# After the Crossroads: Artificial Intelligence, Place-Based Ethics, and the Slow Work of Moral Discernment

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## Abstract

This essay extends my earlier analysis of artificial intelligence (AI) as a convergence of science, ethics, and spirituality by deliberately turning toward questions of place, local governance, and moral formation. While much contemporary discourse on AI remains abstract or global in scale, the material realities of AI infrastructure increasingly manifest at the local level through data centers, energy demands, water use, zoning decisions, and environmental impacts. Drawing on ecological theology, phenomenology, and political theology, this essay argues that meaningful ethical engagement with AI requires slowing technological decision-making, recentering embodied and communal discernment, and reclaiming local democratic and spiritual practices as sites of moral agency. Rather than framing AI as either salvific or catastrophic, I propose understanding AI as a mirror that amplifies existing patterns of extraction, care, and neglect. The essay concludes by suggesting that faith communities and local institutions play a crucial, underexplored role in shaping AI's trajectory through practices of attentiveness, accountability, and place-based moral reasoning.

## From Global Abstraction to Local Reality

In *Artificial Intelligence at the Crossroads of Science, Ethics, and Spirituality*, I examined the accelerating pace of AI development and its entanglement with environmental costs, ethical uncertainties, and metaphysical speculation.[1] That essay intentionally adopted a wide-angle perspective, tracing the rapid expansion of AI systems, the immense physical infrastructure required to sustain them, and the

[1] Sam Harrelson, Artificial Intelligence at the Crossroads of Science, Ethics, and Spirituality, December 2025.

philosophical questions provoked by machines that increasingly simulate human cognition. The goal was not to predict outcomes but to clarify stakes.

What has become increasingly evident is that AI's most consequential impacts are no longer primarily speculative or distant. They are arriving quietly and concretely in specific places in rural counties, small cities, and regional ecosystems, especially across the American Southeast and here in the Carolinas. These regions now host the physical backbone of the digital economy, often without the public language or political leverage needed to meaningfully shape what is arriving.

AI does not enter communities first as an idea or a software platform. It enters through land acquisitions, rezoning requests, tax abatements, non-disclosure agreements, and sudden changes in energy and water demand. It arrives through planning commissions rather than philosophy departments, through utility boards rather than ethics committees. By the time many communities realize they are "part of AI," the fundamental decisions have already been made.

This shift from abstraction to emplacement demands a corresponding shift in ethical and theological analysis. It is no longer sufficient to ask whether AI is "good" or "dangerous" in general terms. The more urgent question is how moral discernment occurs when technological power becomes embedded in land, infrastructure, and governance structures that shape everyday life. AI ethics, in this sense, is increasingly a question of local politics, ecological limits, and communal agency rather than speculative futures.

## The Materiality of Artificial Intelligence

One of the most persistent misconceptions surrounding AI is its apparent immateriality. Cloud metaphors reinforce the illusion that AI exists "nowhere," floating free of ecological constraint. In reality, AI is among the most materially intensive technologies ever developed. Its operation depends on data centers that consume extraordinary amounts of electricity, water, and land.[2]

Recent policy analysis has shown that electricity supply is rapidly becoming a binding constraint on AI expansion, particularly in regions where generation and transmission infrastructure lag behind demand.[3] Research in Nature Sustainability further demonstrates that AI-related data center growth could significantly increase carbon

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[2] Darrell M. West, "*The Future of Data Centers,"* Brookings Institution, November 5, 2025 is an especially interesting piece that I recommend reading if you're heavily interested in this topic.

