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Artificial Intelligence and the Islamic Theology of Technology: From "Means" to "Meanings" and from "Minds" to "Hearts"

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Abstract: Muslim responses to Artificial Intellgence (AI) have so far focused mainly on how it challenges the human "mind". This paper moves from the "mind" to the "heart", which, in Islam, is not only a vessel of emotion but a cognitive, moral and spiritual centre. Charting a path between cynicism and optimism, the article proposes a third track: critical, hopeful, and ethically grounded. Utilizing indigenous Islamic concepts (e.g., *ijtihād* "independent reasoning", *maṣlaḥah mursalah* "unrestricted public interest", and *sadd al-dharā'i*ʿ "blocking the means to harm"), it advocates a bottom-up approach that focuses not just on managing AI, but on shaping "who" we are in the AI age, calling for a moral vision rooted in intentionality (niyyah), moral clarity, and individual-cum-collective responsibility.

Keywords: AI; Muslim responses; mind; heart; ethically grounded; Islamic concepts; *ijtihad*; *maṣlaḥah mursalah*; *sadd al-dharā'i*ʿ; niyyah; moral clarity

1. Introduction and Methodology

In the rapidly evolving landscape of Artificial Intelligence (AI), humanity stands at a crossroads between technological advancement and the preservation of spiritual and ethical values. Addressing this subject from a practical Muslim theology perspective, this paper explores the intersection of AI and Islamic theology, using four methodical questions, as articulated by Richard R. Osmer—a key theorist in practical theology:

1. What is going on? (the descriptive-empirical task)
2. Why is this going on? (the interpretative task)
3. What ought to be going on? (the normative task)
4. How might we respond? (the pragmatic task)

The first two questions—"What is going on?" and "Why is this going on?"—are particularly helpful in unpacking the empirical realities and underlying motivations shaping AI's development and integration into the wider Muslim community. While the first question involves how Muslims are responding to AI, the second encourages inquiry into the socio-political and theological currents that motivate these responses. Are these changes rooted in economic aspirations, authoritarian governance, or genuine attempts at religious reform? Osmer's framework helps theologians avoid simplistic diagnoses, promoting nuanced and contextually informed interpretations that resonate with the lived experiences of Muslim communities (Osmer 2008, pp. 4–10).

The latter two questions—"What ought to be going on?" and "How might we respond?"—direct us toward a constructive theological engagement with AI. The normative task calls on Muslim scholars and communities to assess AI through the lens of Quranic values, the Prophetic model (Sunnah), and *maqāṣid* (higher objectives of Islam).

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As AI systems increasingly shape decision-making and moral behaviour, Muslim ethicists must ask: Should these technologies be aligned with spiritual values, or are there sacred limits they must not transgress? Finally, the pragmatic task challenges Muslim theologians, technologists, and policymakers to implement faithful and effective responses. Thus, Osmer's fourfold method offers a robust, multidimensional tool for engaging the theological, ethical, and practical challenges AI presents to the Muslim world. However, before we move to the first question, two caveats are due. First, in this article, AI refers primarily to generative AI systems, including large language models (LLMs), that simulate human cognitive functions such as reasoning, language, decision-making, and problem-solving. These differ significantly from earlier digital tools, such as apps that play Quranic recitations, which function merely as repositories or transmitters of pre-recorded content without interpretive or generative capacity. Theological reflection on AI, therefore, must attend not only to the automation of previously human tasks—an anxiety already present in Turkle's Alone Together (Turkle 2011)—but to the emergence of tools that perform functions historically associated with human intellect and moral reasoning. Such systems do not merely mimic human action but begin to replicate elements of human judgment, prompting urgent questions in Islamic theology about the ontological and epistemological boundaries between creation and Creator, machine and human, utility and meaning. As this article argues, Muslim responses to AI must go beyond instrumental or cognitive concerns to consider the implications of these technologies for the human heart (qalb)—the locus of moral discernment, spiritual intentionality, and divine receptivity in Islamic thought.

Second, while the paper emphasizes the centrality of the heart (qalb) in approaching AI from an Islamic perspective, it is not suggesting that our response should be purely spiritual or divorced from rational engagement—such a stance would risk becoming overly idealistic or disconnected from real-world complexities. Rather, it argues that an authentic Islamic response integrates both intellect and spirit, recognizing that in the Islamic tradition, the heart is not merely an emotional symbol but the seat of true understanding and ethical judgment. This holistic approach resists the modern bifurcation between reason and spirituality. It insists that meaningful engagement with AI requires not just technical literacy but also inner reform, where the heart's moral clarity guides the mind's decisions. Thus, Islam offers a framework in which ethical technology use is grounded in both rigorous thought and spiritual awareness, ensuring that human agency is exercised with wisdom, not just efficiency.

2. What Is Going on?

The general initial reactions to AI are deeply ambivalent, reflecting a tension between excitement and anxiety. On one hand, there is awe at the remarkable progress AI has made—from generating realistic images and simulating human conversation to optimizing complex systems across industries. These advancements suggest a future filled with new efficiencies and creative possibilities (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014, pp. 11–12). Yet, for every moment of fascination, there is a growing sense of caution. As AI becomes more capable, many feel uncertain about its trajectory, especially given how quickly these technologies are developing and how little the general public understands about their inner workings (Pasquale 2021, pp. 119–28).

