

AI4Science. The specificity of the study of religionsAI for Religious Studies

Since the beginning of this century, religions and their leaders have often been invited to publicly express their thoughts and commitment for peace, non violence, even fraternity. A demanding effort, which was needed in order to combat those who have squandered the heritage of wisdom and coexistence which during the entire human history have been competing with more brutal ideas of persecuting the other. Such a request for clarification was even more urgent in front of the “secular” and very simplistic suspicion considering “religions” – which as such does not exist, because they cannot live but in the soul of real human beings – the only origin of the violence. Denominations, confessions or even “religions” (if you like it) have responded generously to this call for condemnation and distancing from that type of murderers who, under the banner of “God wills it” like the crusaders, became more bloodthirsty and cruel.

At the risk, however, of giving an ambiguous image of the very content of faith. As long as it remains in God's heart and in his revelation, whatever philosophers may argue that faith is undoubtedly and without error a factor of peace. But when it dwells in the heart of every man or woman, faith remains open to the responsibility and freedom of the individual to make good or bad use of it: and history is there not to say that one use is better than the other – because for that purpose you don't need history, but common sense. History is there not to teach that everyone will answer of his their deed before God on the last day – because for such a purpose you need a preacher. History is there to narrate the that in the days of real men and women – namely within the present that we live as well as in another present distant from us that we call past – there were men and women who benefitted from the compassion of those who have understood these truths of faith, or, on the contrary, who suffered the violence of those who have blasphemed them, shedding the blood of innocents in endless fratricidal wars.

What faith communities, their authorities (or “leaders”, as they are called) and the scholars crossing with the instrument of historical knowledge as well as the tools of other disciplines are asked to give is more than the famous “words of wisdom” prophesied by the Beatles: they can give reasons and intellectual energy to all those are willing to explore a process that is typical of the religious experience: namely understand how and why an “object” (a scripture, a doctrine, a cult, a rule) so different meanings and consequences can be derived from an “object” (a scripture, a doctrine, a cult, a rule).

In such an effort, for scholars to share the same faith of the people we they study is not an advantage nor and handicap; the same to be perfectly indifferent to whatever religious experience is not a problem nor a requirement for an “unbiased” knowledge. The only needed virtue is to be aware that there were human beings who were persuaded that they were not playing another game (e.g. a political one, e.g.) while playing with the Heaven: and as for a person who was born blind many sciences are open, but Art history could be more difficult, one must accept that religious studies are focused on people who had their colors, their palettes, their tastes.

For these scholars the technological changes of the last two centuries are all relevant. Anastatic editions made possible to reprint ancient sources, modern archeology discovers new ways of understanding the life in the past, philology and microfilms helped so much significantly in redefining the status of the critical approach, and, last but not least, the digital copy changed the quantity of access to literature and scholarship. However, if we look to the development of Religious Studies in the 20th Century, technological innovation was just one half of the progress in our disciplines: many questions raised by new ideas have created new disciplines (e.g. gender studies, post-colonial studies) and the need of rethinking an amount of sources which do represent the more classical “long durée” and at the same time the “large span” of our doubts and queries.

The use of AI in this field is not different from the use of anastatic editions or microfilms in philology or the market of journals and collections: it does not move of one inch our knowledge by its naive repetition. And the intellectual confusion raised by calling “digital humanities” the production of pdfs for dummies is there to teach us that an insufficient intellectual challenge can only generate profit for some companies, but no result for the understanding development of knowledge?.

What we conventionally call the digital transition is a way of labeling the arrival of technology in people's lives in a way that is perceived as omni-pervasive: Luciano Floridi's brilliant formula, according to which online and “on-life” combine in a new existential sphere, describes the recent past of the issue that concerns us; but what research is looking for is much more complicated.

The difference is very clear to all those who learned another language in another alphabet: when you recognize all the letters, you grasp nothing. And for this reason I consider a necessary development to call “digital humanities” the reading of the letters and identify something else to name the knowledge of the grammar, the syntax, the meanings of the discourse.

Is there a single word to name all of this (I confess: I am since ever fond of “Naming & Necessity”) with a label which may last while technologies are rapidly changing? Unfortunately not.

What we can have is a temporary label, which can be replaced by a better one when and if needed and that can be modeled on the formula “Science with AI” adopted by the European Commission Chief Scientific Advisors in 2024, while I had the honor of serving in.

After a long consultation they (we)we tried to put emphasis on science and to treat “AI systems” as a tool (thereby?fore “Science with AI”).

If this is such an approach to AI is good for science in general it is much proper for religious studies and religious history specifically: and a short definition of terminology could make clear what does “AI systems” mean.

Being a tool for research, also what is generally called “AI” is more than this: research needs a complex system of tools creating an access, a bridge, a key to sources which are the basis for instrumental operations (philology, archeology, linguistics etc., including all disciplines that an old 19th century way to define them, definition called “ancillary”) and the basis for hermeneutical operations (i.e. the narrative hermeneutics of history, the theoretical hermeneutic of philosophy and theology, the model analysis of sociology, etc.). To be rude give an example, one may say that you using AI in science don’t need not just the possibility of making microfilm of manuscripts at risk, but it is about the whole actual process of microfilming, storing, transferring.