[3]Joseph Majkut et al., "*The Electricity Supply Bottleneck on U.S. AI Dominance,*" Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 3, 2025.

emissions and freshwater withdrawals unless mitigated through siting, efficiency, and grid decarbonization.[4] Journalistic investigations have underscored that these costs are unevenly distributed, often falling on rural or economically marginalized communities.[5]

Communities hosting data centers frequently experience minimal long-term employment benefits while absorbing environmental and infrastructural burdens. The economic gains accrue to corporate headquarters and shareholders, while local ecosystems and public utilities bear the costs.[6] This pattern mirrors older extractive industries, even as the resource extracted is no longer coal or timber but computational capacity. The shift from material extraction to informational extraction does not dissolve ethical responsibility. It simply relocates it, often making it harder to see.

## Incarnation, Place, and Moral Responsibility

Christian theology has long insisted that moral truth is disclosed in particular places. Incarnation is not a metaphor but a refusal of disembodied power. The Word becomes flesh somewhere, under specific political and ecological conditions.

Liberation theologians and ecological theologians such as Leonardo Boff have consistently argued that systems that externalize their costs onto the poor or ecosystems cannot be considered morally neutral.[7] In Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor, Boff names the inseparability of social and ecological suffering, a framework that applies directly to contemporary AI infrastructure.[8]

Related theological work on creation and creatureliness further emphasizes that land is not merely a backdrop for human projects but a participant in moral life.[9] When AI infrastructure reshapes landscapes without meaningful local consent, theological concerns about domination, stewardship, and justice inevitably arise.

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[4] Tianqi Xiao et al., "*Environmental Impact and Net-Zero Pathways for Sustainable Artificial Intelligence Servers in the USA,*" Nature Sustainability (2025).
[5] Adam Mahoney, "*From Mississippi to Maryland, Black Communities Are Taking On Big Tech,*" Capital B News, October 28, 2025.
[6] MediaJustice, "*Data Centers and Environmental Justice,*" campaign materials, 2025.
[7] Leonardo Boff, "*Global Ethical Stocktake (GES) for COP30,*" Earth Charter International, August 25, 2025.
[8] Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).
[9] Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

## Speed as a Spiritual and Political Problem

One of the least examined dimensions of AI development is speed. AI research and deployment are driven by acceleration from faster models, shorter training cycles, and quicker returns on investment. Democratic governance and communal discernment, by contrast, are inherently slow processes.

Political theorists have long warned that speed can hollow out democratic life.[10] Theologians have articulated similar concerns through practices such as Sabbath, which resists the reduction of land and labor to instruments of productivity.[11] Sabbath interrupts the logic that treats efficiency as a supreme good and insists that some forms of value cannot be optimized without being destroyed.

From this perspective, the temporal mismatch between AI development and democratic deliberation is not accidental. It reflects a deeper moral formation shaped by technological and economic imperatives rather than communal wisdom.

## The Noosphere and the Necessity of Governance

Thinkers such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin imagined the emergence of a planetary layer of consciousness as a noosphere formed through increasing human interconnectedness.[12] Teilhard's vision has been taken up by contemporary theologians of technology, who see digital networks and AI systems as part of humanity's ongoing evolutionary process.[13]

Yet Teilhard insisted that convergence without love would be dehumanizing rather than salvific.[14] Governance, in this light, is not a bureaucratic obstacle to spiritual progress but a moral necessity. Zoning laws, environmental review processes, and public deliberation are among the few mechanisms through which collective responsibility can be exercised at scale.

Theologians such as Ilia Delio have argued that technological evolution must be oriented toward wholeness rather than domination.[15] Without structures capable of

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[10] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
[11] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).
[12] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).
[13] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (New York: Image Books, 1964).
[14] Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 261–62.
[15] Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

integrating ecological limits and democratic consent, the noosphere risks becoming another site of abstraction divorced from lived reality.[16]

## Environmental Justice and the Politics of Siting

The siting of AI infrastructure has become a critical issue of environmental justice. Investigative reporting has documented that data centers are disproportionately located in communities with limited political power, often communities of color or economically disadvantaged rural areas.[17] Advocacy groups have described this pattern as a new form of extraction, in which local communities bear environmental costs while distant actors reap economic benefits.[18]

This dynamic reflects what political theorists describe as sacrifice zones… places deemed expendable for the sake of growth elsewhere.[19] The persistence of such zones in the digital economy challenges narratives that frame AI as inherently progressive or emancipatory.