Within the arena of Islamic Studies, two key approaches exist. Yaqub Chaudhary takes a more critical position, examining the development and discourse of AI through the lens of Islamic metaphysics, arguing that modern AI—rooted in Western materialist and technoscientific paradigms—poses a metaphysical and ethical challenge to the Islamic conception of human nature, intelligence, and divine order. Chaudhary warns that AI contributes to the "artificialisation" of reality, reducing sacred and intelligible truths to

quantifiable data, and potentially displacing spiritual reliance on God with algorithmic authority. Though he acknowledges limited practical uses of AI, such as Quranic recitation tools, his overall stance is cautious and sceptical, emphasizing the need for Islamic scholars to engage deeply with AI's philosophical underpinnings to resist its dehumanizing tendencies (Chaudhary 2024, pp. 109–28).

While Chaudhary adopts a critical and theologically cautious stance toward AI, Shoaib A. Malik offers a more exploratory and tentatively optimistic perspective on AI's intersection with Islamic thought. Malik acknowledges the risks AI poses but frames them as intellectual provocations rather than existential dangers. He entertains the possibility of AI contributing meaningfully to Islamic scholarship—via concepts like the iMufti or techno-madhhabs—and argues that such developments, if critically managed, could enrich Islamic jurisprudential diversity and provoke valuable theological reflection (Malik 2024, pp. 108–15). Unlike Chaudhary, who emphasizes AI's failure to account for the soul and divine epistemology, Malik considers how AI might even challenge the Quran's inimitability (i ʿjāz), only to potentially reaffirm it, whether through the limits of AI's literary capacity or theological frameworks like *ṣarfah* (turning away any possible challenges to the Quran's inimitability). Thus, while Chaudhary sees AI as symptomatic of a broader turn away from the divine, Malik views it as a tool that could stimulate renewed engagement with core Islamic doctrines.

In similar veins, Yusuf Çelik's approach resonates more with Malik's position than with Chaudhary's. Drawing from Ibn al-ʿArabī's (d. 1240) mystical philosophy, he argues that human distinctiveness lies not in intelligence or power—traits likely to be surpassed by AI—but in humanity's unique capacity to respond to God's love through vulnerability, moral struggle, and embodiment of divine attributes such as mercy and forgiveness (Çelik 2023, pp. 679–96). In contrast to Chaudhary, who views AI as a metaphysical threat that undermines the divine-human relationship, Çelik engages AI as a theological provocation that deepens our understanding of what it means to be human before God.

The above situation is further intensified by the absence of robust governance frameworks in the wider society. While some stakeholders advocate for a laissez-faire approach to foster innovation, others emphasize the urgent need for regulatory mechanisms that prioritize safety, transparency, and ethical design (Crawford 2022, pp. 55–59). However, regulation often lags behind technological advancement, leaving civil society without a clear voice in shaping how these tools are deployed. The rapid pace of AI development and the competitive landscape among tech firms often appear to prioritize market dominance over societal responsibility, creating a sense that ordinary people are being left behind in decisions with far-reaching consequences (Zuboff 2019, pp. 130–35).

Moreover, the emotional and psychological impact of AI is not to be underestimated. When machines begin to perform tasks once thought to require human uniqueness—empathy, creativity, and moral judgment—it can provoke existential discomfort (Turkle 2011, pp. 256–59). There is a growing fear that we are not merely creating tools, but digital rivals that challenge our role in the world. Within this context, various challenging questions to the Muslim practice are posed. The following lines will offer and engage with some of those questions.

2.1. Can AI Lead Islamic Rituals and Religious Practices?

A frequently voiced concern in contemporary Islamic discourse on AI revolves around the question of whether AI can lead Islamic rituals, such as the five daily prayers (*ṣalāh*) or the Friday sermon (*khuṭbah*). Proponents of this worry point to the growing sophistication of AI in mimicking human speech, executing tasks with precision, and even generating religious content. However, Islamic theology anchors ritual leadership not

merely in competence or linguistic ability, but in spiritual and moral integrity. The act of leading prayer (*imāmah*) requires the presence of *niyyah* (intentionality), *taqwā* (God-consciousness), and *khushūʿ* (humble reverence), all of which presuppose a conscious, believing human subject. These inner states are indispensable for acts of worship to be valid, as indicated by classical jurists, like al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who emphasize that external conformity must be accompanied by inner sincerity for rituals to be theologically meaningful (al-Ghazālī 2005, pp. 130–45).

Moreover, the social and moral role of the imam or khatib extends beyond recitation. An imam is expected to serve as a spiritual exemplar and a bearer of moral authority within the community, qualities that AI systems fundamentally lack due to their absence of consciousness, faith, and accountability. While AI might replicate the *form* of ritual acts—such as reciting the Quran or giving syntactically correct sermons—it lacks the ontological capacity for *ʿibādah* (worship) and moral leadership. Thus, the suggestion that AI could legitimately lead Islamic rituals constitutes a category mistake: it conflates performative mimicry with spiritually efficacious leadership. In sum, from both theological and ethical perspectives, AI cannot replace the human imam without undermining the spiritual and communal dimensions of Islamic worship.

2.2. Can AI Interpret the Quran and Hadith with Authentic Religious Authority?

Malikhighlights how there is a concern that AI systems, by virtue of their capacity to process and synthesize vast corpora of religious texts, might be mistaken for possessing the authority to interpret the Quran and Hadith (Malik 2024, pp. 108–15). The core of this concern lies in the perception that computational outputs—especially when couched in fluent, human-like language—may resemble the products of traditional Islamic scholarship. However, Islamic sciences such as tafsir (Quranic exegesis) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) are far more than linguistic analysis; they are hermeneutical enterprises grounded in a complex matrix of epistemological, theological, and legal principles. Key tools in this interpretive tradition include *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), consideration of occasions of revelation, and spiritual discernment, none of which can be genuinely replicated by AI, which operates on statistical correlation rather than intentional reasoning. While AI can assist in clerical or supportive functions—such as organizing hadith databases, identifying textual parallels, or generating initial translations—it lacks the foundational prerequisites for authentic religious authority. In line with classical Islamic epistemology, the authority to issue legal or theological rulings (fatwas) is contingent upon rigorous training and moral integrity—criteria that AI categorically cannot fulfil (Hallaq 2005, pp. 102–4). Thus, the scholarly community must remain vigilant in clarifying the distinction between digital tools and divinely guided interpretation.

