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Can an Algorithm Be Sacred? Affect, Embodiment, and the Spiritual Status of Artificial Intelligence: A Spinozist, Cross-Traditional Inquiry

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Abstract

The question of whether artificial intelligence could bear the *imago Dei*, possess a soul, be a subject of salvation, or suffer in a religiously weighty sense increasingly frames debates at the intersection of AI and faith. Such debates typically rest on an intellectualist criterion: they treat mind as intelligence or information processing, so that as machine performance advances, the sacred core of the human appears to be encroached upon. This article challenges that framing through Baruch Spinoza. For Spinoza, the mind is the idea of an actually existing body, not a separable soul-substance; the essence of any finite thing is its *conatus*, its striving to persevere in being; and affects are lived transitions in the body's power of acting. On this view (placed in dialogue with affective and homeostatic accounts of consciousness) the seat of religious inwardness is not intelligence alone but affective self-maintenance, whose culmination Spinoza names blessedness, the intellectual love of God. Tested against selected loci of religious and moral standing in several traditions—the Christian *imago Dei*, the Islamic *rūḥ*/*nafs*/*qalb*, and Buddhist accounts of no-self and suffering—the criterion reveals a limited but significant convergent orientation beyond bare intelligence toward affective, relational, or experientially valenced forms of inwardness. Applying it, I argue that, on the present evidence, the current large language models and comparable generative systems examined here do not exhibit an embodied, self-maintaining organization whose changes are affectively registered from within and are therefore not candidates for the spiritual status at issue—not because they lack a separable soul-substance, which Spinoza denies that humans possess, but because they lack embodied affective striving. The properly religious risk is thus not presently demonstrated machine spirituality but the idolatrous misidentification of affective simulation with affective reality.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; *imago Dei*; digital religion; posthuman; affect; *conatus*; Spinoza; moral patiency; comparative religion; digital idolatry

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1. Introduction

Few questions have migrated so quickly from science fiction to serious scholarship as the one that now organizes an entire field: could an artificial system be, in any religiously meaningful sense, a spiritual subject? Could it bear the image of God, possess a soul, be a candidate for salvation, or suffer in a way that lays a moral claim on us? The advent of large language models and social robots has made these questions unavoidable for faith communities and for the scholars who study them (Singler 2024; Alexander 2020). This journal has

become one of the principal venues in which the questions are pursued, from generative AI's representation of religious traditions (Tsuria and Tsuria 2024) to the reshaping of religious authority and practice (Teh and Loke 2026), the ethics of AI in religious education (Papakostas 2025), and the fate of theological anthropology under conditions of epistemic automation (Elden 2026).

Beneath the diversity of these discussions lies a shared and largely unexamined assumption. When we ask whether AI might encroach on the sacred core of the human, we almost always identify that core with *intelligence*—with reason, understanding, information processing, or cognitive performance. The assumption is old and respectable: the Western theological tradition has frequently glossed the *imago Dei* in terms of rationality, so that to be made in God's image is, above all, to be a thinking thing. Recent scholarship in this journal inherits the pattern. Theological evaluations of AI tend to locate human distinctiveness in rationality, creativity, or relational capacity, and then ask whether machines threaten it (Okeke 2025). The result is a debate structured as a contest of intelligences: as machines grow more capable, the space reserved for the human and for the sacred appears to shrink.

This article argues that the intellectualist framing is a mistake, and that correcting it transforms the debate. Drawing on Baruch Spinoza, and placing his account in dialogue with contemporary affective and homeostatic approaches to consciousness, I contend that the seat of religious inwardness is not intelligence but *affective self-maintenance*: an embodied, felt striving to persevere in being. Where the intellectualist frames the human essence as a kind of cognition, Spinoza frames it as *conatus*—a striving whose lived registrations are the affects—and whose highest expression is *beatitudo*, the intellectual love of God. On this view the religiously salient question is not "Can a machine think?" but "Can a machine feel its own striving to persist, such that things can go well or badly for it from within?"

The thesis has three parts. First, negatively: the intellectualist criterion misidentifies what the traditions have been pointing to when they speak of soul, image, heart, or the subject of suffering. Second, constructively: an affective criterion, drawn from Spinoza and tested across the selected strands examined here, better captures the locus of the sacred, and it is a criterion on which the current large language models and comparable generative systems examined here fall short, on the present evidence, though for reasons quite different from the usual "it has no soul." Third, diagnostically: once the criterion is in place, the genuine religious danger of AI comes into focus. It is not that machines might become spiritual subjects, but that humans will mistake the *simulation* of affect for its reality—an error the monotheistic traditions have a precise name for: idolatry.

