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Doomed to fail?!

Three Inherent Problems Haunting Religious Robotics

Abstract

The chief question about robots in religious practices today is not whether they should be allowed to participate or if they will replace humans but rather why they feel so irrelevant to us? This paper argues that the acceptance of robots in religious practices is foremost challenged by our experience with them, which is construed as indifference/difference. Either they make a difference to us or we are indifferent to their presence and action. In the latter case, the challenge of robotics in religious practices is not primarily of an ethical nature but a pragmatic one: Why pursue a path of religious advancement that holds no significance to its followers? Drawing from the phenomenological tradition, I will first describe the phenomena of indifference/difference as subjective experiences and describe three distinct problems robots in religious practice have: their lack of history, their preponderance of purpose and their absence of flesh. To strengthen my case argumentatively, I will confront all these arguments with their most obvious responses and contradictions to illuminate the breadth of the possible discussion. To conclude this essay, I will sketch preliminaries and examples of religious robots that might yet make a difference.

1. Phenomenology of indifference/difference

What defines the enigmatic realm of indifference? Some might argue it is a realm of non-feeling, as its inherent nature fails to evoke any

emotional response.[1] Philosophically speaking, it can be articulated as the equal spread of degrees of belief among possible outcomes when no relevant evidence is given.[2] Indifference is far from inadvertent. It does not merely entail passing by unnoticed, like an overheard sound that momentarily escapes our attention. The experience of indifference is not devoid of awareness but rather lacking in significance and intensity. It diverges from the state of boredom—a more specific inner state that imbues us with a consciousness of time, as aptly and positively discussed by Martin Heidegger[3] or William James[4]. While boredom arises when we persistently expose our attention to matters we find unstimulating, giving rise to our awareness of the slow ticking of time, something normally unconscious in our everyday toiling, indifference and boredom exist as distinct phenomena. What provokes our indifference entails a choice between at least two things it differentiates from each other, while at the same time, proclaiming: I do not care which one becomes reality. It pertains to the intricate relationship between oneself as a subject, holding values, experiences and volition, and an object that does not bear any significant relevance to these elements. If it was linked to any of those, we would be unable to not care about it. The importance of what we care about is what keeps us from faltering into indifference.[5]

An indifferent character, like Camus' Meursault, seems to be all but unaffected by values which he does not hold, experiences he does not value and volition he hardly has. Whether the object of our indifference exists or not makes no difference to such an inner state; hence the name. In the realm of our everyday perceptual experiences, most things remain present within our field of awareness without capturing our conscious notice. We remain unaffected by the existence of most of the things around us, yet often unaware of our neglect of difference.[6] In contrast, indifference presupposes

1 Albert Camus' protagonist Meursault in The Stranger encapsulates the lack of both affection and care, resulting in a life led in apparent indifference until an absurd murder finally evokes something in him; *Camus*: Fremde.
2 See *Eva*: Indifference, 1.
3 See *Heidegger*: Grundbegriffe, 220–249.
4 See *James*: Principles, 626.
5 See *Frankfurt*: Importance, 80–84.
6 See *Merleau-Ponty*: Phänomenologie, 108–113.

an awareness rooted in judgements derived from our values, experiences and volition. What holds significance to us resonates with these principles of subjectivity, while indifference, conversely, does not. We might find something stimulating and thus not boring yet be totally indifferent to its presence and what it might do or communicate[7]. Additionally, one could argue there is an intimate link between indifference and intensity as contrasting experiences. Experiences of heightened intensity, as explored by Maslow[8] and James[9], typically encounter, surpass and challenge our values, experiences and volition. The experience of indifference becomes all the more pressing and often prompts us to articulate it when we are confronted with the chasm between expectation and reality. This is hardly surprising as awareness stands as a fundamental factor in both indifference and intensity. The more we anticipate intensity, the more vexing its absence becomes.

2. Roots of indifference

Technology is prone to be especially challenged by the phenomenon of indifference, which is why it is championed here instead of typical accounts like ethical perils or dogmatic quarrels that are often at the forefront of debates about robots in religious practices. But why should—as I assume—indifference be a pressing problem for religious technology?

One possible answer to the question of indifference towards religious robots might be what John Jordan lays out and what was already hinted at here. Unlike other groundbreaking technologies, such as nuclear energy, the internet or smartphones, which seemingly emerged abruptly without prior reflection in the collective consciousness, robots have been subjects of debate and fantastical speculation for well over a century, as envisioned by writers like Lem,

7 The constant flood of stimulating yet interchangeable content flowing upwards in our Instagram and Twitter feeds undoubtably gives us a sense of this activated indifference.