2.3. Could Reverence for AI Become a Form of Shirk?

Concerns regarding AI and *shirk*—the Islamic theological concept of associating partners with God—have gained increasing attention as AI systems grow in capability and presence within society. In Islamic theology, *shirk* is considered the most grievous sin (Q. 4:48; 4:116), particularly when it involves attributing divine qualities such as omniscience (al-ʻAlīm), omnipotence (al-Qadīr), or ultimate moral authority to entities other than God. The fear that AI might lead to *shirk* often emerges from speculative discourse or science fiction rather than from a grounded theological assessment.

Nevertheless, fears of AI becoming a "god-like" entity stem from misunderstandings of both technology and theology. Islamic scholarship generally maintains that the mere use of intelligent tools, even in autonomous systems, does not constitute *shirk* unless these tools are consciously revered or relied upon in ways that compromise *tawḥīd*—the oneness

of God. The line between pragmatic use and theological error becomes blurred when individuals begin to attribute metaphysical agency to AI, such as trusting its outputs as absolute moral guidance or fate-determining judgments. If AI is perceived as a source of ultimate truth or destiny—particularly in contexts like legal rulings, matchmaking, or spiritual advice—it may risk edging into what al-Ghazālī, in his *Iḥyā' ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, termed "hidden *shirk*" (shirk al-khafī), where reliance on anything besides God in matters of ultimate concern becomes subtly idolatrous (al-Ghazālī 2005, pp. 130–45).

Olivier Roy, in his *Holy Ignorance* (Roy 2010), observes in relation to modern ideologies, that secular systems can inadvertently assume theological functions in the public imagination (Roy 2010, pp. 139–40). The Islamic response, however, is not to reject AI per se, but to maintain vigilance in safeguarding the ontological divide between Creator and creation. Muslims are urged to exercise discernment (ta'aqqul) and ensure that trust (tawakkul) remains directed solely toward God (Q. 3:159; 65:3), not toward the tools He has enabled humanity to develop.

2.4. Can AI Develop Its Own Theology?

Another speculative challenge to Islamic theology in the age of AI is the proposition that AI could eventually develop its own belief system or theological framework. This idea presupposes that machines might attain a form of self-awareness or subjective consciousness capable of theological reflection. Therefore, it may end up developing theology in ways that disrupt and disturb faith in God.

However, this premise is problematic from both theological and philosophical perspectives. In Islamic thought, theology ('ilm al-kalām) is not merely a cognitive exercise but a spiritual, moral, and existential pursuit rooted in divine revelation (waḥy), prophetic example (sunnah), and the inner transformation of the soul (ruh). It involves grappling with questions of divine unity (tawḥīd), eschatology, and human accountability before God—concepts that presuppose metaphysical awareness, moral agency, and an experiential relationship with the divine, none of which can be instantiated in algorithmic processes.

Moreover, Islamic spirituality (taṣawwuf or ihsān) places strong emphasis on the inner states of the heart—such as love for God (maḥabba), fear of divine judgment (khawf), and hope in divine mercy (rajā')—as necessary preconditions for theological understanding. These qualities are inseparable from human embodiment, suffering, intentionality, and the capacity for divine encounter through acts of worship ('ibādah) and sincere devotion (ikhlāṣ). AI, by contrast, operates through statistical pattern recognition and computational logic without consciousness, intentionality, or metaphysical longing. To suggest that AI could produce theology in any meaningful sense is to conflate linguistic mimicry with spiritual apprehension and, in doing so, risks a reductive understanding of religion itself. Consequently, the claim that AI could generate its own theology represents a category error rather than a legitimate theological challenge.

Therefore, the rise of AI has sparked a mix of awe and anxiety, reflecting both its transformative potential and the deep uncertainties it provokes. In Islamic thought, this ambivalence is echoed in scholarly debates: Chaudhary sees AI as a metaphysical threat that undermines divine-human relationships and spiritual truths, while Malik and Çelik offer more exploratory responses, viewing AI as a catalyst for theological reflection and renewed understanding of human distinctiveness. These tensions play out in pressing questions: whether AI can lead religious rituals, interpret sacred texts, or even inspire theological reverence—issues that raise critical concerns about consciousness, moral integrity, and spiritual authority. The core challenge lies not in AI's capabilities alone, but in how humans relate to and revere it, risking spiritual confusion if AI is mistaken for a source

of moral or metaphysical truth. Now, it is time to move to the next question: Why is the response mixed?

3. Why Is This Going on? The Context and the Content

It is argued here that this state of apprehension about AI stems from two primary factors: the *context* in which we live and the *content* that AI embodies. First, our context is shaped by the post-industrial, hyper-technological age—a stark contrast to the pre-industrial era that, while limited in technical *means*, was abundant in spiritual, communal, and metaphysical *meanings*. In our current context, we are surrounded by unprecedented capabilities yet often lack a cohesive vision of purpose. Second, we must scrutinize the content of AI itself: is it truly neutral, or does it carry embedded values and assumptions? This section explores both factors, beginning with the existential and cultural context in which AI arises, and then turning to the ethical and philosophical content that informs its development and use.