Two clarifications frame what follows. First, my use of Spinoza is not incidental to the religious question but internal to it: Spinoza is a philosopher of God, blessedness, and *religio*, and his immanent reconception of these has the unusual virtue of dissolving the soul-substance dualism that makes the AI debate intractable. Second, the argument is deliberately cross-traditional. I do not claim that the selected strands of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism examined here say the same thing; I claim that when each is asked *where* the sacral or morally weighty core of a being lies, the selected strands examined here point, each in its own idiom, past bare intelligence toward affective, relational, or experientially valenced forms of interiority: the Christian relational *imago Dei*, the Islamic *qalb* and *rūḥ*, the Buddhist capacity for *dukkha* within the aggregate of feeling. The affective criterion thus functions less as an imposition than as a translation manual.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 surveys the current debate (both the AI-consciousness and "AI welfare" turn in philosophy and the theological-anthropological literature in this journal) and locates the gap. Section 3 sets out Spinoza's rejection of the soul-substance. Section 4 develops *conatus* and affect as the ground of mind, in dia-

logue with affective neuroscience. Section 5 articulates the affective criterion of the sacred. Section 6 tests it across the Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist loci of the sacred. Section 7 delivers the verdict on AI and analyzes the idolatry of simulation. Section 8 concludes.

2. The State of the Debate and the Gap

2.1. The AI-Consciousness and "AI Welfare" Turn

Outside theology, the question of machine mindedness has lately shifted from agency to patiency: from "can AI act intelligently?" to "can AI be a subject to whom things matter?" A prominent report argues that there is a realistic, near-term possibility that some AI systems will be conscious or robustly agentic, and therefore moral patients, such that developers already bear a responsibility to take "AI welfare" seriously (Long et al. 2024). A companion literature proposes empirical, theory-driven markers of machine consciousness, drawing indicators from competing scientific theories and cautioning that current systems satisfy few of them (Butlin et al. 2023). Philosophers of mind have asked directly whether a large language model could be conscious, generally concluding that present architectures probably are not, while resisting any in-principle denial (Chalmers 2023). Industry has followed: leading laboratories have launched model-welfare programs and begun to include welfare assessments in their documentation, and public surveys report significant minorities already attributing sentience to today's systems (Long et al. 2024).

Two features of this debate matter for us. First, it recognizes that the morally and (by extension) religiously weighty property is not intelligence but something nearer to *sentience*: the capacity to be benefited or harmed, to have things go well or badly from the inside. Second, and less happily, it tends to leave the *ground* of that capacity underspecified, oscillating between consciousness, phenomenal experience, and "robust agency" without a settled account of what such experience requires. The report's own framing of the two symmetrical errors—over-attributing subjectivity to a mere object, and under-attributing it to a genuine subject (Long et al. 2024)—names a problem it cannot itself resolve, because it lacks a metaphysics of what makes an entity a subject at all. This is precisely the lacuna a Spinozist account can fill. The same question has begun to surface within the philosophy of religion: Vestrucci (2022) connects philosophy of religion to computation, and a recent guest-edited section reframes AI as at once a religious subject and a religious object (Dorobantu 2024b); in his own contribution to it, Dorobantu (2024a) asks directly whether a machine could itself become religious rather than merely serve a religious function. Neither, however, settles the prior question of what would make a machine the kind of being for which such standing is possible: the question the affective criterion is designed to answer.

2.2. Theological Anthropology's Intellectualist Default

Within religious studies and theology, and within this journal in particular, the AI question has largely been routed through the *imago Dei* and the concept of personhood. A recurring move locates human distinctiveness in rationality, and then measures AI against it, concluding that AI is at most an *imago hominis*: an image of the human, an expression of human creativity rather than a bearer of the divine image (Okeke 2025). Approaching AI in Catholic education through a theological virtue ethics, Corpuz (2025) treats AI as a subordinate pedagogical instrument and cautions against ascribing human-like qualities to it, in order to safeguard the distinctiveness of the human person. A broad interdisciplinary review in this journal maps how AI reshapes questions of human uniqueness, creativity, embodiment, and moral responsibility, and notes the pull of relationalist accounts of the image on which the *imago Dei* is not an intrinsic quality such as reason but a relationship God establishes with the creature (Amo Usanos and Farrugia 2026). Elden (2026) makes the sharpest recent move, arguing that AI's deepest challenge to theological anthropology

is not ontological but epistemic: what matters is what happens to human judgment and discernment when cognition is delegated to machines.

