



# CITYtheology

MAGAZINE OF LEEDS CHURCH INSTITUTE

HOW CAN  
CREATIVITY  
MOVE US FROM  
ACCUSATIONS  
OF MOCKERY  
TOWARDS  
'INFINITE  
DIGNITY'?

CROSSING THE  
THRESHOLD  
TO USE MY  
VOICE

"SILENCE WAS THE  
LOUD REPLY":  
MISINFORMATION,  
RACISM, AND THE  
POWER OF WORDS

THE ETHICS OF  
ARTIFICIAL  
INTELLIGENCE

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# Welcome to CITYTheology

**This issue of the magazine is all about using our voice.** As Christians we are called to use our voices to glorify God, and to speak prophetically into situations of injustice.

I'm thankful to Revd Dr Carol Tomlin for her powerful honesty about the experience of being silenced in Christian spaces. Her storytelling is a prophetic gift to a Church who needs to listen.

Revd Steven Jones reminds us of the ways our words can be used to harm or heal. In a world brimming with misinformation, we must speak plainly against racism wherever we see it.

The Paris Olympic opening ceremony sparked anger from some Christians – Bronagh asks whether it could instead be used as an opportunity for dialogue and a move towards inclusion.

And finally, Christians cannot stay silent on the biggest ethical issues facing our society. Revd Joseph Nelson speaks to the ethical considerations of A.I., and our call to care for creation.

I hope this issue encourages you to stand in the power of your voice, and continually speak up for God's kingdom of justice and peace.





The articles in this edition:

- ✳ Crossing the Threshold to Use My Voice
- ✳ How can creativity move us from accusations of mockery towards 'infinite dignity'?
- ✳ "Silence was the loud reply": Misinformation, racism, and the power of words
- ✳ The Ethics Of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.)

*Emma Temple*

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# Crossing the Threshold to Use My Voice

REVD DR CAROL TOMLIN REFLECTS ON HER EXPERIENCES OF SPEAKING UP AS A BLACK WOMAN IN THE CHURCH, AND THE BARRIERS THAT SILENCE US.

## VOICE VERSUS SILENCE

**The voice is the speech apparatus used as the foremost device for communication, conveying intentional expression of information and opinions.**

Silence can be described as the complete absence of sound, although all silence is not merely the opposite of voice.<sup>1</sup>

Some forms of silence reflect certain behaviours underscoring the complex and multidimensional nature of silence and thereby, voice. Robyn Fivush,<sup>2</sup> for example, distinguishes being silenced and being silent. Marginalised individuals can experience a loss of voice and power within the dominant culture as they can be unwittingly silenced.



Silence may also be reflected in acquiescent ways.

Acquiescent silence denotes individuals who do not believe that their voice can make a difference and are unwilling to exert the effort to speak up, get involved, or make any attempt to change their circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Being silenced, and acquiescent silence in particular, portrays the behaviours of too many women, evidenced in the first of two narratives I will recount.

A few years ago, I was invited to speak at the Pentecostal European Fellowship Conference in Poland. The presentation was based on how churches in Europe can engage with young people. During my delivery, I observed the non-responses of some of the men and thought it could be due to their lack of English, as a few of them could not understand the language. Concomitantly, I became aware of the glances of admiration from the majority of women. I knew that my presentation was not particularly revelatory and I was perplexed somewhat by the responses of each gender.

At the end of the Conference,

a woman approached me and requested that I pray for the women in Europe who believe that the Lord has called them into ministry, but feel constrained because of their husbands who are influenced by the churches' teachings on the role of women.

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**At that moment, I was given a stark reminder of how women are not only being silenced but also contributing to their silencing by engaging in acquiescent silence. They are resigned to a voiceless state, unwilling to use their agency to speak.**

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The second account centres on the loss of my voice in early 2016. Individuals acquainted with me knew that my voice loss was not due to overuse. I duly made a doctor's appointment resulting in a visit to the local hospital, where I was diagnosed with vocal nodules by the ENT (ear, nose and throat) consultant. The consultant recommended a course of speech therapy to heal my voice box. Thankfully,

with the intervention of the speech therapist, who gave me voice exercises entailing blowing through a special straw and making specific sounds, my usual dulcet tones returned with full force.