3.1. The Context of AI: The Age of Means over Meanings

Some awareness of our historical moment helps unpack our sense of apprehension. In our current age, the proliferation of AI mirrors a broader civilizational shift where technical means have vastly outpaced our capacity to generate or sustain meanings. This situation is especially concerning when viewed against the backdrop of the post-industrial era, which, despite its extraordinary abundance in tools, infrastructure, and computational power, suffers from a noticeable vacuum in metaphysical and ethical orientation. As Zygmunt Bauman notes in *Liquid Modernity* (2000), the modern condition is marked by a breakdown in long-term, stable values, leading to a state of "liquid" existence where everything flows but little holds (Bauman 2000, pp. 1–5). This contrasts sharply with pre-industrial societies—particularly those shaped by classical Islamic epistemologies—where technological means were few, but their development and use were deeply rooted in theological and cosmological understandings. In such contexts, the scarcity of tools was offset by a richness in moral, spiritual, and communal frameworks, ensuring that whatever means were available were directed toward meaningful ends.

This civilizational inversion—from meaning to means—finds a powerful illustration in the lives of two iconic figures: al-Khwārizmī (d. 850) and J. Robert Oppenheimer (d. 1967). Al-Khwārizmī, often credited as the father of algebra and algorithm, developed his work within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence and theology, particularly in service of inheritance laws grounded in the Quran. His scientific endeavour was inseparable from the spiritual and ethical needs of his community. The algorithm, in its original form, was not merely a tool of calculation but a mechanism to enact divine justice. Oppenheimer, by contrast, the father of the atomic bomb, stood at the helm of an epochal technological leap—driven largely by nationalistic and militaristic pressures rather than spiritual or ethical conviction. After witnessing the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he famously quoted the Bhagavad Gita: "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds". The contrast between the two figures—one rooted in divine purpose, the other haunted by moral uncertainty—epitomizes the shift from a cosmos ordered by *meanings* to a world dominated by unchecked *means*.

This tension between means and meanings is further exacerbated by a dramatic shift in educational and research priorities over the past century. In most advanced societies, public and private investment has increasingly favoured STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines at the expense of the humanities. According to a 2022 report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, funding for humanities research in the United States declined by over 18% between 2008 and 2020, while funding for

STEM fields increased significantly (American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2022). This trend reflects a broader societal assumption: that technical knowledge alone can solve the world's problems. However, as Martha Nussbaum argues in *Not for Profit*: *Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010), this imbalance creates generations of students who may excel in computation and engineering but lack the ethical sensibilities and critical thinking skills necessary to address the moral and social implications of their work (Nussbaum 2010, pp. 93–94).

Islamic intellectual history offers a contrasting model. Classical Muslim education was grounded in the harmonious integration of the *ʿulūm al-naqliyya* (transmitted sciences such as Quranic exegesis, hadith, and jurisprudence) and *ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyya* (rational sciences such as logic, philosophy, and medicine). Thinkers like al-Farābī (d. 950), Ibn Sīna (d. 1037), and al- Ghazālī, along with their Christian and Jewish peers such as Aquinas (d. 1474) and Maimonides (d. 1204), operated at the intersection of these domains, ensuring that scientific inquiry did not detach from metaphysical reflection. This synthesis was more than academic—it reflected a unified vision of the human being as composed of body and soul, and of knowledge as a means of drawing closer to the divine. In contrast, our contemporary educational models often reduce the human being to a rational utility-maximiser or a data-generating machine, thus reinforcing a paradigm in which AI and other technologies are developed in moral isolation.

The neglect of the humanities in favour of STEM disciplines also leads to a poverty in language for moral reflection. As technology becomes more autonomous—through AI decision-making in sectors like healthcare, military, and law enforcement—we are increasingly confronted with dilemmas for which technical training alone offers no answers. For instance, questions about algorithmic bias, surveillance ethics, or the moral permissibility of autonomous weapons systems cannot be resolved through engineering principles alone. They require insights from ethics, theology, and philosophy. As Shannon Vallor points out in *Technology and the Virtues* (2016), the cultivation of moral virtues such as wisdom, justice, and humility is indispensable for navigating the ethical terrain of emerging technologies. Without this grounding, we risk developing AI systems that are procedurally efficient but ethically disastrous (Vallor 2016, pp. 7–9). In her *The AI Mirror: How to Reclaim Our Humanity in an Age of Machine Thinking* (2024), she deepens the argument that artificial intelligence does not merely reflect our technical capabilities but mirrors back our cultural values, philosophical assumptions, and moral priorities. Hence, as machine thinking begins to reshape social norms, ethical expectations, and even interpersonal relationships, she warns that we risk allowing machines to set the terms of human flourishing. In response, she proposes a reinvigoration of humanistic and philosophical inquiry to ensure that AI development is guided by virtues such as wisdom, justice, and compassion (Vallor 2024, pp. 1–4, 171).

Vallor's insights resonate powerfully with Islamic theological concerns, particularly the emphasis on intentionality, moral responsibility (*taqwā*), and the cultivation of the *qalb* as the seat of discernment. The classical Islamic model treated the pursuit of knowledge as a spiritual endeavour, wherein the scientist was also a seeker of truth and virtue. This holistic model fostered scientists who were not merely skilled but wise. Today, however, the fragmentation of disciplines has led to what Jürgen Habermas terms the "colonization of the lifeworld" by technical rationality—where human values and communicative actions are subordinated to system imperatives like profit and efficiency (Habermas 1984, pp. xxxiii, xxxvi). AI, developed in such a milieu, reflects not only the brilliance of our engineering but the bankruptcy of our moral vision.

