

Are Churches Trading Freedom for Security with AI Surveillance?

Technology in its base form is inherently neutral, just like any other tool be it digital or analog.

It all depends on how the person using it wields the tool that determines if it has been used for good or for evil.

This argument has taken on a new form as artificial intelligence has grown in leaps and bounds all within the last couple of years.

Is AI as neutral as a shovel, Facebook account or knife? It would depend on who programmed and operates the algorithm.

As humanity continues to find new, innovative ways to utilize AI for the good of mankind, warnings have poured out from the very programmers who helped create the artificial systems about the risks and dangers associated with AI.

Christians in particular are especially wary of AI, as it has been linked with the implementation of the prophesied mark of the beast, from the book of Revelation in the end times.

One church however, Valley Baptist Church in Bakersfield, California, is trying to formulate a way to use AI to help strengthen the security over their congregation.

Speaking to writer, author and podcaster Billy Hallowell on his "Higher Ground with Billy Hallowell" podcast, Matt Montana, director of safety for Valley Baptist explained how he and his church are using AI to stop potential mass shootings before they happen.

"I came on staff here a little over three years ago after

retiring from law enforcement,” Montana said. “And as I assessed the safety needs of our community. ... I really felt it was important to kind of identify some sort of technology that would allow us to identify if somebody had weapons on our campus.”

Montana later discovered the company, ZeroEyes, which touts a “human-verified proactive gun detection and situational awareness software that integrates into existing digital security cameras with a mission to stop mass shootings and gun-related violence.”

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As the Christian Post reported, ZeroEyes was founded by a team of former Navy SEALs and technology experts whose COO, Rob Huberty, joined the podcast to discuss how the company came about in 2018 after the school shooting in Parkland, Florida.

“A bunch of us, we saw a video of the shooter who was out, and he had his gun out in front of a camera, and he actually talked to another student. He said, ‘Get out of here. It’s going to be bad,’” Huberty explains. “And we said, ‘There’s an opportunity here to see a gun and do something before anything happens. What if somebody was watching this?’”

Exploring how they could utilize technology, and AI specifically, to help prevent another mass shooting, they set to work creating a digital infrastructure to recognize and neutralize a mass shooter as soon as possible.

“We took images of ourselves carrying guns on these types of cameras, and we just compiled a massive database for what the definition of a gun is,” Huberty explained, that if security cameras pick up any gun the technology will flag that weapon. “If there’s an image, it’s going to send out an alert, and it’s going to give that image of that location.”

Emergency services would then be alerted to this event and must appropriately.

But one particular question comes to mind about an AI security system being installed in a house of worship with a direct line to first responders: How could this technology be misused in the wrong hands?

An old adage states: "The pathway to hell is paved with good intentions," and it appears this is all done with the safety of parishioners in mind.

But there is a very real evil that is threatening this world. An evil that wants to see more events like the tragedy which took place in Charleston back in 2015, spread across the world. That same evil also seeks to silence the gospel of Jesus Christ, and having a system in place in churches across the U.S. that would allow them to be monitored could unintentionally become a Trojan Horse of religious persecution.

The recent pandemic showed all Americans that there are those in government who would shut down every church they could in a heartbeat. There are still lawsuits ongoing in states like California over the unjust and unconstitutional persecution some of the churches faced during the lockdowns.

How much worse would it be with an AI monitoring system in place keeping track of who attends the services, and what is being said during those same services?

To be clear, none of this seems to be the intent of the company Mr. Hallowell talked to about increasing security, a noble objective in and of itself. But there remains the potential of unintended consequences should the coding and operation of such AI programs enter into the wrong hands.

The technology is here, today, it is no longer the stuff of science fiction. How this new technology will be used in the

very near future, however, remains to be seen.

One thing is certain, that God always has been and always will be in control (see Joshua 1:9). {eoa}

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