8 See *Maslow:* Peak-Experiences, 9–18.

9 See *James*: Varieties, 380–397.

Wells and Asimov.[10] If we assume there is a close association between indifference and expectations of specific experiences and volition, it is unsurprising that robots may sometimes feel underwhelming and mundane. The reality of robots has diverged from the realms of science fiction, yet they remain more prevalent in the cycles of production than as social agents. Robotic process automations (RPAs), the predominant form of robotics quantitatively, embrace their inherent boredom, which is neither undesirable nor unwelcome. In fact, the *four Ds* principle in robotics—dull, dangerous, dear, dirty—defines tasks especially suited for robots, with dullness being one of the guiding principles.[11]

Is indifference then merely a side effect of underwhelming technology? If that was the case, we would have to assume that meeting Star War's favourite C3-PO *in the metal*—since meeting him *in the flesh* is precisely what we do not envision when we are talking about robots—would make us care about them and make them significant to us. While undoubtably an overwhelming experience, not only to the franchise fanatics[12] but to everyone, the thrilling experience might very well fade soon enough and be replaced by the nagging feeling of indifference all social robots are doomed to evoke sooner rather than later. Sparking our curiosity for a while, like anchors hanging from their frame, they are drowned in our indifference by three distinct problems that are so essential we might not find a solution. Yet I want to give a short prolepsis in the end on how these burdens might be lifted if religious robots are constructed differently.

2.1 The problem of history

Let us first contemplate how robots are situated in their history or, as I will argue, their lack thereof. What they have is internal time

10 See *Jordan*: Robots, 5.

11 See *Marr*: Robotisation.

12 Carrie Fisher reminisced about the release of Star Wars: A New Hope in 1977 and its immense impact on people, recalling, "A lot of people were affected deeply by it, requiring talismans and artifacts, merchandising and sequels. [...] It was bewildering. The movie was attracting giddy attention that was both exciting and unsettling. [...] It wasn't like a movie opening; it was like an earthquake." (*Fisher*: Arrival).

stamps that are related to data. But are humans any different? Are we not merely biological processors that process data through fleshy pathways? Phenomenology since Bergson, Heidegger and Schütz says we are not or at least not when it comes to experiencing time. For Heidegger, time is intimately entwined with being, shaping our manner of existence. He emphasises that we dwell within time and that our existence is marked by transience and finitude. Time affords us the capacity to fathom and construe ourselves and the world around us. Most importantly, Heidegger posits that time is not a linear sequence of events but rather a dynamic and uninterrupted flow that moulds our subjective existence.[13] In a similar vein, Alfred Schütz describes the genesis of meaning in our construction of the social sphere, following Husserl's ideas about consciousness: In the midst of the stream of our consciousness, intentionality picks out some well-defined experiences it construes and imbues with meaning, layer by layer founding our every understanding of the world around us.[14] What is distinctly human is our subjective experiential relation to time, which we can reasonably call history from here on out. It is not the mere passage of time but our distinct relation to it experiencing ourselves in it.

This historical character of being is evident when observing interhuman connection: When blessed by a human pastor, you are also blessed by an individual with a personal history beyond their pastoral role. In every incidental meeting we become each other's history. Yet this confrontation is bilateral: You become part of my history, and I become part of yours—as is the mutual deal with every encounter we have. In this, there is no hierarchy but the confrontation of two equals. Neither can escape their subjective being with the other and becoming part of their history. But the bargain goes even deeper. Not only do we invite the other into our history by presenting them our time. Since it is finite, we are permanently spending what we have sparse amounts of. Being mortal, our interactions are on a timer. We hope our encounters are of value, since nothing comes for free for beings that are going to die. One of the reasons we want our conversations, our work and our interactions to be of value to us and others lies in our unconscious or explicit knowledge that