Also AI is more precisely an “AI system”: AI is, indeed, a system: namely an integrated multilevel process of Data, Codes or Algorithms, and Computing (or High Performance Computing). Under a theoretical angle the new AI based technologies, are instructed by a library of “objects” not to discover connections (which are easy and irrelevant), but connections among connections. More will come when Hpc and AI will be superseded by quantum computing and the new possibility of creating self-learning systems so to gain time in many fields.

Nonetheless,; but the challenge remains the same: ESPLICITARE. And in such a scenario religious studies have a peculiar role which will not come from the specialist of religions in comparative sense shaped by extrinsecism.

Religious studies – as a huge variety of intrinsic knowledge of the human experiences of religious scriptures, doctrines, cults, norms gained with the methods that are proper to each discipline – are obviously part of the Humanities: but they are not bound or condemned in being just a variant of “general” disciplines working with sources, time, facts, narratives.

The research of connections among connections (connections₂, connections₃, connections_{n-1}) may have in a unique topology of sources a unique benchmark: because these all these sources (material or textual, iconographic or symbolic) are disseminated into different historical contexts, multiplied by cultural adaptation to different contexts, translated into different alphabets and semantics, merged by diverse anthropological and philosophical visions: and all this is done through a “long durée”, made of infinite chronological points and diachronical segments. And this means This is a complexity where the expert eye can always (always) discern vision and hallucination.

Much more than providing “ethical” guidelines, religious thoughts and stories may offer a playground for new games: instead of defining ethical principles which could be terribly similar to the one produced by an imaginary ethicist of the iron age (make humanocentric use of iron, don’t use iron to arm other people, share you iron with the one who are in need...) they can provide to powerful technologies the opportunity to explore one of the most complex systems of thought. .

And scholarship can derive for such a virtuous gain, as an exchange, tools capable of understanding, safeguarding and disseminating the great theological, legal, scientific, and philosophical heritage that the great religions have produced.

With the European research infrastructure for religious sciences “Resilience RESILIENCE,” we are carrying out the first experiments in AI for the humanities that promise a leap forward in our knowledge as a result of such exchange.. Among the many cases that are presented in this volume, three are the examples that, in my opinion, precisely explain the type of significant change that AI is producing with and within the scholarly community.

If I have time, I will give three examples from among the many projects underway within the UNESCO Chair on Religious Pluralism and Peace, projects that are being carried out by my colleagues in Palermo and Bologna, where you are all invited and welcome.

I do not need toThe first concerns the study of Talmud. Without entering into the details that explain here the importance of the Talmud for Judaism and the thread that connects the Noble Quran to the Shenedrin 12 treatise (“Whoever saves a life saves the whole world; whoever loses a life loses the whole world”), we can observe that. The comments arranged in rectangles around the text of the Mishnah all have different dates, which the Vilna edition obviously presents in two dimensions. However, if we lift the Vilna page and “push” each rectangle of commentary forward or backward so as to make the chronological stratification of the commentaries visible, we would obtain something that would allow us to understand the interpretative evolution of the text, or when the opinion of usually less important schools takes precedence over a more important school, etc.

The second example is about Greek and Latin patrologies? (but also Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopian), which have a fairly similar function in the Christian tradition: a thousand printed volumes cover the entire heritage of the “ancient” tradition which, since around the eighth century, has been considered an existential tool for the renewal of the Church. It is here, in fact, that Tradition (with a capital T) resides, allowing us to re-evaluate or change traditions (with a lowercase t (think of the Second Vatican Council for the Roman Catholic Church) traditions (with a lowercase t) that have consolidated customs that are less good than the ancient ones (think of the Second Vatican Council for the Roman Catholic Church). There is an immense body of literature in patristics: in order to reconstruct today what the Bible or the New Testament actually quoted, the construction of allusions or fusions will give a completely new image of this heritage, which contains unexplored treasures.

On The third concerns Arabic and Islam, we are working on severalon which many are the ongoing projects (an attempt at semi-automatic cataloguing of title pages, a transcription of manuscripts, a work similar to the patristic Tafasir, etc.) and on a project thatbut only one is very close to my heart: a revision of the Italian translation of the Noble Quran with a parallel text that will restore to the text the solemnity it deserves and the poetic depth it contains. Among the Italian translations (sometimes dependent on French translations or written in poor Italian), an AI system would can systematically identify the possibility or necessity of reproducing the return of Arabic words in the Italian verses. I hope that this will serve as a model for scholars who want to know the text and for the faithful who seek recognition.

I will not dwell on examples.

But I will return to my pointEach of the three examples highlights the need for a choice: the technological change we are witnessing requires a choice of the scholars about the role of his/herthey claim for their own disciplines: they can be users of byproducts coming down from the technological chain; more importantly, they can be the driver of questioning issues that feed the chain of knowledge that goes from the world of research to university students, teachers, religious schools, information, the media and new media, and public opinion.

Commenting on the book of Ezekiel, Pope Gregory the Great explained to the Christians of Sseventh-century Rome the vision of a four-wheeled chariot turning in all directions with a Latin phrase with which I will conclude: “Divina eloquia cum legenti crescunt,” “Divine words grow with those who read them.” Gregory meant that in every revealed word there is a perfect and intangible truth, but that this is revealed to the reader to the extent of his purity, patience, and ability to delve deeper into its meaning.

The technological change we are witnessing can help readers grow and give the world that force of peace that can come from those who (as Sura 5 commands) know how to compete in good works and compete with those who have the same spiritual and intellectual ambition.

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