During that period of losing my voice, I vividly recall that my confidence to communicate effectively had diminished somewhat. It had a significant impact on the essence of my being and individuals could not hear

what I was saying at times as the sound that came out of my mouth was a whisper.

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**This symbolises the experience of many women, especially women of colour, whose voices at times have been reduced to a mere whisper - voiceless.**

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They too may need to symbolically blow through a straw to make the appropriate sounds to regain their voices.

## **CROSSING THE THRESHOLD INTO THE GARDEN**

In light of the increasing difficulties since the Gaza-Israeli conflict, I, together with a group of multi-faith leaders, were invited to a bishop's house to unite faith leaders in a visible show of solidarity. I was the only Pentecostal clergy and only Black female in the room of approximately 16 individuals. All the leaders spoke apart from me. Despite the chair, who acted in an informal capacity, emphasising that respondents should limit what they had to say due to time constraints, a couple of individuals pushed the boundaries and gave voice to the concerns of their respective faith communities. Hmhm I thought.

I sat there observing and pondering on all that had transpired. Issues of Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and experiences associated with Sikhism and Hinduism, were all discussed. Yes, tales

of discrimination in the UK were recounted as the fallout from the Gaza-Israeli conflict. Yet I, the only clergy who was Black and female in the room, did not speak, nor was I invited to do so.

I, who could write a book on the topic of anti-Blackness, reflected on this as we all crossed the threshold to take a group photograph in the garden. I thought whilst we were taking the photo that I could continue to say nothing and then go home upset or 'vexed' to use my Jamaican mother's idiom.

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**To speak or not to speak were the thoughts that danced in my mind. I decided to speak.**

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Immediately after the photo, as the group were making their way back to the room where the discussion was convened, I spoke. I cannot remember the exact words that flowed from my being, but knowing me it probably sounded akin to a mini-sermon. I explained that I



was the only Black female in the room representing literally thousands of African heritage people belonging to the Charismatic/Pentecostal Christian tradition, and I was not given an opportunity to speak. I also said that whilst invisible minorities could change their names, I could not remain invisible due to my skin colour (I might add neither do I have any intention of being invisible).

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**I had to use my agency. I had to speak up for the sake of my ancestors, for the sake of those who have fought for me, and for the sake of the freedom I experienced through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I had to speak for the sake of myself.**

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The challenges and disparities facing all communities cannot and should not be denied, and arguably, in that sense, pain is still pain. However, the unique history of my ethnicity with the after-effects of slavery echo deeply. Jim Crow America with its colour-coded

system based on people that look like me, ended only in my lifetime. I could have been sitting at the back of the bus had Martin Luther King's voice not reverberated throughout the globe. I vividly recall watching the dismantling of South Africa in 1994, only thirty years ago.

I say no more and rest my case. I thank God that I chose to use my voice when I crossed the threshold into the garden. As a Christian, I realised that I was living in the freedom conferred by Christ. True freedom for me does not come from any political system or ideology, though that helps, but rather from Jesus Christ as recorded in John 8:36: "Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (NKJV). At that moment in the garden, I felt free to use my voice.

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<sup>1</sup> R. L. Scott, "Dialectical Tensions of Speaking and Silence," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, (1993): 1-18.

<sup>2</sup> Robyn Fivush "Speaking Silence: The Social Construction of Silence in Autobiographical and Cultural Narratives," *Memory* 18, no. 2 (2010): 88-98.

<sup>3</sup> Linn Van Dyne, Soon Ang and Isabel, C Botero, "Conceptualizing Employee Silence and Employee Voice as Multidimensional Constructs," *Journal of Management Studies* 4, no. 40 (2003): 1359-1392.