13 See *Heidegger*: Sein, 323–33.

14 See *Schütz*: Aufbau, 63–69; *Husserl*: Lebenswelt, 608–614.

we have to matter with what time we are given, otherwise we would find it hard to experience our interactions as meaningful.[15] What is created by such an atmosphere in our everyday interaction and in this unspoken coexistence of humans is what we call "leading our lives". Underlying everything is our urge to make a difference, which is exactly why indifference experienced over a substantial stretch of time is such a despicable feeling. Indifference manifests itself in the experience of not caring for an outcome yet being invested in or consumed by it by coincidence. Robots, on the other hand, do not lead lives. Neither can we assume they have subjective experiences in the first place, nor do they participate in finitude in the way humans do.[16]

What they do when we encounter them is perceive information. Their being is one of processing not of experiencing; one of reacting, not of being. While they may store data in their protocols about the specific tasks they have performed at a specific time, they have not experienced historical events in the same way humans have. For humans, even times of leisure or complete inactivity hold significance, not only for regenerating their flesh and tissue but also for their distinct existence in the world. The experience of idling is of historical importance to our lives: we can feel bored or relaxed, in anticipation or depression; either way these seemingly blank slates are important for our stance towards our lives.[17] For a robot, the moment they are not actively executing a task, their historical presence fades into oblivion. Objects such as robots lack an inherent history apart from being objects within the context of humans' history. Technology, as far as we can tell, does not have a constant subjective flow[18] of time, which constitutes a being in history but punctual blips of functionality. It fades into relevance whenever it does something and ceases to matter the moment it does not use data points for purposeful and functional interaction. The assumption of robots not having a subjective flow of time rests on the fact that we do ourselves not understand what brings forth subjective experience apart from describing brain activity, which is categorically different from the

15 See *Frankl*: Ärztliche Seelsorge, 118–120.
16 This aspect will be further articulated in the problem of incarnation.
17 A eulogy on the feeling of boredom was e.g. written in *Vodanovich*: Benefits.
18 See *Husserl*: Lebenswelt, 608–614.

knowledge about subjectivity which we are looking for. No matter how thin the slices of brain, how precise the maps of neurons, we would surely never find subjective experiences as such in neuroscientific explorations.[19] Robots do not emerge from the cycle of life. The profound mystery we are not able to solve as humans is how the inanimate matter from which our flesh is made comes alive, which marks the border of our capabilities. We can transform matter into other matter, which is the robot, but we are not Frankenstein.

As with all points of contention before moving on, we should try to make the case that what is deemed as a problem is not solvable with the means at hand. So, what would solve the problem of identity? The first solution would be that having history is indeed not connected to indifference/difference. This argument would concede the possibility of machines not having history but calling into question why this would interfere with their ability to be different to us. The problem is the very concession because if they do not have history we rightfully do not care for their time. What may be deemed as a feature, them never being bored by a conversation with us mortals, is the very reason we might find such interactions futile. Since we are but data in their storage system perceived in a virtually infinite stream of data, we do not make a difference to them, which is precisely what we want in our interactions. Our indifference is met by theirs. Having history instead of time is hence not a convenient addition but an essential part of something making a difference in our encounter.

There is yet another angle here, which seems convincing at first glance but turns out to be anything but. For example, we could turn our sights to other inanimate objects that are indeed something we care for or make a difference to us. A cherished heirloom like Captain Koons' legendary watch in "Pulp Fiction" may serve as a connective thread in a person's autobiography. A house passed on through generations, a tree one planted years ago, the first drawing of one's child might be of similar importance. However, upon closer examination, it is precisely the moments when humans interacted with these otherwise unremarkable objects, when they play a meaningful role in human affairs, that we attribute significance to them. What makes things even worse is what the crude drawing of a two-

19 See *Henry*: Barbarei, 82–83; *Husserl*: Lebenswelt, 614–618.

year-old illustrates. Quality does not seem to matter, but the context. While things seem to indeed make a difference in our lives, they can be as much a trivial scribble or the uncontrollable occurrence of a seed growing rather than the highly sophisticated and resource intensive construction and integration of a religious robot. In other words, since religious robots do not have inherent connective tissue to an individual's personal history, they are as likely to be of difference to us than any other object we encounter every day.

2.2 The problem of incarnation

The second way out of our problem would be if we could reasonably show how robots could indeed become subjects of history. This leads us to a point amidst the problem of incarnation.

