

This Church's AI Bot Reveals What a Dangerous Tool It Is

It used to be that you could tell a woke church by vague statements about social justice on their website, or a barista in the lobby of their Sunday services, or how hipster-ish their pastors seemed to dress. In the future, perhaps, you'll be able to tell by a church's AI bot.

Meet Cathy. Cathy isn't a person, although "she" represents the teachings of one of the most liberal Christian denominations there is—just in case you were curious.

According to an Aug. 7, report from the Episcopal News Service, AskCathy is "[t]he latest AI chatbot geared for spiritual seekers ... co-launched in June by a research institute and ministry organization and aiming to roll out soon on Episcopal church websites.

"Cathy draws on the latest version of ChatGPT and is equipped to prioritize Episcopal resources."

According to the AskCathy FAQ, it draws upon both ChatGPT AI; the website of the Episcopal Church, one of the more liberal offshoots of the Anglican Communion; "The Book of Common Prayer," a prayer book used by most churches in the Anglican Communion; and publications by Forward Movement, an Episcopal publisher.

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"This is not a substitute for a priest," said Rev. Tay Moss, who directs the Innovative Ministry Center, a Toronto-based organization, which the Episcopal News Service says "develops digital resources for communities of faith" and is one of the architects behind AskCathy.

“She comes alongside you in your search queries and helps you discover material. But she is not the end-all be-all of authority. She can’t tell you how to believe or what to believe.”

Yes, but ... you’re probably less likely to pick up on the wokeness vibe if you come across an AI chatbot, which represents the church’s positions in your web browser, than you would if you were to go to an Episcopal service. And, indeed, that’s the whole point.

“The goal is not that they will end up at their nearby Episcopal church on Sunday. The goal is that it will spark in them this knowledge that God is always with us, that God never leaves us,” said the Rev. Lorenzo Lebrija, another developer of AskCathy and executive director of the TryTank Research Institute at Virginia Theological Seminary.

“This can be a tool that gives us a glimpse and little direction that we can then follow on our own.”

So, what exactly is that glimpse?



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One of our editors, for example, asked AskCathy, “Does the Bible allow a man to lie with another man as with a women?”

The answer is ... well, we’ll let Cathy speak for herself:

The Bible contains passages that have been traditionally interpreted as prohibiting same-sex sexual relations. For example, Leviticus 18:22 states, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” Similarly, certain passages in the New Testament, such as Romans 1:26-27, have been interpreted as speaking against same-sex relations.

However, interpretations of these passages can vary widely. Some people understand them as prohibiting all same-sex sexual activity, while others interpret them in their historical and cultural contexts, suggesting that they do not apply to modern, loving, committed same-sex relationships.

The Episcopal Church, through its General Convention, has taken steps to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ individuals, including the recognition and blessing of same-sex marriages. This reflects a broader understanding and interpretation of Scripture that emphasizes love, inclusion, and the dignity of every human being.

As with many theological questions, individuals are encouraged to study the Scriptures, engage with theological resources, and participate in community discussions to form their understanding.

It's worth noting that, when I tried to corroborate this several weeks later, I got a much more succinct—and less risible—answer:

In the Bible, specifically in Leviticus 18:22, it states, “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” This passage is often cited in discussions about biblical views on same-sex relations. It's important to note that interpretations and understandings of these texts can vary widely within different Christian communities. If you're interested in a more in-depth exploration of this topic, I recommend speaking with a clergy member or theologian within the Episcopal Church who can provide insight into how these scriptures are understood in the context of modern faith and practice.

Indeed, AskCathy seems to be undergoing relatively constant retooling—and probably for good reason, considering that some of its initial responses perked the interest of, well, people

like my editor. It's unclear whether this is intentional meddling or simply machine learning at work. Both would be problematic.

For instance, as the Episcopal News Service noted: "In May, the Catholic evangelization site Catholic Answers 'defrocked' their AI avatar, Father Justin, designating him as a layperson after he reportedly claimed to be an ordained priest capable of taking confession and performing marriages."

However, it's worth noting that the answers that seemed to have changed over our time using AskCathy, such as it is, seem to involve questions of wokeness. When my editor asked if there were any transgender figures in the Bible, AskCathy responded, "While the Bible does not explicitly mention transgender individuals ... some people look at the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 as a figure who might resonate with transgender experiences. Eunuchs in biblical times did not fit the typical gender roles of their society, and the Ethiopian eunuch is portrayed as a faithful and devout individual who is welcomed into the Christian community."

"It's important to approach these interpretations with sensitivity and an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of the biblical texts. Discussions around gender diversity in the Bible can offer meaningful insights and reflections for many people today," the bot answered.

Asking that question now, we got the same answer about the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40—not really an appropriate analog for the transgender debate in 2024, but that's an entirely different tangent—except AskCathy ended its answer on a different, more even-handed note.

"It's worth noting that interpretations and discussions around gender in the Bible can vary widely. The Episcopal Church, like many other denominations, continues to engage in conversations about gender identity and inclusivity within the

faith community,” the bot responded Tuesday morning. “If you are interested in exploring this topic further, I recommend speaking with a clergy member or theologian who can provide more context and insight.”

Uh-huh.

Now, it’s worth noting two things. First, AskCathy makes no truth claims about the righteousness of the Episcopal Church and makes it clear that the answers you’re getting are the positions of the Episcopal Church and not general Protestant biblical exegesis. I will say this much: You would have to be incredibly dim to believe that this is some kind of magical Bible-bot that’s interpreting God’s Word for you and not simply answering questions about a denomination.

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Second, anyone remotely familiar with the Episcopal Church in America will, in no way, be surprised by these answers. You aren’t getting anything different than you’d get from the pulpit. In fact, by making AskCathy’s answers more equivocal over time—either through passive machine learning or active manipulation—it’s probably less progressive than the average Episcopal sermon.

As the pro-LGBT Human Rights Commission noted on its website, the Episcopal Church stated, as early as 1976, that “homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the church”—much earlier than even the most liberal of Christian denominations even dreamt of such a thing.

The HRC noted that Episcopal canon law says those who have issues with “gender identity or expression” have full access to the church’s ministry: “As transgender people and their

families increasingly come out within or find their way to congregations, their specific naming in our Canons ... will encourage congregations to deepen their understanding and widen their welcome.”

The issue, of course, is woke church culture outreach going digital—and, not only that, apparently learning through AI or human intervention what sets off alarm bells and what doesn't. Its creators don't necessarily want those who use it to even go to church, although they also insist it's not a replacement.

What is it, then? What do you want it to be? That seems to be the bedrock question the Episcopal Church—and too many other congregations, for that matter—are asking. It isn't what God wants from us, it's what we want from God. That's not how it works.

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