## AI as a Mirror Rather Than an Agent

Much contemporary anxiety surrounding AI focuses on the possibility of machine autonomy or superintelligence.[20] While these concerns warrant attention, they can obscure a more immediate reality: AI systems largely amplify existing human values and institutional priorities.

Research on algorithmic bias demonstrates that AI often reproduces and intensifies social inequalities already present in training data and governance structures.[21] Sociological studies further show that technological mediation can erode human relationships when efficiency is prioritized over attentiveness.[22] In this sense, AI functions less as an independent moral agent and more as a mirror reflecting the quality of our political and ethical institutions.

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[16] Ilia Delio, "*Integral Ecology in an Age of AI,*" Center for Christogenesis, May 23, 2025.
[17] Mahoney, "*From Mississippi to Maryland.*"
[18] MediaJustice, "*Data Centers and Environmental Justice.*"
[19] Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
[20] Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[21] Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru, "*Gender Shades,*" Proceedings of Machine Learning Research 81 (2018).
[22] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

## Faith Communities as Sites of Moral Formation

Faith communities remain among the few spaces where people regularly gather to reflect on meaning, responsibility, and the common good outside of market logic. Philosophers of technology have argued that virtues such as justice, honesty, and care must be cultivated if technological systems are to serve human flourishing.[23] In a moment when ethical discourse around AI is often confined to corporate policy statements, technical standards committees, or abstract philosophical debates, congregations occupy a different moral register altogether. They are not primarily sites of optimization or innovation, but of formation… places where habits of attention, judgment, and care are slowly cultivated over time.

This formative dimension is critical to how communities respond to technological change. As philosophers of technology such as Shannon Vallor have argued, ethical action in technologically saturated societies depends less on rule-following than on cultivating virtues: practical wisdom, justice, honesty, humility, and care.[24] These virtues are not acquired through technical training alone. They emerge through repeated practices that shape how people perceive the world and their responsibilities within it. Faith communities, at their best, are precisely such sites of habituation.

From a theological perspective, moral formation is never abstract. It is embodied, communal, and place-bound.[25] It takes shape through liturgy, shared meals, storytelling, confession, lament, and practices of care for the vulnerable. These practices train participants to notice dependency rather than deny it, to recognize limits rather than transcend them, and to value relationships over efficiency. In this sense, congregations cultivate dispositions that run directly counter to the dominant cultural narratives surrounding AI, which often privilege speed, scale, and control.[26]

This is particularly significant when AI infrastructure arrives at the local level. Decisions about data centers, energy use, water rights, and zoning are rarely framed in moral terms. They are presented as technical necessities or economic opportunities. Faith communities, however, are well-positioned to ask different kinds of questions: Who bears the cost of this project? Who benefits, and who does not? What forms of life are being supported or undermined? What voices are missing from the conversation?

Attending a zoning hearing or planning commission meeting, then, is not a departure from theology. It is theology enacted. It represents a refusal to separate spiritual

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[23] Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[24] *ibid*
[25] Norman Wirzba, *From Nature to Creation: A Christian Vision for Understanding and Loving Our World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).
[26] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*

concern from material consequence, belief from land use, or worship from governance. When congregants show up not merely as individual property owners but as members of a moral community attentive to justice and care, they bring a different quality of presence into civic life as one shaped by patience rather than urgency, and by accountability rather than profit.[27]

The tradition of Sabbath offers a particularly rich resource here. As Abraham Joshua Heschel famously argued, the Sabbath is not simply a day of rest but a form of resistance to the absolutization of productivity.[28] It is a temporal practice that interrupts the logic of endless growth and reminds communities that worth is not measured by output. In the context of AI, Sabbath-oriented communities are uniquely positioned to question assumptions that technological acceleration is inherently good or inevitable. They can insist that some decisions require time, including time for deliberation, listening, and consent.