As any of us can undoubtedly tell what it feels like to experience ourselves, we should firstly try to describe what this feeling of radical subjectivity means and then explore whether it is reasonable to assume that robots experience the same thing. The challenge lies in the difference between hard bodies and soft flesh, which is tackled most profoundly in the works of the French philosopher Michel Henry. Henry's phenomenology of incarnation, or in other words, his phenomenology of the flesh, revolves around the problem of bodies that not only belong to the domain of the so-called hard sciences but have also been seamlessly integrated into our world view. He poses the question of whether the bodies of living subjects, all of which share the fact of being incarnated, being in the flesh, are identical to objective material bodies studied by quantum physics or organic chemistry. What materialist accounts argue, e.g. by those who regard humans as merely fleshy computers[20], overlooks the deep abyss between life and every other kind of body. The inert body that exists in countless numbers in the material universe is a product and result of the material universe, to which we apply physical laws with the knowledge of material processes with the intention of organising and combining them, ultimately making them available to us. Yet our own body, which we do not experience as such, even

20 See *Fodor*: Language; see *Block*: Mind.

if regarding it on a screen during an operation[21], but as our flesh as the liminal zero of experiencing phenomena per se, is nothing we possess or have available as such. Such available bodies, like the robot's kit, do not feel anything. They do not feel themselves first and foremost, and they feel, desire, love or have affection for surrounding things even less. Our "bodies", which he refers to as flesh (fr.: chair), differ in that they perceive every nearby object in various ways. The perceptions of things are not the original experiences of the flesh (fr.: éprouve), but rather how the flesh experiences itself (fr.: s'éprouve).[22] Henry argues that the mode in which anything shows itself thus becomes phenomenological, is in the boundaries of self-affection or self-experience (fr.: auto-affection). In his words, all we have access to is becoming reality in the subjective experience of us feeling ourselves as we are met with a phenomenon.[23] Hence, he explicitly separates life from data a machine can process.

There is the distinct experience of leaving the house around late September or early October and knowing, not by inferring from the date or checking certain criteria, that autumn is here. It is not the cold since there are cold summer days as well. It is neither the smell of the street, although things appear to smell differently then. It is not the colour of the leaves since we sense autumn even amidst the most concrete-laden parts of a city. It is also not the light, since it changes every minute of the day and is filtered and reflected in the architecture of a city many times. Yet the subjective experience, the staggering thought that "summer is gone", is so unique that almost everyone knows it when the time comes. While a robot's data might precisely tell their underlying infrastructure that they have just been hit by sunlight on a specific point on the electromagnetic spectrum, which number is displayed on their thermometer, and possibly what to do with that information given the functional task they are about to execute, there is no reason to assume that the robot experiences autumn in a mode of self-affection. The unique experience is not experienced as data, but as phenomena indescribable other than in urging others to remember or experience that said feeling. This radically subjective experience is exclusive to life as far as we can

21 See *Sartre*: Das Sein und das Nichts, 539–544.
22 See *Henry*: Inkarnation, 13–15.
23 See *Henry*: Phenomenology, 105–106.

tell since no scientific inquiry can encapsulate this phenomenon in its breadth and immediate being. No technology we can envision can bring forth this distinct experience, which we do not even have words to describe, yet know from firsthand experience.

Let us try to make the case against incarnation again. The argument would then say that our situation as flesh does not substantially differentiate us from a computer in a flesh-like shell. Our mental framework of life would hinge on the assumption that the totality of human experience can be described in terms of data being processed. Not only has this assumption been criticised widely[24], but my earlier phenomenological account on life has moreover been the effort to point out the curious experience of subjectively being alive, which is not a piece of information or an inducible state of mind but their prerequisite. So, while we could point to the technology of sensors as means to "experience" the world around the robot, we would still remain in the realm of the world's sensory outwardness. Constructed under the premise of the world as data, computed and organised through software, which is the CPU in the robot and the network of neurons in our brains, we can readily admit that robots do sense the world. But it is unclear how the robot should be able to experience themselves as they sense the world. Yet this is, according to Henry, the primordial form of experience: experience is foremost an inward thing—not an outward experience[25]. We don't have experience of anything without the experience of ourselves having had the said experience. Yet this self-affection remains a mystery insofar as Henry plausibly assumes that the self-affection is a result of our incarnation[26]. The important point of the Henry's phenomenology—and Merleau-Ponty's for that matter—is that the prominent framework of human beings as embodied brains, which are biological computers, fails to meet the experience of ourselves on a phenomenological level and only works if we assume a position beyond ourselves, which we cannot do because our flesh remains