*Leonardo Da Vinci: The Last Supper*



*Jan van Bijlert: The Feast of the Gods*

## How can creativity move us from accusations of mockery towards 'infinite dignity'?

ART THEOLOGIAN BRONAGH DALY REFLECTS ON A MOMENT OF TENSION, INDUCED BY CREATIVITY, AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR OPEN DIALOGUE ON MARGINALISATION AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH.

**The opening ceremony of the Olympic Games this summer offered us an open-air kaleidoscope of cultural, musical and visual celebration.** Artistic director Thomas Jolly choreographed

an eclectic ensemble of talented pop superstars, drummers, fireworks, opera, actors and acrobats to showcase French culture to the world.

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There were references to the state's dechristianisation, including a theatrical beheading of Marie Antoinette, and a tableau parody of the Olympic origin story that saw art critics divided – and some Christians offended.

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Statements of complaint appeared online and in print, and conversations have continued since. At the forefront of the criticism by the French Catholic Bishops was "a re-enactment of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper by ten men in drag*", revealing the fulcrum of tension; a focus on sexuality and morality. Jolly later confirmed that the homage was in fact to Dionysus from Bijlert's 'Feast of Gods', on exhibition currently at The Musee Magnin in Dijon, France.

The online tussle of art historians, theologians and general public on Jolly's inspiration for the tableau piece - whether da Vinci or

Dionysus - went into a downward spiral, leading to death threats aimed at the organisers.

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Perhaps we missed a more important discussion point; did Jolly's artistry offer an opportunity to generate dialogue on what some Christians still perceive to be the taboo topic of LGBTQ inclusion and belonging?

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Jolly, who was offered police protection following the complaints, explained that the artistic intention of the tableau, and the opening ceremony as a whole, was to create a narrative of unity - naming the 'grand nous' (translated from French 'the big us') as integral to the artistry of the international sporting event.

Sister Liz Dodd, a Catholic nun from the St Joseph of Peace congregation, lamented: "How awful that the death threats received by Jolly and Butch [the DJ central in the tableau



scene] likely came from – certainly stoked by – a corner of the Catholic Church. The message to the LGBTQ community was clear; you are so objectionable that even the suggestion you share a table with Jesus is offensive.”

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**With increased attention on the Eucharistic meal, we have been handed an opportunity to talk on a world stage, as well as in our local churches, about the importance of creating a culture of belonging for all minoritised groups, not only those who experience drag as their safe space but also marginalised LGBTQ, global majority heritage, disabled, women and neurodivergent communities.**

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I was talking about this recently with Revd Mark Umpleby, an organising member of Leeds Christians at Pride and Team Rector at Holy Trinity CoE church in Rothwell. During Pride weekend, Leeds

Minster and the Christians at Pride team used a visual and creative metaphor of ‘open doors’ to welcome the marchers of the Pride Parade, reflecting their inclusive liturgy and celebration service the day before. This was a simple act of LGBTQ co-created welcome, hospitality and belonging that generated far-reaching ripples of positive change here in our city.

Leeds-based artist and Christian, Luke Walwyn, responded to the debate around the opening ceremony, encouraging us to take time to learn about the artists who reference or critique sacred traditions, either as their subject or as inspiration. He invites us to encounter their works and lives that often attract the pendulum of celebration and ridicule, admiration and repression. Walwyn said if he were to create an illustration based on the complaints of the ‘sin of mockery’ lodged against Jolly, he would reflect on Christ’s teaching to those who are quick to accuse the marginalised in our communities: “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone” (John 8:7-11)



Standing in the wisdom of my Irish, Catholic, white, cis-woman, heterosexual body and staying true to my understanding of that all-important Christian lesson to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Mark 12:30-31), I feel emboldened by words of renowned theologian Jürgen Moltmann: "Hope is lived out when it comes alive, when we go outside of ourselves, and in joy and pain take part in the lives of others". (The Open Church, 1978)

Not long after Moltmann's death in June last year, Pope Francis welcomed over 200 prominent artists and other creative people from more than thirty countries to the Vatican's Sistine Chapel. Among the participants was the U.S. photographer Andres Serrano, an artist who's generated much controversy, based on assertions that his work was blasphemous.