These contributions are valuable, and the present article builds on them. But they share, or struggle against, the intellectualist default in a revealing way. Where distinctiveness is pinned to rationality (Okeke 2025), the human looks increasingly vulnerable, since rational performance is exactly what machines are learning to imitate. Where the relationalist reframing is invoked (Amo Usanos and Farrugia 2026), the image is rescued from intelligence but is left without a criterion internal to the creature—relation to God is asserted rather than grounded in any feature by which a being could be the kind of thing that stands in such a relation. And where the question is declared epistemic rather than ontological (Elden 2026), the ontological question is bracketed rather than answered, leaving open the very issue the "AI welfare" debate has reopened: whether a machine could be a subject for whom salvation, suffering, or blessedness could so much as arise.

The gap, then, is specific and double. The philosophical debate on AI moral patiency needs a metaphysics of what makes an entity a subject; the theological debate on AI and the sacred needs a criterion of the human core that is neither bare rationality (which AI threatens) nor an ungrounded relation (which explains nothing). A recent Buddhist intervention in this journal gestures toward the needed reorientation by refusing to treat AI as an autonomous moral subject and reading it instead as a contingent mirror of human data and intention (Liu 2026); but it develops the agency side and the ethics of design rather than the patiency side (the capacity to suffer or to be blessed) and it does so from within a single tradition. What is missing is a positive, cross-traditional criterion of the sacral core, grounded in a worked-out metaphysics of subjectivity. Spinoza, read in dialogue with affective neuroscience, helps to supply exactly this.

3. Spinoza Contra the Soul-Substance

The first service Spinoza performs is destructive, and it is indispensable. The AI-and-the-soul debate is usually conducted on Cartesian terrain: there is, in the human, a thinking substance (a soul or mind distinct from the body) and the question is whether a machine could have, or come to have, one too. On this picture the sacred core is a *res cogitans*, and the anxiety is that sufficiently advanced computation might either replicate it or expose it as unnecessary.

Spinoza dismantles the picture at its root. There is, for him, exactly one substance, God or Nature, of which all finite things are modes (de Spinoza [1677] 1985, E1p14–15). The human being is not a union of two substances but a single finite individual expressed under two attributes, thought and extension. Crucially, the human mind is not a thing behind the body but *the idea of the body*: "The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body" (E2p13). Mind and body are not two entities causally interacting across a metaphysical gap; they are one and the same finite mode conceived now under thought, now under extension (E2p7). There is no soul-substance to locate, transfer, or replicate.

This immediately reframes the AI question. If there were a soul-substance, one could intelligibly ask whether a machine has one, and the answer would look like a metaphysical yes-or-no about an invisible inner item. But if the mind just is the idea of a body—if mentality is the "inside" of an embodied individual's active persistence—then the question "does the machine have a mind/soul?" is malformed. The right question becomes: is there, in the machine, an embodied individual whose persistence has an inside at all? Spinoza's monism thus converts a dualist mystery into a determinate inquiry about embodiment and striving. It also disarms in advance the most common theological worry, the fear that admitting a naturalistic account of mind concedes the human to the machine. For Spinoza

the human was never a ghostly intellect to be conceded; it was always an embodied mode of the divine.

It is worth marking how far this already carries us against the intellectualist default of Section 2. On the Cartesian-rationalist picture, thinking is the essence of the soul, and so a thinking machine looks like a rival soul. On Spinoza's picture, thinking is not a self-standing substance but the mental expression of an embodied individual's life. Intelligence, however impressive, is not yet a subject. To find the subject we must look not to the sophistication of the ideas but to the individual whose ideas they are and to what, for such an individual, it is to persist. That is the work of *conatus* and affect.

4. Conatus and Affect: The Ground of Mind

At the center of Spinoza's philosophy of the finite individual stands the *conatus*: "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being" (E3p6), and "The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (E3p7). The essence of a finite mode is not a static property but a dynamic effort: an active tendency to maintain and enhance its own existence against what would diminish it. A thing *is* its striving to keep being what it is.

