pluralism as inefficiency. The utopian horizon is one of frictionless coordination rather than moral deliberation. Critical scholars have argued that this orientation risks depoliticizing social life (Benjamin, 2019; Crawford, 2021). When social problems are framed as technical challenges, questions of power, inequality, and historical responsibility are obscured. The future appears morally resolved in advance by

intelligent systems, leaving little space for dissent or transformation. From the perspective of religious studies, this resembles what might be called immanentized eschatology: the belief that ultimate harmony can be achieved within history through the correct application of technique. Classical religious traditions have often warned against such visions, precisely because they conflate salvation with control. By promising a perfect society through optimization, AI utopianism risks reproducing a form of secular absolutism.

4.3. Moral Displacement and the Externalization of Responsibility

One of the most significant consequences of technological utopianism is the displacement of moral responsibility. In religious eschatology, the future judges the present, but it does so in a way that intensifies ethical responsibility. Human beings are called to repentance, justice, and care precisely because the end matters. In AI-driven futures, responsibility is increasingly externalized to systems, designers, and abstract governance frameworks. Moral failure becomes system failure. Instead of asking how humans ought to live together, discourse focuses on how systems ought to be aligned. Ethical agency shifts from communal practice to technical design.

Recent philosophical literature has emphasized this shift as a central danger of AI ethics (Floridi et al., 2018; Danaher, 2020). When morality is framed as an engineering problem, ethical life risks being reduced to compliance with system outputs. This reduction undermines the role of moral judgment, narrative understanding, and contextual responsibility. From a religious perspective, this displacement is particularly significant. Religious traditions typically insist that salvation and justice cannot be outsourced. Even when divine grace is central, human responsibility remains irreducible. By contrast, technological utopianism encourages a passive posture toward the future: if systems are built correctly, moral problems will resolve themselves. This posture mirrors what theologians have criticized as “cheap salvation”—a promise of redemption without transformation. The future is imagined as morally perfected, but the present is relieved of ethical struggle. Such narratives risk eroding the moral seriousness that eschatological thinking originally cultivated.

4.4. Utopia without Transcendence: Limits of Technological Hope

A final tension in technological utopianism concerns the absence of transcendence. Classical religious utopias, even when worldly, retain a reference to something beyond human calculation—divine justice, ultimate truth, or cosmic order. This transcendence functions as a critical limit on power. It prevents any human system from claiming final authority. AI utopianism lacks this limiting horizon. Because the future is produced entirely within technological systems, there is no external standpoint from which to judge their legitimacy. Optimization becomes its own justification. As a result, technological utopia risks collapsing into technocracy: rule by systems that cannot be meaningfully questioned from within their own logic. Religious studies offers a critical resource here. By revealing the implicit religious structure of technological utopianism, it becomes possible to question its claims to inevitability and moral sufficiency. The issue is not whether AI can contribute to human flourishing, but whether a future imagined solely in terms of system performance can sustain meaning, responsibility, and justice.

This chapter has argued that technological utopianism functions as a secularized moral horizon that inherits religious hope while transforming its ethical grammar. It promises harmony without transcendence, salvation without transformation, and justice without judgment. Recognizing these limits prepares the ground for the concluding chapter, which reflects on how religious traditions might contribute to a more responsible imagination of technological futures.

5. Conclusion

This study has argued that contemporary discourses on artificial intelligence are best understood not only as technical or scientific projections, but as future-oriented imaginaries that inherit and transform fundamental structures of religious thought. By comparing AI narratives with classical traditions of eschatology, soteriology, and utopian hope, the paper has shown that contemporary technological imagination reproduces the logic of ultimate rupture, redemption, and moral horizon while relocating these themes within immanent, system-driven frameworks. Artificial intelligence becomes a secular bearer of ultimate concern: it promises salvation through optimization, frames the future as a decisive threshold, and redefines moral responsibility as a problem of design and governance. Yet in doing so, it also displaces key elements central to religious futures—transcendence, ethical transformation, and communal accountability—risking a form of technological absolutism in which hope is reduced to prediction and justice to system performance. Recognizing the implicit religious dimensions of AI futures does not entail rejecting technological development; rather, it invites a more reflective engagement with the narratives that guide it. Religious traditions, with their long engagement with finitude, hope, and moral responsibility, offer critical resources for resisting the totalization of technological utopianism and for reimagining futures in which intelligence, whether human or artificial, remains accountable to meanings that cannot be fully optimized or controlled.

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization, Z. L; methodology, Z. L; software, Z. L; validation, Z. L; formal analysis, Z. L; investigation, Z. L; resources, Z. L; data curation, Z. L; writing—original draft preparation, Z. L; writing—review and editing, Z. L; visualization, Z. L; supervision, Z. L; project administration, Z. L; funding acquisition, Z. L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement:

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement:

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest:

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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