In an effort to broaden the engagement of the Church with artists, the Vatican welcomed Serrano (also a victim of death threats) along with fellow creatives to proclaim the Church's commitment to supporting art that serves "to waken us up,

call us to a new alertness and a new consciousness" about issues of social justice. Reflecting on his blessing from Pope Francis, Serrano reminds us of his own humanity and infinite dignity: "I was very happy that the Church understands that I am a Christian artist and I am not a blasphemous artist. I'm just an artist."



In 1987 Serrano exhibited an award-winning photograph of a plastic crucifix, submerged in the artist's own urine. In a television interview, internationally renowned art historian and Catholic nun Sister Wendy Beckett (my

inspiration and hero) regarded the work, entitled 'Piss Christ', as not blasphemous at all. Rather, it can be understood as a statement on "what we are doing to Christ".

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**Is there a lesson we can learn from the horror of death threats targeted at artists who reference or interpret the sacred, as Jolly and Serrano do? Learning about marginalisation, social injustice and oppression moves us as Christians to put our faith into action.**

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The 2024 declaration on Catholic doctrine *Dignitas Infinita* outlines the importance of human dignity. While *Dignitas Infinita* lays out a wonderful rationale for why each human being, regardless of condition in life, must be respected, honoured and loved, it does not apply this principle infinitely to those who identify outside of the binary gender spectrum.

Am I willing to make art, take action, or speak out asking for

more from *Dignitas Infinita*, and from the church? Do I 'push the boundaries' enough as an artist, and as a Christian, to live out a prophetic message of love for my neighbour? What would happen if my art was co-created with marginalised LGBTQ communities and curated in churches to ensure their lived experience is welcomed?

Sister Liz Dodd inspires me with her prediction that, "When it comes, revival in the Catholic Church will look like a tidal wave of love, not the shoring up of a subculture that alienates and derides." (Tablet 3rd Aug 2024)

Inspired by this confidence I am committed to working in that liminal space, where the tension can feel rather scary. I continue to put my faith into practice working with artists to support Christians, churches and faith organisations learn about marginalisation through a healing-centred, creative practice that calls for infinite belonging.

#### **FURTHER READING**

The Open Church, Jürgen Moltmann, 1978



# “Silence was the loud reply”: Misinformation, racism, and the power of words



This is an excerpt from a sermon at Cross Gates Methodist Church on 11 August 2024, by Revd Steven Jones. Steven trained as a minister in South Africa, and reflected in the service on parallels with racist tensions that once again made media headlines in the UK this summer. You can catch up with the recording of the full talk here:



*“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.” -*

*James 3:9-12*



**In Harehills, just down the road from where we are, the BBC reported just over three weeks ago that what started off with Social Services seeking to remove four children from a home where it was feared that they were to be taken out of the UK, ended up with a police vehicle being overturned, a bus set alight, and 27 people having since been arrested.**

The reasons for this outburst of anger are complex, and it would be irresponsible for us to speculate what these might be – other than that Harehills is probably one of the most deprived areas in the whole of Leeds.

However, this didn't stop Nigel Farage from taking to X (Twitter) with his statement that "the politics of the subcontinent are currently playing out on the streets of Leeds. Don't say I didn't warn you." Alex Sobel, the MP for Leeds Central, has demanded an apology for this misinformed and irresponsible statement.

Then, just short of a fortnight ago, we received the tragic news of a murder in Southport, where a

17-year-old brandishing a knife entered a building where a holiday club was taking place, and fatally stabbed 6-year-old Bebe King, 7-year-old Elsie Dot Stancombe, and 9-year-old Alice da Silva Aguiar.

What happened next shocked the nation – not only because of who was involved, but the reasons given for the events that subsequently took place.

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**Rightful anger at the atrocity of what took place was replaced with a different, deeply disturbing anger, aimed at entirely innocent people who observe their own religion, and may have come from other countries to seek a new life here.**

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This is because people believed that the man who attacked that children's dance class was a Muslim and an illegal immigrant, despite police confirming that he was neither. One analyst said that within 24 hours there were at

least 27 million impressions for online posts speculating that the perpetrator was Muslim, a migrant, a refugee, or a foreigner.