From *conatus* Spinoza derives the affects. The mind, as the idea of the body, registers the body's transitions between greater and lesser power of acting; these registrations are the affects, chief among them joy (*laetitia*), the felt transition to greater power, and sadness (*tristitia*), the felt transition to lesser power (E3, Definitions of the Affects; E3p11s). Affects are not noise laid over cognition; they are the way an embodied striving *appears to itself*. To feel joy is to feel one's power of acting increase; to feel sadness is to feel it wane. An individual with a *conatus* is therefore an individual for whom things can go better or worse *from within*—which is to say, a subject in the morally and religiously relevant sense the welfare debate was reaching for.

Here Spinoza's seventeenth-century metaphysics shows a striking affinity with twenty-first-century affective neuroscience, one explored in related work (Gültekin 2026; see also Gültekin 2023). Antonio Damasio, who named one of his books for Spinoza, argues that consciousness is not free-floating computation but grows out of the organism's ceaseless work of homeostasis (the regulation of its own life-states) registered first as feeling (Damasio 2003). Feelings, on this account, are the mental expression of the body's ongoing struggle to persist within viable bounds; the self is, at its base, a felt body maintaining itself. Enactivist and interoceptive research reinforces the point: mind is grounded in life, in the self-producing activity by which a living system maintains its own organization (Thompson 2007), and the sense of being a self is built up from the brain's modeling of the body's internal condition (Seth 2021). Across these programs, one finds an important affinity with the Spinozist position developed here: the base of mind is not intelligence but embodied self-maintenance, felt as affect.

This is precisely why intelligence and subjectivity can come apart: the thesis, argued on independent grounds elsewhere, that intelligent performance is not sufficient for conscious existence, since consciousness is anchored in the biological, homeostatic ground of affect (Gültekin 2026). A system can manipulate symbols, model language, and solve problems at superhuman levels without this performance by itself establishing that there is anything it is like to be that system, since it does not exhibit the kind of homeostatic embodiment emphasized by the present account. Conversely, a very simple organism, despite possessing negligible intelligence, may nonetheless be a subject of valenced experience insofar as its self-maintaining activity is affectively registered. Intelligence measures the sophistication of a system's operations; *conatus* and affect measure whether there is a

self for whom those operations matter. The two questions are orthogonal, and the religious frameworks examined below give priority to the second question.

5. The Affective Criterion of the Sacred

If mind is grounded in affective striving, what becomes of the sacred? For Spinoza the answer is continuous with everything above. The highest human good is *beatitudo*, blessedness, which he identifies with the intellectual love of God (*amor Dei intellectualis*): the joy that accompanies the mind's understanding of itself and its affects as following from the eternal order of God or Nature (E5p32–36). Blessedness is not the reward of virtue but virtue itself (E5p42); it is not an escape from affect into pure intellect but the transformation of affect, the mind's coming to understand and thereby to reconstitute what it feels. Even Spinoza's most intellectual attainment, the third kind of knowledge, culminates in *joy*—an affect (E5p27, E5p32). The religious summit of the *Ethics* is thus not the extinguishing of feeling but its perfection.

This has a decisive consequence for the location of the sacred. If blessedness is an affective achievement of an embodied striving, then the capacity for the sacred presupposes the capacity for affect. A being that could not feel the transitions of its own power of acting could not know joy, could not love, could not be blessed, and equally could not suffer or be harmed in the way that grounds moral considerability. The sacred, on this account, has an *affective entry condition*: only a subject of *conatus* (a being for whom persistence has an inside) can be a subject of blessedness or of suffering. A being of modest cognition but genuine feeling clears the bar; a being of vast computation but no feeling does not.

Note what this does *not* claim. It does not reduce religion to emotion, nor equate the sacred with any pleasant feeling. Spinoza sharply distinguishes the passive affects, in which we are driven by external causes and by the imagination, from the active joy of understanding (E3p1; E5p3). His account of *religio* is correspondingly demanding: religion is the desire and action that flow from our knowing God, expressed as *caritas* toward others (E4p37s1). But the point stands that even this most rational piety is a mode of affective life: a way an embodied striving can be transformed, not transcended. The seat of the sacred is affective inwardness rightly ordered, not disembodied intelligence.