The result of these historical and structural shifts is a culture awash in information but starving for wisdom. We have built machines that can simulate intelligence, process language, and make predictions—but we have not cultivated the ethical frameworks to

decide how these capabilities should be used. In the absence of a shared metaphysical horizon, AI risks becoming a mirror of our worst tendencies: surveillance over solidarity, manipulation over appreciation, prediction over providence. This is why the anxiety surrounding AI is not merely technical or economic but existential. We fear not only what AI can do, but what its unmoored development says about who we have become—and what we might lose in the process.

The growing disjunction between *means* and *meanings* threatens the balance of the human composite: body and soul. Technologies like AI cater overwhelmingly to the needs of the body—efficiency, productivity, control—but do little to nourish the soul. In Islamic thought, the soul (rūḥ) is the seat of moral discernment and divine connection, and its neglect leads to spiritual corrosion. Without an intentional reintegration of the humanities, spiritual wisdom, and theological ethics into our discourse on AI, we risk cultivating a world where our tools evolve faster than our souls can keep up.

3.2. The Content of AI: Is AI Value-Neutral?

The question of whether AI is value-neutral or inherently value-laden has become a central concern in the ethics of technology. Proponents of the value-neutrality thesis argue that AI, like any tool, is morally inert in itself; it is the intentions and uses of its human operators that determine its ethical status. This instrumentalist view, rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, sees technology as a passive medium for human will. Just as a knife may be used either to prepare food or to harm, AI is said to hold no intrinsic moral weight—its goodness or badness lies in the purposes to which it is directed. This position undergirds much of the laissez-faire orientation in tech policy, where innovation is prioritized and ethical considerations are deferred to regulation or public accountability mechanisms downstream. Carl Mitcham identifies this perspective as characteristic of the "engineering model" of technology, where tools are value-free instruments awaiting purposeful human direction (Mitcham 1994, pp. 42–46).

However, this instrumental view has been increasingly challenged by scholars in science and technology studies, philosophy of technology, and ethics of AI. The central critique is that technologies are not designed, implemented, or used in a vacuum. Instead, they are deeply embedded in social and institutional contexts that shape—and are shaped by—values, assumptions, and power relations.

Langdon Winner famously argued that "artifacts have politics" (Winner 1980, pp. 121–36). He showed how technical design can embed social hierarchies, such as low-hanging overpasses in New York designed to prevent buses from passing under them—effectively excluding low-income who use buses more often and minority communities from accessing certain public spaces. This example illustrates how seemingly technical decisions can carry profound political and moral consequences. In AI systems, similar patterns emerge. Algorithms used in facial recognition, predictive policing, or credit scoring often reflect and reinforce existing biases. Research by Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru showed that commercial facial recognition systems perform significantly worse on darker-skinned and female faces, due to biased training data and inadequate representational diversity (Buolamwini and Gebru 2018, pp. 1–15). These outcomes do not result from user misuse alone—they are built into the systems themselves. Furthermore, Cathy O'Neil argues that opaque algorithms can perpetuate inequality under the guise of scientific neutrality (O'Neil 2016, p. 92). Legal scholar Julie Cohen similarly notes that tech corporations often claim value-neutrality as a way to avoid responsibility while consolidating control over digital infrastructures (Cohen 2019, pp. 111–15, 121, 190).

This dialectic about AI's value neutrality reveals a deeper anxiety: that the more powerful AI becomes, the harder it is to contain its ethical consequences within the narrow

confines of intention or regulation. If AI is indeed value-laden, then every use of it—whether in governance, health, or religion—requires scrutiny not only of what it does, but of what assumptions it carries and what norms it reinforces. Conversely, if AI were genuinely neutral, it would absolve users and developers of deeper ethical reflection. But this dichotomy itself may be flawed. As scholars in *Science and Technology Studies* have argued, technologies co-evolve with their social environments, creating feedback loops in which values are both embedded and transformed (Latour 1992, pp. 225–58). This recursive entanglement means that AI cannot simply be "used well" or "used badly"; it actively shapes the conditions of its own use.

Ultimately, the section argues that the anxiety surrounding AI stems from both the *context* in which it is developed and the *content* it embodies. We live in a post-industrial, hyper-technological age where technical capabilities far outpace moral and metaphysical guidance, leading to a society focused on "means over meanings". Unlike pre-modern civilizations—especially classical Islamic traditions that integrated scientific pursuit with spiritual and ethical frameworks—modern education and technological development often ignore moral reflection, prioritizing STEM over the humanities. This shift results in powerful tools like AI being developed without the ethical wisdom to guide their use. Furthermore, the content of AI is not value-neutral; technologies often embed social, political, and cultural biases. AI systems, therefore, not only reflect human values but also shape them, reinforcing existing inequities under the guise of neutrality. The overarching concern is existential: without reintegrating moral, philosophical, and spiritual insights, AI risks deepening a crisis where we have immense power but little wisdom about its purpose or consequences.

4. What Ought to Be Going on?

What unites the above range of questions—whether concerning AI's capacity to issue fatwas, interpret scripture, or simulate human reasoning—is their underlying preoccupation with the human "mind". These discussions, while important, remain largely confined to the intellectual and cognitive dimensions of human identity, often neglecting the profound insights Islamic theology offers regarding the human heart (qalb) as a locus of understanding, ethical discernment, and divine receptivity. Little attention has been given to what the human heart might contribute to the discourse on AI, or how the emergence of AI could serve as a catalyst for its revival. In many ways, the modern age—with its Enlightenment legacy of hyper-rationalism—has marginalized the heart, relegating its functions to sentiment and superstition. Yet, as AI increasingly mirrors and even surpasses human cognitive capacities, it may paradoxically illuminate what machines lack: consciousness, moral depth, and spiritual intentionality. This moment presents an opportunity not to lament what AI can do, but to rediscover what it cannot—the deeply human capacity to know, choose, and love with the heart. We will come to this later in the paper.