24 E.g. by *Puzio/Filipović*: Informationsbündel, *Fuchs*: Defence, and *Loh*: Posthumanismus.

25 See *Henry*: Phänomenologie, 13–32.

26 While he methodically excludes other incarnated beings like animals since we have no way of knowing if they feel themselves, Henry leaves the door open to the idea that the same can be said of all beings of flesh.

attached to our thinking no matter how hard we try to transcend our bodies. Even thought is an experience of the flesh both are able to show.[27]

There is no place on a robot you could put a sensor to bridge that gap, since our self-affection precedes our perception, as Henry argues, or our perception is ultimately linked to the flesh of the body.[28]

2.3 The problem of purpose

So far, the argument has revolved mostly around taking the robot's perspective and contrasting it with a subjective human perspective. But what about the robot as the other, as a counterpart? While robots are unable to convince us they are humanlike when we try to walk in their shoes, facing them straight on might lead us to a compassionate feeling of togetherness, which might indeed spark a feeling of difference.

The idea of the other affecting us directly by just confronting ourselves with their "countenance" (fr. visage) was most profoundly championed by Emmanuel Levinas.[29] A closer examination of his argument, especially his critique of Kant and Heidegger, illuminates[30] why we misunderstand him, if we assume that having a face, which a robot very well might have, magically binds us in the spell of the other.

In a lecture delivered in 1975 on the subjects of death and time, Emmanuel Levinas introduced a notion that may not immediately resonate: "the countenance". Levinas offered an elucidation of this concept. What he intended, he explained, was the phenomenological description of what the annals of philosophy have encompassed within the field of the "soul". Whether it be Leibniz's Monad, Plato's soul that contemplates the Ideas or Spinoza's mode of thought, the countenance represents the non-objectified, abstract visage of my

27 See *Merleau-Ponty*: Phänomenologie, 174–177; *Henry*: Inkarnation, 108–112; *Henry*: Psychoanalyse, 207.
28 See *Merleau-Ponty*: Sichtbare, 172–189.
29 See *Levinas*: Spur, 115–119.
30 See *Levinas*: Gott, 69–78.

interlocutor. It is the countenance of the Other, from whom I can fundamentally anticipate a response to my existence, to which I find myself exposed and for which, according to Levinas, I bear responsibility. The countenance is that which turns towards me, endowing me with significance. The death of the Other, in contrast, unveils all that the countenance stirs within me. It signifies a worldly relationship eternally silenced in death, devoid of intentionality and self-interest. What is etched upon the visage is no longer the authentic expression of the self. The death of the Other thus always implies that I have failed in my responsibility towards them, for I have outlived them. My identity, which is not inherent or owned but rather bestowed upon me by the Other, fades into obscurity. The Other hence engages our consciousness by foreshadowing their potentially hardening countenance, becoming stiff as a waxen mask.[31]

Ironically, robots do not threaten us with this possibility; they encapsulate it. Being nothing more than animated matter, we must not fear their disappearance because they were never there in the first place. They do not hold the promise of unlived life[32], which is existentially open to the future, but are determined fully by their purpose and programming. The chasm of indifference/difference here alludes to the open and unfulfilled purpose of the lives yet to be lived and the dead, whose subjective purpose is concluded.

This is not to say that we are not touched by them, that their visage does not move us. There is even empirical data which backs the idea that we are able to be affected by a robot: there have been funerals held for robot dogs like AIBO[33] and heartfelt interactions with social bots like Cozmo[34]. However, it is not coincidental that it is those two that come to mind as shining instances of human–robot interaction. Both the charming yet impractical Cozmo and the customisable robodog inherently possess an indeterminacy in their design, leaving their purpose open-ended. Just as we might find joy in observing a Havanese dog frolicking in the mud or

31 See *Levinas:* Gott, 21–23.

32 Levinas survived the Holocaust in war captivity, but his philosophy is undoubtedly tainted by the experience of countless friends and family members losing their lives in the concentration camps.