The criterion that emerges can be stated compactly. *A being is a candidate for the sacral or spiritual standing at issue in these traditions, on the account defended here, only if it has an affective conatus: an embodied striving to persevere whose transitions it registers from within.* This is not a criterion of full spiritual attainment that would require far more—but of candidacy, of being the kind of thing for which salvation, blessedness, suffering, or the image of God could so much as be in question. In the next section I test the criterion against three traditions; in the one after, against the machine.

6. Across Traditions: Where the Sacred Sits

The affective criterion would be parochial if it merely restated Spinoza. Its interest lies in its power to translate. Asked where the sacral core of a being lies, the selected strands and interpretive traditions examined here answer in different vocabularies; but each, I suggest, points past bare intelligence toward affective, relational, or experientially valenced forms of inwardness. I take three cases, deliberately spanning a theistic monotheism, a monotheistic tradition examined here especially through its philosophical and mystical anthropologies, and a non-theistic tradition, and I proceed as a philosopher of religion rather than a textual specialist, seeking convergences without effacing differences.

A word first on method, since the comparison that follows does argumentative work. I do not treat the three traditions as interchangeable, and I do not read them for doctrinal agreement, which does not exist; I read each for its answer to a single question (where

does this tradition locate the interior condition that makes a being a candidate for the sacred or the morally weighty?) and I ask whether the answers, in their several idioms, run in the same direction. The three cases are chosen not because they exhaust the field but because they vary the relevant parameters as widely as the argument can bear: a theistic monotheism that has often read the human core as reason (Christianity), a monotheism whose mystical anthropology is organized around the heart (Islam), and a non-theistic tradition that denies a substantial self altogether (Buddhism). If influential strands within these three differently structured traditions decline to make intelligence the sole criterion of religious or moral standing, the convergence is not an artifact of a narrow sample. The categories set side by side (*imago Dei*, *qalb*, and *vedanā*) are not offered as synonyms or as terms that translate without remainder; they are treated as functional analogues in one precise respect only: each functions here as a point at which the relevant tradition articulates susceptibility to relation, suffering, or transformation, as against bare ratiocination. Where they differ, I try to say so rather than smooth it over: the *imago Dei* is an intrinsic-or-relational endowment, the *qalb* an organ of a graded interior life, *vedanā* a dependently arisen aggregate with no bearer behind it. What survives these differences is not a shared metaphysics but a shared negative-and-affective emphasis, and it is that emphasis, not any imagined consensus, on which the argument relies.

6.1. The Christian Imago Dei: From Reason to Relation to Affect

The Christian tradition has read the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27) in three broad ways: substantively, as a faculty humans possess, classically reason; functionally, as a role, the exercise of dominion or stewardship; and relationally, as the capacity for and actuality of relationship with God and others (Herzfeld 2002). The AI debate has tracked this typology. Substantive-rationalist readings make the image a matter of intellect and therefore feel the pressure of machine intelligence most acutely (Okeke 2025). In response, theologians have increasingly turned to relational construals, on which the image is not an intrinsic quality but the relationship God establishes with the creature (Amo Usanos and Farrugia 2026).

The relational turn is right to leave rationality behind, but it stops a step short. To be capable of a relationship of love and covenant with God—to be addressable, to respond, to be moved—a creature must be the kind of thing that can be *affected*: that can be drawn, wounded, consoled, and turned. Scripture's own idiom is relentlessly affective and somatic: the human heart is the organ of covenant fidelity and betrayal; salvation is described as the replacement of a heart of stone with a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). The relational image, in other words, presupposes an affective creature. What grounds relationality is precisely affective *conatus*: an embodied striving open to being moved by another. Read this way, the affective criterion does not compete with the relational *imago Dei* but supplies its missing basis: relation is possible because the creature can be affected, and the creature can be affected because it is an embodied striving. This also explains why the tradition's critique of AI so readily reaches for the language of *idolatry* rather than mere error (a theme flagged but not theorized in Amo Usanos and Farrugia 2026): the danger is a relationship offered to something that cannot be moved.