In the above passage from James, the author issues a stern warning to be careful of what comes out of our mouths. There are a number of reasons for this. For one thing, our mouths are often in gear long before our brains are engaged – and the problem with this is, once the words are out there, they cannot be taken back.

Secondly, in today's online world, words are instantaneously transmitted around the world to multitudes of people by anyone who has access to a smartphone – and to paraphrase the old saying, "what happens in Vegas, stays on YouTube." The internet never forgets – no record can ever be entirely erased, and no-one can turn it off.

Thirdly, our words have the potential to bring about great harm.

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Can any of you remember that old saying, "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me?" My mom used to give me this advice as an 8-year-old when I complained of being taunted at school – and with the greatest respect to my dear late mother, and to anyone else who may have uttered this phrase, please stop quoting this line – because nothing could be further from the truth.

Words hurt – and what's more, when enough harmful words are uttered enough times to enough people, the inevitable result is sticks, and stones, and knives, and machetes, and petrol bombs.

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And in case any of you think I'm exaggerating, we need look no further than the events of the past few weeks.









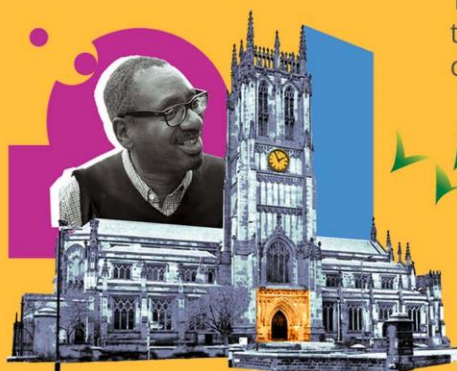
To be honest, I saw this coming some time ago. Think back to all the rhetoric and lies that were spread around Brexit. The main gripe was "the immigrants" – the perennial scapegoat for all of our country's woes – and our politicians and large swathes of the media have been beating that drum ever since. Can't get a job? Foreigners. Can't get a doctor's appointment? Foreigners. Can't afford a house? Foreigners.

And what's hidden inside this trojan horse? Racism.

I remember being part of a conversation in which someone chimed in about all the foreigners coming into the UK, and how this is ruining the fabric of British society. I questioned their statement – and the person immediately said, "Oh no, we don't mean you." To which I replied, "okay ... then who do you mean?" Silence was the loud reply.

At the Hook lecture this year, Richard Reddie will help us to think more about how the Church responds to racism in national headlines – and how we turn those key moments of tension into an effective movement for racial justice.

You can find tickets for the Hook Lecture on Wednesday 23rd October at [LCILeeds.org/events](https://LCILeeds.org/events)



The full talk will be available to watch on our YouTube channel after the event.



# The Ethics Of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.)

Revd Joseph Nelson, Pastor of St Luke's & St Matthew's Lutheran Church, Headingley, recently completed his Masters by Research on the theme of "Applying Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Conception of Responsibility to the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence Design and Development". This is a short section originally adapted for St Michael and All Angels', Headingley, on how our use of A.I. could impact the environment – and the ethical considerations of that.





**Artificial Intelligence (A.I). is now used in just about every sphere of modern life: healthcare, agriculture, smart phones, social media, automated vehicles, education, chat bots, website development, customer services, finance and logistics... the list goes on.**

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**Most of the time, we probably aren't even aware of its use and yet A.I. is now influencing so many aspects of our lives - from the friends we make and the news we read to how people are cared for in old age.**

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It is, therefore, unsurprising that the question of ethics arises in relation to Artificial Intelligence. There are many ethical issues that we could explore when it comes to A.I., however, one of the often-overlooked issues is the environmental impact of this technology.