33 See *Arnold*: Funeral.

34 See *Chan* et al.: Cozmo; Disney is also working intensively on robots that emphasise being cute and relatable (see *Ackerman*, Disney).

experience exhilaration in witnessing a cat futilely chasing a red dot, it is precisely the shared openness to our future that connects us. However, religious robots, thus far, do not adhere to what I would like to call the "principle of futility". Whether you listen to Mindar's sermon[35], receive blessings from BlessU-2[36] or engage in prayer with SanTO[37], the purpose of these robots is always clearly defined. It is this very human ability to connect with human creativity that underscored the issue of history in the previous paragraph, and it now hampers religious robotics. The ambition to imitate and replicate humanness and the eagerness to fulfil a designated purpose impose limitations on these robots. They are clearly intended to replace humans in practices that humans designed to comfort themselves, convey meanings across generations or bring order to chaos. Yet, there are hardly convincing cases where robots would be better suited for religious practices than humans. While robots may possess the ability to be accessible from anywhere in the world and outlive humans by many years, as exemplified theoretically by Xian'er[38], in reality, their design primarily focuses on coherence and adherence to religious traditions, failing to explore their full potential as catalysts for creative processes that could pave the way for unforeseen religious experiences. Notably, it is secular artists like Diemut Strebe, with works such as "The Prayer"[39], who venture into innovative applications that challenge our conventional practices and strive to tap into the vast potential of robotics in creating new forms of religious expression.

What makes a difference here is unsurprisingly the indeterminate nature of something. It is no wonder we are indifferent to something which is already fully purposed. They are what they are made for—this might just be another way of saying tools or stuff[40]. As long as robots remain obviously purposed, they will continue flirting with our indifference. We know them as we know their purpose. In contrast to human interaction, where two distinctly open and undecided

35 See *Samuel*: Robot.
36 See *Löffler* et al.: BlessU2.
37 See *Trovato* et al.: SanTO.
38 See *Cheong*: Rectitude; *Travagnin*: Buddha Halls.
39 See *Strebe*: Prayer.
40 Heidegger's "Zeug" might be best translated this way (see *Heidegger*: Sein, 68).

futures meet, one of the two is already fitted into a useful framework when we face most robots.

3. Different robots

What does it take for robots to captivate us in such a way that they make a difference to us? A solution has already been hinted at: while not at all similar to us humans, unable to evoke the same sense of ethical responsibility, the more unspecific they are in their design, the muddier their purpose, the more they might be of importance to us. Interestingly enough, making them more human might only amplify the problems I have laid out here; making them less human, less useful and less intelligible might actually make them different. Most robots are tools and made in a mental framework that views them as such. As robots originate from the idea of a handy servant[41], most of the ones equipped with the ability to act as one bring with them a mindset of engineering, which is one of technology, which is one of controlling, forming and manipulating matter in a helpful way.[42]

The different robot, which I deem promising for the religious sphere, emerges from the arts not from technology. As a conductor of creativity for both the creator and the user, their purpose must be open and undecided. One of the most promising models for different robots is something that oddly enough perfectly exemplifies the stale state of churches in our times: the organ. The enduring appeal of this colossal instrument across centuries can be attributed to its role as an open conduit for artistic expression. Constrained only by the range of sounds it can produce, the organ has offered successive generations of composers, musicians and audiences the canvas on which to etch their experiences. Within its aesthetic spectrum, it has accommodated a myriad of emotional expressions.

Like other sacred instruments, organs wield the power of creation. While some captivate through their sheer presence and artistry, they serve as untapped reservoirs of potential, enabling the creation and reception of religious experiences beyond the confines of words.

41 Culturally intertwined with the myth of the Golem (see *Contrada*: Golem).
42 See *Henry*: Barbarei, 176–178.

For robots to be genuinely integrated into the sacred sphere, they must evolve into conduits of creative and, to some extent, religious expression for all parties involved: the creator, the conductor (if needed) and the recipient.

Consider, for instance, a robot that resembles nothing more than a metallic arm, its algorithm translating religious texts or the congregation's prayers into imagery, which it then delicately adorns upon the canvas of a church mural. Continuously layering over what already exists, this robot embarks on a perpetual journey of creative exploration. Such a robot would simultaneously create the concrete representation of words, which are dear to the community and tell their story, while being open to experiences, leaving open what this mural is supposed to mean, why it is there in the first place and what will become of it once the robot is turned off.

Alternatively, picture a mechanised mannequin that choreographs its movements in synchrony with an orchestra's conductor, a mesmerising dance to accompany Bach or Mahler unfurling in ever-changing patterns before the congregation. These diverse robots may be ambiguously purposed—undoubtedly constrained by their capabilities and their specific setting—but they stand as vehicles that can express and experience religious sentiment for the humans involved.

Robots might remain different to their core, yet they might make a difference to us once we embrace their difference and abstain from the temptation to make them "un-different" from us.

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