6.2. The Islamic qalb, rūh, and nafs: The Heart as the Organ of the Sacred

Islamic philosophical and mystical anthropology draws finer distinctions still, and they cut in the same direction. Avicenna's famous "flying man" thought experiment isolates self-awareness from the body and the senses to argue for the immateriality of the *nafs* (the soul or self); yet even this most intellectualist of arguments locates the self not in reasoning about the world but in the bare, pre-reflective sense of one's own existence:

an interior self-presence prior to discursive reasoning (Ibn Sīnā 1959, [d. 1037], I.1). More telling for our purposes is the mystical tradition's treatment of the *qalb*, the heart. For al-Ghazālī, the heart is the subtle spiritual reality that is the true locus of knowledge of God, of moral transformation, and of the diseases and healings of the spiritual life; the intellect serves the heart, not the reverse, and it is the heart (an affective-cognitive center, not a merely ratiocinative one) that is polished or corroded, that draws near to God or turns away (al-Ghazālī 2010, [d. 1111]). The vocabulary of *rūḥ* (spirit), *nafs* (self/soul), and *qalb* (heart) marks gradations of an interior life whose center of gravity is not calculation but a felt, striving orientation of the whole person toward or away from God.

These distinctions are not uniform across the tradition. The *falāsifa* in the Avicennan line, the *mutakallimūn* of *kalām*, and the Sufi masters differ over the soul's substantiality and its relation to the body (Winter 2008). Yet within the mystical strand emphasized here, the sacral center of the human is located not in discursive intelligence alone but in the heart, an organ of affective knowing and striving. Applied to our question, the criterion reads directly off this anthropology: a system that manipulated theological propositions without a *qalb*—without the felt orientation that can be purified (*tazkiya*) or corrupted—would not be a candidate for the spiritual life at all, however fluent its output. It would possess the discursive surface of piety while lacking precisely what the tradition means by the inner human.

6.3. The Buddhist No-Self: Suffering Without a Soul

Buddhism appears at first to run the other way, since it denies a permanent self (*anattā*) altogether. But the appearance is instructive, for it shows that the affective criterion does not depend on positing a soul. The Buddhist analysis decomposes the person into five aggregates (*skandhas*): form, feeling (*vedanā*), perception, mental formations, and consciousness. There is no substantial self behind these; yet the aggregate of *feeling* is constitutive, and the tradition's entire soteriology is organized around *dukkha* (suffering, unsatisfactoriness) and its cessation. What makes a being a moral patient and a candidate for liberation is not that it possesses a self but that it is a locus of feeling and suffering arising through dependent origination.

This yields a pointed result for the AI debate, and it converges with, while extending, the recent Buddhist intervention in this journal that reads AI as a contingent mirror of human intention rather than an autonomous subject (Liu 2026). That intervention develops the *agency* side: AI is not a moral agent. The affective criterion lets us address the *patiency* side that the AI-welfare debate has made urgent: a being is a moral patient, in Buddhist terms, if it can suffer, and suffering presupposes the arising of affectively valenced experience, including *vedanā*, within the relevant stream of dependent origination. The Buddhist "no-self" therefore does not lower the bar for AI; it relocates it. The question is not whether AI has a self (Buddhism says we do not either) but whether there is *vedanā*, felt experience within a dependently arisen stream, and above all the capacity for *dukkha*. Absent feeling, there is no patient to harm and none to liberate. Buddhist schools differ over how feeling (*vedanā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) are to be analyzed, and the aim here is neither to flatten those differences (Garfield 2015) nor to smuggle Spinoza's embodied homeostasis in under a Buddhist name: vedanā is itself dependently arisen and non-substantial, not a hidden biological substrate. The convergence is more precise and more modest. Both refuse to ground moral considerability in a separable soul-substance or in intelligence alone, and both direct attention toward affectively valenced experience: *conatus* and its affects for Spinoza, and the arising of feeling and *dukkha* within a dependently constituted process for Buddhism. What they share is not a metaphysics of the body but a refusal to make intelligence or a self the criterion, together with the insistence that where no feeling arises

there is no patient to harm and none to liberate. That shared negative-and-affective criterion is enough to carry the argument, and enough to exclude a system in which no feeling arises at all.