Moreover, faith communities often serve as bridges between scales of moral concern. They are rooted in particular places while participating in wider traditions that speak across regions and generations.[29] This allows them to hold together local experience and global responsibility without collapsing one into the other. A congregation in rural South Carolina, for example, can meaningfully connect a proposed data center's water usage to broader concerns about climate change, environmental justice, and the integrity of creation, without treating these as abstract or distant issues.

There is also a political dimension to this formative role. Political theorists from Hannah Arendt onward have warned that civic life erodes when citizens are reduced to consumers or managed populations rather than participants in shared action. Faith communities resist this reduction by cultivating practices of participation, deliberation, and shared responsibility. They remind their members that democracy is not only a system of institutions but a way of life that requires active, attentive citizens.

In this sense, congregations function as training grounds for democratic agency. They habituate people to speaking, listening, disagreeing, and remaining in relationship even amid conflict.[30] These capacities are essential when communities face contentious technological decisions that do not admit of simple solutions. Without such formation, public engagement around AI risks becoming either technocratic acquiescence or reactive opposition, neither of which fosters genuine discernment.

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[27] Latour, *Politics of Nature*
[28] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).
[29] Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*
[30] Arendt, The Human Condition.

At the same time, this role should not be romanticized. Faith communities can fail in these tasks, sometimes reinforcing exclusion or resisting change in ways that harm rather than heal.[31] But this risk does not negate their potential. It underscores the need for theological self-critique and ongoing formation that remains open to learning from ecological science, social analysis, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

If AI ethics is to move beyond abstract principles and into lived practice, it will require communities capable of sustaining moral attention over time. Faith communities, precisely because they are not designed for speed or efficiency, offer one of the few remaining social infrastructures where such attention can be cultivated.[32] They cannot solve the challenges posed by AI alone. But they can help shape the kinds of people, and the kinds of publics, capable of responding to those challenges with wisdom rather than fear.

Rather than embracing or rejecting AI wholesale, communities need a politics of conditions. Under what conditions is AI infrastructure acceptable? Under what conditions is it not? What safeguards are non-negotiable? What benefits must remain local? Political theory offers resources for articulating such conditions.[33] Economic proposals such as universal basic income highlight how technological change intersects with questions of justice and distribution.[34] These frameworks underscore that AI's social consequences cannot be addressed solely through technical fixes.

## Conclusion: Discernment After the Hype Cycle

We may be entering a quieter phase of the AI story. The initial wonder has faded, and with it some of the more inflated promises and apocalyptic fears that accompanied AI's public emergence. What remains is less spectacular but more demanding: the slow, uneven work of moral formation. This work does not take place primarily in research labs or corporate boardrooms, though those spaces matter. It unfolds instead in communities, institutions, and landscapes that must now live with the material and social consequences of technologies developed elsewhere.

This shift matters. Hype thrives on abstraction. It trades in futures rather than responsibilities, in possibility rather than accountability. Discernment, by contrast, begins where people actually live. It asks not what AI might become in some imagined horizon,

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[31] Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).
[32] *ibid*
[33] Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature.*
[34] Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, *Basic Income* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

but what it is already doing to land, water, labor, governance, and attention. In this sense, the ethical challenge of AI is no longer primarily speculative. It is phenomenological. It concerns how technological power is encountered, negotiated, and resisted in everyday life. That is, it concerns how AI is encountered in lived experience, through infrastructure, governance, and everyday constraints, rather than as a hypothetical future agent.