The Islamic tradition's prioritization of the heart as the locus of understanding offers a critical corrective to dominant narratives that treat intelligence as exclusively mental or computational. Modern conceptions of rationality tend to locate cognition within the brain, aligning human value with computational capability—a framework that implicitly privileges AI's strengths. Yet, the Quran repeatedly attributes understanding and perception to the heart (qalb), not the mind ('aql), as in Q. 7:179: "They have hearts with which they do not understand." In fact, it views understanding as the exercise of the heart. Hence, it does not separate the two. In Islamic theology, the heart is not only a vessel of emotion but a cognitive, moral, and spiritual centre. Al- Ghazālī elaborated this view in his *Iḥyā' ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, arguing that the heart perceives higher truths and is the organ upon which divine knowledge is inscribed (Abdelnour 2022, pp. 61–62). This foundational concept radically

shifts our AI discourse: AI may mimic intellectual functions, but it lacks a *qalb*—and thus remains ontologically incapable of true understanding.

This marginalization of the heart is not accidental but the product of a modern epistemological rupture. The Cartesian bifurcation of mind and body introduced a dualism foreign to classical Islamic thought, leading modernity to elevate analytical reason and demote the intuitive, affective, and moral wisdom associated with the heart. Seyyed Hossein Nasr calls this shift "a desacralization of knowledge," where knowledge becomes stripped of its spiritual purpose and reduced to instrumental control. In this paradigm, the outputs of the heart—intuition, discernment, reverence—are often dismissed as irrational or superstitious (Nasr 1989, p. 9). The danger is that AI, emerging from this very paradigm, reinforces a model of intelligence devoid of virtue. Muslim theologians must resist this reduction by restoring the heart to its epistemic and ethical role.

What Islam contributes to the global conversation on AI is a more holistic anthropology—one that reunites intellect and spirit, cognition and conscience. While *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* emphasizes the preservation of the intellect (ʿaql) through prohibitions like that on alcohol, *maqāṣid al-ʿaqīdah*, according to Mohammed G. Abdelnour in his *The Higher Objectives of Islamic Theology*, centres the preservation of the heart (qalb), which is considered the locus of truth (Abdelnour 2022, pp. 62–63). As the Quran affirms in26:194, revelation descends not upon the Prophet's mind, but "upon your heart (ʿalā qalbik)". This theological claim has ethical implications: any AI ethic that sidelines the heart risks detaching technological progress from moral depth. The contemporary Muslim engagement with AI must therefore reorient from simply protecting the mind to cultivating the heart—a task that no algorithm can fulfil.

Moreover, spiritual reform of the heart is not peripheral but essential to resisting the more dangerous social functions of AI. In *al-Muwāfaqāt*, al-Shāṭibī warns against the unrestrained pursuit of desires, which he identifies as the antithesis of truth. He maintains that the Sharīʿah aims to liberate humans from being ruled by their whims and return them to worship and divine purpose (Abdelnour 2022, pp. 62–63). When AI systems are driven by user preference, predictive analytics, and behavioural nudging, they risk feeding precisely these desires that the Sharīʿah seeks to curb. In such a context, the cultivation of the heart—disciplined through *taqwā* and guided by revelation—becomes not merely a spiritual aspiration but a sociotechnical necessity.

Ultimately, this reframing invites a profound shift: from simulating minds to reforming hearts. If the prevailing AI discourse measures progress by increasing cognitive emulation, Islam reminds us that the pinnacle of human excellence lies not in intelligence but in spiritual refinement. In this light, the ethical use of AI must be grounded not in what it can do for us intellectually, but what we become in relation to it spiritually. Islam's theological anthropology thus insists on a new balance—one that integrates the mental with the moral, the informational with the intentional. This balance is the distinctive gift Islamic theology can offer to the emerging ethics of AI.

In the light of this foregoing discussion, between proponents of AI's value-neutrality and their opponents, the Quran charts a middle track, distinguishing between the inherent neutrality of tools and the moral responsibility of their users. The Quran states, "He it is Who has made you successors/stewards (khalāʾif) on earth" (6:165), establishing humans as stewards entrusted with safeguarding creation. Tools, including AI, are devoid of intrinsic moral value; their ethical implications arise from human intent and application. However, their design and deployment are shaped by human biases. Hence, the idea that technology and AI are value-neutral is no longer tenable. From both secular and Islamic standpoints, technologies embody, reflect, and amplify human values—whether intentionally or not. Their development and use are inseparable from questions of justice, responsibility, and the

common good. While secular frameworks increasingly recognize the political and moral dimensions of technology, Islamic ethics offers a spiritually grounded, comprehensive framework rooted in accountability, stewardship, and justice.

Having reoriented the discourse from the human "mind" to the human "heart", we should not necessarily assume a negative position on AI. In fact, AI might be a catalyst for bringing the human heart again into the epistemic discourse and hence stimulate a deeper conversation between science and theology. What is needed though is developing a grammar for this reorientation and rebalance the trope in order to avoid other forms of extremism. In the following pages, we will look into a number of Islamic concepts that may guide our usage of AI.

First of all, the Quranic concept of *khilāfah*, as mentioned in 2:30, demands a deliberative engagement with human capabilities. Being stewards on earth implies not only preserving creation from harm but also developing and nurturing it in ways that reflect divine attributes of compassion, wisdom, and justice. As such, our technological endeavours, including AI, are not morally neutral but fall under this spiritual mandate. Human agency in developing and deploying AI is thus not value-free; it is ethically charged and theologically framed. The historical contributions of Muslim scholars to fields such as mathematics, astronomy, and medicine underscore Islam's positive orientation toward scientific advancement. The works of scholars like Ibn Sina, Al-Khwarizmi, and Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1040) were not only compatible with Islamic values but were also driven by them. Today's AI revolution can be seen as a continuation of this intellectual tradition—seeking knowledge that is beneficial and applying it in service of humanity. What is required is not rejection but the ethical calibration of AI to align with Islamic values.