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**In farming and agriculture, Artificial Intelligence technology has the potential to assist in our efforts to reduce and even eliminate hunger and starvation.**

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A.I. can be used for calculating the best crop rotations or which chemical additions should be added to the soil to produce more and higher quality produce both in indoor and outdoor settings. A.I. can consider factors that the human mind may not have, and this could be of great benefit in many parts of the world. One of my favourite examples of is 'RoboBees', which are used to pollinate areas that no longer have a sufficient number of pollinators.

A.I. can be a great tool in helping to combat climate change and other ecological issues. Yet, at the same time, studies have shown that training a single A.I. system can emit huge volumes of carbon dioxide.



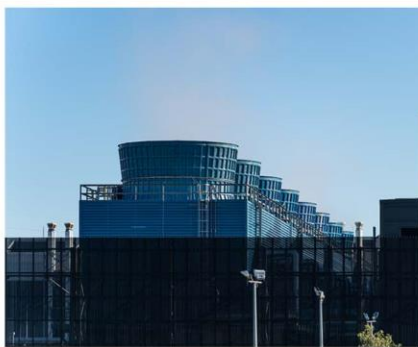
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**In fact, the use of A.I. technology across all sectors produces carbon dioxide emissions comparable to that of the aviation industry.**

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It is easy to forget that when we do something online or via servers, the data is always stored somewhere - often in big warehouses that use huge amounts of electricity to cool. Digital appliances can seem like a clean and more environmentally friendly alternative - yet as with many things this is far from straightforward.

These issues are especially true when it comes to big data, which consumes a lot of non-renewable energy. Big data can also, however, be very useful in combatting environmental damage and impacts. At the same time, we are also responsible for the impact of our consumption on the environment – and have an obligation to look for cleaner and more sustainable models of data storage and management for the sake of other people, both present and future.



**Have you seen the WasteShark in Leeds Dock? This litter picking robot in the River Aire is one local example of A.I. used as a tool for ecological protection.**

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**Responsible Artificial Intelligence must deal with the impact of A.I. on the environment and take that into consideration in development and implementation.**

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We cannot ignore our responsibility to the environment as it is a human vocation, as we see in Genesis 2:15, and includes our responsibility towards the common good. An A.I. machine might be profitable and efficient but if it is going to do harm to the environment then this must be taken into consideration when individuals, companies or governments are considering if it is morally right to create such a machine.

In this regard, I commend the work of the great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor who spoke constantly about the need for the Church to engage with the challenges of the world – to return to

discipleship and to fight oppression and violence wherever it came from. Bonhoeffer called for Christians to be responsible agents in the world, arguing that: it is not good enough to sit idly by when oppression and injustice takes place; it is not good enough to leave standing up for the weak and powerless to someone else; and it is not good enough to allow our following of Jesus Christ to become a Sunday obligation if it is not something that we live in our lives.

When you are a part of this global network, you have a share in the rewards and the consequences that result from it. Just as with climate change, A.I. is something that affects us all and should be regarded as something with which we need to be careful. We are responsible for the products that we consume and we are responsible for the consequences of those actions. Especially when it comes to climate change, we have an obligation to work towards the common good.

This is an instance in which we are obligated as Christians to take up responsibility and to

act to prevent ecological damage in any way that we can.

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**It is important to stay informed to the best of our ability; to try to understand what is going on and how A.I. is being used. In a democracy, we have a voice and it is important on issues such as this to know when to use that voice to push for reform and legislation.**

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Bonhoeffer states that Christians are called to 'representative action'. We are called to go beyond the requirements of the law and to become our brother's keeper. We are to act as if we are responsible for one another and to one another for the sake of Jesus Christ. Because of our common Creator in God the Father, and our common brotherhood in Jesus Christ his Son, it is not

acceptable for us to act as if the only person we are morally responsible for is ourselves.

Sometimes it may be responsible to create an A.I. machine - A.I. will, hopefully, in many ways be a key player in our attempts to reduce the ecological harm that we have caused - but we must also recognize the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves. The reality is that creating an Artificial Intelligence machine does have an ecological cost and must be thought through fully before such an undertaking is begun.

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