What AI will do, almost inevitably, is intensify existing patterns of care and neglect. Where systems are already extractive, opaque, and unjust, AI will tend to accelerate those tendencies. Where communities are organized around attentiveness, accountability, and shared responsibility, AI can be integrated more thoughtfully, though never without tension or cost. Technology does not arrive as a neutral force. It amplifies the moral contours already present in a given place. For people of faith, the task is not to sanctify or demonize AI, but to remain committed to forms of presence that cannot be automated by listening, accountability, patience, and attention to place.[35]

For people of faith, this realization carries both a warning and an invitation. The warning is against outsourcing moral responsibility to technical expertise, market logic, or distant governance structures. The invitation is to reclaim older practices of discernment that attend carefully to limits, vulnerability, and interdependence. These practices do not offer easy answers. They are slow by design. They require listening, disagreement, and the willingness to remain present even when outcomes are uncertain.

Discernment, in this sense, is not simply a method for deciding whether a particular AI project should proceed. It is a way of inhabiting technological modernity without surrendering moral agency. It resists the pressure to treat innovation as inevitable and opposition as naïve. Instead, it insists on asking conditional questions: under what circumstances, at whose expense, and with what forms of accountability?

This essay has argued that such discernment must be place-based. AI's material footprint ensures that its ethical significance is always local before it is global. Data centers draw water from particular aquifers, strain specific electrical grids, and alter concrete landscapes. Decisions made in distant corporate or governmental centers are ultimately borne by communities that must live with their effects. Ethical reflection that fails to attend to this asymmetry risks becoming complicit in the very forms of abstraction it seeks to critique.

At the same time, place-based discernment does not imply parochialism. Local attention can open outward rather than inward, connecting particular struggles to broader patterns of environmental injustice, economic inequality, and ecological degradation. The

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[35] Wendell Berry, "*The Work of Local Culture,*" in What Are People For? (New York: North Point Press, 1990).

task is not to oppose global responsibility in the name of local autonomy, but to ensure that global ambitions do not erase local agency. This tension cannot be resolved once and for all. It must be navigated repeatedly, case by case, with humility.

Faith communities, as I have suggested, are among the few remaining social institutions capable of sustaining this kind of moral attention over time. Not because they possess superior answers, but because they preserve practices that resist speed, commodification, and disembodiment. Liturgy, Sabbath, shared meals, and forms of collective deliberation train participants to notice what efficiency tends to overlook: dependence, fragility, and the claims of others. In a technological culture that increasingly rewards abstraction and distance, these practices offer a counter-formation.

This does not mean that faith communities should position themselves as arbiters of technological legitimacy or as nostalgic holdouts against change. Such postures are both ineffective and theologically thin. The more difficult work is to remain present within contested spaces such as zoning hearings, planning commissions, school boards, and utility debates, without abandoning theological depth or civic responsibility. This presence is rarely dramatic. It is often frustrating and incomplete. But it is precisely here, in these unspectacular spaces, that discernment takes on flesh.

If AI stands at a crossroads (or its handlers have already sped through it), as I have suggested throughout this essay, the choice before us is not between acceptance and rejection, progress and regression, or salvation and catastrophe. The choice is between deeper abstraction and deeper attention. One path treats technological systems as inevitable forces to which communities must adapt. The other insists that technologies, like all human creations, remain subject to moral evaluation, democratic negotiation, and ecological limits.

The second path is slower. It resists spectacle and certainty. It does not lend itself easily to headlines or metrics. But it may be the only path that remains recognizably human, honoring the fragile interdependence of people, places, and more-than-human worlds in an age increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence.

Ultimately, the question is not whether we will live with AI. We already do. The question is whether we will learn to live well with it, attentively and humbly, in ways that preserve the conditions for shared life on a finite planet. Discernment, practiced patiently and locally, offers no guarantees. But it remains one of the few tools we have for refusing both despair and domination, and for choosing responsibility in the face of unprecedented power.

One path leads toward deeper abstraction and extraction. The other leads toward grounded, participatory discernment rooted in local communities and ecological

responsibility. That second path is slower. It resists spectacle. But it may be the only path that remains recognizably human.[36]

[36] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition.Economy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

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