Three other concepts are equally important here: *ijtihād* (independent reasoning), *maṣlaḥah mursalah* (unrestricted public interest), and *sadd al-dharā'i* (blocking the means to harm). These concepts, in tandem with *khilāfah*, provide a robust ethical framework for Muslims to actively contribute to the responsible development and governance of artificial intelligence. *Ijtihād* empowers qualified scholars and experts to engage in critical, contextual reasoning, allowing them to derive new rulings and ethical guidelines that address the novel challenges posed by AI technologies. *Maṣlaḥah mursalah* enables the pursuit of public welfare in areas not explicitly covered by traditional legal texts, thereby justifying the proactive use of AI in promoting social good—such as improving healthcare, education, and environmental protection—so long as it aligns with Islamic moral values. At the same time, *sadd al-dharā'i* serves as a preventative mechanism, guiding Muslims to identify and restrict pathways through which AI could lead to harm, such as privacy violations, algorithmic bias, or social manipulation. Together, these tools offer a balanced, principled approach that allows Muslims to fulfil their ethical responsibility as *khulafā* (stewards) of the earth in the age of AI.

If this is conceded, it is worthy of note that while the Islamic tradition emphasizes the avoidance of harm (ḍarar), it equally prioritizes the realization of benefit (maṣlaḥa). This dual obligation highlights a proactive moral imperative in Islam: not only to avoid wrongdoing but also to actively pursue the welfare of society. In the context of AI, this balanced perspective is crucial. While discussions surrounding AI often centre on the risks of surveillance, algorithmic bias, and automation-induced job loss, an Islamic ethical lens demands an equal, if not greater, attentiveness to the transformative potential of AI to bring about good—improving healthcare, facilitating education, and enhancing social justice.

AI's contributions to public welfare are becoming increasingly apparent. For example, machine learning technologies are being employed in diagnostic medicine, predictive agriculture, and personalized learning platforms, expanding access and efficiency in essential services. In Islamic jurisprudence, the principle of *jalb al-maṣāliḥ wa dar' al-mafāsid* (bring-

ing about benefits and warding off harms) legitimizes innovations that offer substantial social benefits, provided they are regulated within an ethical framework. Thus, rather than adopting a posture of suspicion or blanket resistance to AI, the appropriate Islamic response would be to ethically steward its development and implementation to serve communal *maṣlaḥa*.

Moreover, the Prophet Muhammad consistently encouraged the pursuit of beneficial knowledge (*ʿilm nāfiʿ*) and innovative solutions that alleviate human hardship. AI, as a product of human knowledge and creativity, can be seen as a form of *niʿma* (divine blessing), provided it is harnessed with responsibility and foresight. Scholars such as al- Ghazālī and al-Shāṭibī (d. 1388) have emphasized that the objectives of the Sharīʿah (Islamic law) revolve around the preservation of: religion, life, intellect, religion, lineage, and property. Abdelnour extended this to the entirety of the Islamic tradition, arguing that it aims not only to preserve the true, the just, and the beautiful on earth, but also to *pursue* and then *promote* them (Abdelnour 2022, p. 55). Therefore, AI has the capacity to advance these objectives when directed toward equitable health care, justice system reform, and inclusive economic growth.

The previous discussion challenges dominant AI discourses that prioritize cognitive intelligence by re-centring the Islamic theological concept of the *qalb* (heart) as the true locus of understanding, moral discernment, and spiritual receptivity in the Islamic tradition. Modern epistemologies, shaped by Cartesian dualism and Enlightenment rationalism, have marginalized the heart's role, reducing intelligence to computational output and sidelining moral and spiritual wisdom. In contrast, Islam's holistic anthropology integrates intellect and spirit, proposing that the heart's reform is not only a theological imperative but a sociotechnical necessity in an AI-driven world. This theological insight reframes our approach to AI: rather than reacting with fear or blind embrace, it calls for an ethical and spiritual reorientation that AI itself might paradoxically inspire. With this re-centering in mind, we now turn to the question: How might we respond?

5. How Might We Respond?

A Bottom-Up Response: Beginning with the Self

Considering the above, one might instinctively look toward institutional or governmental regulations as the primary avenue for reforming and regulating AI. However, while a top-down approach remains necessary—through policy, jurisprudence, and institutional oversight—it is not sufficient. As Islamic theology reminds us, change begins not with the state, but with the self. The Quran states unequivocally: *"Indeed, God will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves"* (13:11). Any real response to the transformative impact of AI must begin at the level of the individual: their practices, intentions, and moral compass.

Top-down governance can set external boundaries, but it is our personal adoption, overreliance, or resistance to AI that determines its deepest effects on society. As Jeremy Peckham argues, in his *Masters or Slaves: AI and the Future of Humanity* (2021) that the more pertinent question is not what AI can do *for* us—automating tasks, increasing efficiency, or generating knowledge—but what it is doing *to* us: psychologically, spiritually, and morally. Hence, if we do not begin with the self in this context, then external regulators will offer little help (Peckham 2021, p. 13).

