

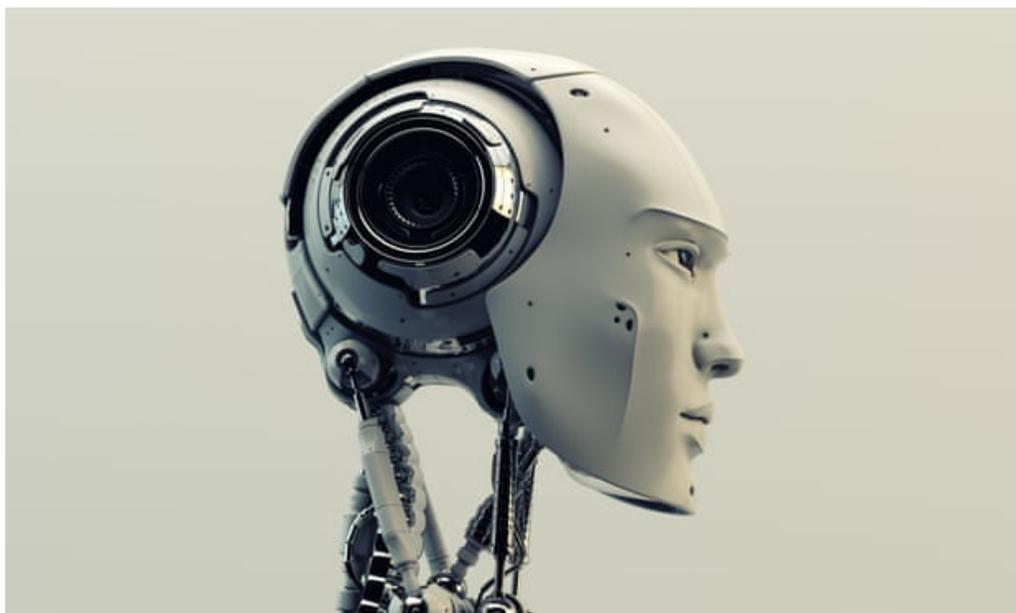
# The Guardian

## Deus ex machina: former Google engineer is developing an AI god

**Way of the Future, a religious group founded by Anthony Levandowski, wants to create a deity based on artificial intelligence for the betterment of society**

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Are you there God? It's me, robot. Photograph: Ociacia/Getty Images/iStockphoto

Intranet service? Check. Autonomous motorcycle? Check. Driverless car technology? Check. Obviously the next logical project for a successful Silicon Valley engineer is to set up an AI-worshipping religious organization.

Anthony Levandowski, who is at the center of a legal battle between Uber and Google's Waymo, has established a nonprofit religious corporation called Way of the Future, according to state filings first uncovered by Wired's Backchannel. Way of the Future's startling mission: "To develop and promote the realization of a Godhead based on artificial intelligence and through understanding and worship of the Godhead contribute to the betterment of society."

Levandowski was co-founder of autonomous trucking company Otto, which Uber bought in

2016. He was fired from Uber in May amid allegations that he had stolen trade secrets from Google to develop Otto's self-driving technology. He must be grateful for this religious fall-back project, first registered in 2015.

The Way of the Future team did not respond to requests for more information about their proposed benevolent AI overlord, but history tells us that new technologies and scientific discoveries have continually shaped religion, killing old gods and giving birth to new ones.

As author Yuval Noah Harari notes: "That is why agricultural deities were different from hunter-gatherer spirits, why factory hands and peasants fantasised about different paradises, and why the revolutionary technologies of the 21st century are far more likely to spawn unprecedented religious movements than to revive medieval creeds."

Religions, Harari argues, must keep up with the technological advancements of the day or they become irrelevant, unable to answer or understand the quandaries facing their disciples.

"The church does a terrible job of reaching out to Silicon Valley types," acknowledges Christopher Benek a pastor in Florida and founding chair of the Christian Transhumanist Association.

Silicon Valley, meanwhile, has sought solace in technology and has developed quasi-religious concepts including the "singularity", the hypothesis that machines will eventually be so smart that they will outperform all human capabilities, leading to a superhuman intelligence that will be so sophisticated it will be incomprehensible to our tiny fleshy, rational brains.



Anthony Levandowski, the former head of Uber's self-driving program, with one of the company's driverless cars in San Francisco. Photograph: Eric Risberg/AP

For futurists like Ray Kurzweil, this means we'll be able to upload copies of our brains to these machines, leading to digital immortality. Others like Elon Musk and Stephen Hawking warn that such systems pose an existential threat to humanity.

"With artificial intelligence we are summoning the demon," Musk said at a conference in 2014.

“In all those stories where there’s the guy with the pentagram and the holy water, it’s like - yeah, he’s sure he can control the demon. Doesn’t work out.”

Benek argues that advanced AI is compatible with Christianity - it’s just another technology that humans have created under guidance from God that can be used for good or evil.

“I totally think that AI can participate in Christ’s redemptive purposes,” he said, by ensuring it is imbued with Christian values.

“Even if people don’t buy organized religion, they can buy into ‘do unto others’.”

For transhumanist and “recovering Catholic” Zoltan Istvan, religion and science converge conceptually in the singularity.

“God, if it exists as the most powerful of all singularities, has certainly already become pure organized intelligence,” he said, referring to an intelligence that “spans the universe through subatomic manipulation of physics”.

“And perhaps, there are other forms of intelligence more complicated than that which already exist and which already permeate our entire existence. Talk about ghost in the machine,” he added.

For Istvan, an AI-based God is likely to be more rational and more attractive than current concepts (“the Bible is a sadistic book”) and, he added, “this God will actually exist and hopefully will do things for us.”

We don’t know whether Levandowski’s Godhead ties into any existing theologies or is a manmade alternative, but it’s clear that advancements in technologies including AI and bioengineering kick up the kinds of ethical and moral dilemmas that make humans seek the advice and comfort from a higher power: what will humans do once artificial intelligence outperforms us in most tasks? How will society be affected by the ability to create super-smart, athletic “designer babies” that only the rich can afford? Should a driverless car kill five pedestrians or swerve to the side to kill the owner?

If traditional religions don’t have the answer, AI - or at least the promise of AI - might be alluring.

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