This paradigm shift mirrors the Islamic emphasis on *niyyah* and *taqwā* as inward orientations that determine the validity and value of outward acts. As such, the individual user is not a passive consumer of AI, but a moral agent whose every interaction with the technology reflects and reshapes their inner world. A bottom-up response would therefore require us to pause and ask: In embracing AI, what might I be gaining? What might I

be losing? While we may gain in efficiency, are we losing our technical competence—our ability to reason, write, analyse, and create independently? As Turkle (2011) warns, the automation of thinking and communication may lead to a form of "cognitive outsourcing," where humans become dependent on machines not only for answers but for forming questions (Turkle 2011, pp. 256–59). In Islamic epistemology, this is a serious risk. The Quran repeatedly invites human beings to reflect (*yatafakkarūn*), reason (*yaʿqilūn*), and seek knowledge (*yaʿlamūn*), framing intellectual engagement as a form of worship. To offload this sacred activity onto AI is not only imprudent—it is potentially spiritually corrosive.

A bottom-up approach compels us to reevaluate not only *how* we use AI, but *why*. Is our use of AI oriented toward self-improvement, community service, and divine remembrance—or toward self-indulgence, distraction, and control? The concept of *maṣlaḥah* in Islamic ethics demands that we align our technological engagements with spiritually and socially constructive ends. This means resisting the temptation to normalize algorithmic mediators in spiritual or relational spaces. AI should not replace the imam, the teacher, or the companion—but rather assist them. If AI replaces human presence, it may ultimately displace human love.

By beginning with the self, we also become co-creators of broader reform. If individual users engage AI with moral vigilance, ethical restraint, and spiritual intention, then their cumulative influence will ripple upward. Institutions are not impersonal monoliths; they are shaped by the aggregated values and expectations of individuals. Thus, a spiritually grounded grassroots reform may, in time, influence curricula, fatwas, platform design, and policy. True change is recursive: it begins in the soul, informs action, and returns as systemic transformation. In this way, the Islamic response to AI must reclaim the primacy of the heart (*qalb*)—not as a romantic metaphor, but as the locus of moral discernment and divine connection. Reforming the heart is not a diversion from the technological debate—it is its foundation. For only hearts that are awake can use powerful tools without becoming enslaved by them. The question that remains is how do we reform the heart? Which is a topic for further research.

6. Conclusions

The discourse on artificial intelligence within Islamic theology cannot afford to be simplistic or reactive. By framing the investigation around Osmer's four-fold practical theological questions—What is going on? Why is it going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?—this study has brought into focus the layered and systemic nature of AI's challenge to Muslim thought and praxis. It is not only about what AI does, but about what we are becoming in relation to it.

A central insight has been the shift from meanings to means. In today's post-industrial and hyper-technological age, technological efficiency often eclipses metaphysical purpose. Classical Islamic thought, which once harmonized the rational and the revealed, the technical and the spiritual, is now being tested by tools that are powerful but morally ambiguous. We are not advocating for the replacement of STEM with the humanities, but rather for a thoughtful balance between the two. The humanities without STEM risk becoming impractical, lacking the tools and methodologies needed to engage with the complex technological realities shaping our world. Conversely, STEM without the humanities risks becoming non-directional, driven by innovation without ethical reflection, historical context, or humanistic purpose. A well-integrated approach ensures that scientific and technological advancements are guided by moral insight and social responsibility, while humanistic inquiry remains grounded in the evolving realities of our time.

Anther equally crucial insight from this article is that it proposes a movement from the head to the heart—from understanding how AI challenges human cognition to how

it unsettles human conscience. This shift opens new doors for Islamic theology and Islamic spiritualty, inviting a renewed exploration of the spiritual, ethical, and existential dimensions of technology in light of the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* and the deeper questions of what it means to be human. In this way, AI will not only be a challenge but equally an opportunity. Hence, the article cautions against alarmist or reactionary attitudes. AI is not intrinsically evil, nor is its development a threat to be categorically rejected. Rather, it is an occasion for self-reflection and spiritual renewal. Islamic theology, when retrieved in its full richness—including the often-neglected traditions of love, humility, and *iḥsān*—offers a robust framework for engaging technology without losing sight of the human soul. By re-centring the heart and the spiritual virtues that define humanity's relationship to the divine, Muslims can encounter AI not with fear, but with discernment and moral clarity.

To the above ends, a bottom-up response is essential. While international guidelines and ethical regulations are essential, they will remain hollow without a bottom-up theological approach that begins with individual intention and accountability. The Quranic ethic urges believers to ask not only *how* we use tools, but *why*—and to what end. AI must be directed by a moral vision. Only then can technology be made to serve human flourishing rather than control or commodify it. This requires a renewed commitment to integrating spiritual values into technological design. Models such as value-sensitive design (VSD) and pluralist ethical frameworks can serve as starting points for building systems that reflect Islamic virtues such as justice (ʿadl), mercy, and sincerity. Scholars, developers, and policymakers must collaborate across disciplines to ensure that emerging technologies are governed by a theology that respects both divine guidance and the complexity of human life. The challenge is not merely to regulate machines, but to cultivate humans who use them wisely and compassionately.

Looking forward, the Islamic theology of technology must move beyond binary oppositions—rejection or uncritical acceptance—and offer a third path: one of purposeful engagement. By acknowledging that technology is not neutral, and that our responses to it shape who we become, Muslims are called to reassert their moral agency in a rapidly transforming world. Artificial intelligence may alter the landscape of human capability, but it need not diminish our humanity. Through the lens of Islamic ethics, AI can become not just a means of control, but a mirror reflecting the values we choose to embed—or to resist. And, in doing so, it offers Muslims a profound opportunity: not to fear the future, but to shape it with meaning. A theology that only says "no" to technology becomes irrelevant; a theology that says "yes" without scrutiny becomes complicit. The task is to say "yes, but"—to innovate with integrity, and to remain faithful even while embracing the new.

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