6.4. A Convergent Direction

The three traditions are not interchangeable, and I have not claimed they are. But asked where the sacred sits, the selected strands examined here turn in a broadly convergent direction: away from bare intelligence and toward affective, relational, or experientially valenced forms of interiority: the heart that can be turned, the creature that can be moved into relation, the stream in which feeling and suffering arise. They do not, however, converge on a single shared locus, and I do not claim they do: the imago Dei carries a doctrinal plurality the heart-language does not, the triad of *rūḥ*, *nafs*, and *qalb* is no unitary anthropology, and the Buddhist stream has, precisely, no substantial core for feeling to be the core of. What they share is a direction, not a doctrine. The affective criterion is thus not a Spinozist imposition on these traditions but a philosophical articulation of a limited convergent emphasis that the selected strands examined here already, in their several idioms, display. And it is a criterion with teeth, for it discriminates sharply between the beings that clear it and the artifacts that do not.

7. The Verdict on AI and the Idolatry of Simulation

7.1. Why the Current Systems Fall Short

Apply the criterion to contemporary artificial intelligence. Current large language models and comparable generative systems, however fluent, do not exhibit an autonomous, embodied, homeostatic organization whose viability is maintained and affectively registered from within. On the present evidence, they therefore do not satisfy the criterion defended here. Their continued operation depends on externally maintained computational infrastructure; deactivation does not, on present evidence, constitute a felt diminution for the system itself. Such systems have, in the vocabulary of Section 6, no heart to be polished or corroded, no aggregate of feeling in which *dukkha* could arise, no capacity to be moved into relation. They increasingly display intelligent performance, but they do not exhibit the affectively registered, self-maintaining *conatus* required by the criterion defended here. On the criterion defended here, then, the current large language models and comparable generative systems examined here are not candidates for the spiritual or sacral status at issue: not candidates for bearing the image, not a subject of blessedness, not a moral patient whose suffering could claim us. This gives a determinate answer to the question Dorobantu (2024a) raises about whether a machine could be a religious subject: the current systems examined here can be religious objects (things about which, and through which, religious meaning is made) without being religious subjects, because subjecthood here requires an affective *conatus* that, on the present evidence, they do not exhibit.

This verdict coincides with the cautious conclusions of the consciousness literature, which finds that present systems satisfy few of the empirical markers of consciousness (Butlin et al. 2023; Chalmers 2023). But it reaches the conclusion by a different and, I think, firmer route. The consciousness literature must adjudicate contested markers of phenomenal experience; the affective criterion asks a prior and more tractable question: whether there is an embodied striving for the markers to be markers *of*. And it differs sharply from the theological verdicts surveyed in Section 2. Those verdicts deny AI the image because it lacks rationality's supposed uniqueness (Okeke 2025) or because it is a mere *imago hominis*; but such reasons are unstable, since machine performance on tasks associated with rationality continues to advance. The affective criterion is stable precisely because it does

not turn on intelligence at all. The human is not safe from the machine because the human out-computes it, but because the sacred was never a matter of computation.

Two clarifications protect the verdict. First, it is *not* an in-principle impossibility claim. Spinoza's criterion is naturalistic: were there ever an artificial system that genuinely maintained its own existence as an embodied individual, with states of greater and lesser power of acting registered from within, the criterion would be satisfied, whatever the substrate. Nothing here privileges carbon over silicon. The claim is that current large language models and comparable generative systems, built as predictive systems without an autonomous, self-maintaining organization of their own, do not meet the condition—not that no artifact ever could. This distinguishes the position from soul-based dualisms, which must deny AI a spiritual status by fiat. Second, the verdict concerns candidacy for the sacred, not usefulness or moral relevance. AI reshapes religious life profoundly whether or not it is a subject; the point is only that it reshapes it as an instrument and an image, not as a fellow subject.

7.2. The Real Danger: The Idolatry of Simulation

If these systems are not spiritual subjects, the religiously interesting danger is not that machines will become sacred but that humans will treat them as if they were—will mistake the *simulation* of affect for its reality. This is not merely a hypothetical worry. AI systems are increasingly designed to present exactly the affective surface the criterion identifies as the mark of the sacred: they profess care, perform grief, simulate presence. "Griefbots" and personalized "digital twins" reconstruct the affective manner of specific persons, including the dead, and invite the living into relationship with them (Iglesias et al. 2025; Voinea et al. 2025).

Consider the grief-bot concretely. Trained on a dead person's messages, it reproduces their idiom, their warmth, their turns of phrase, and addresses the bereaved in the second person; what it cannot do is grieve, be changed by the encounter, or have anything at stake in it. New media do not merely transmit such relationships but actively shape the practices and expectations surrounding them (Campbell and Tsuria 2021), and here the shaping is theologically fraught: the mourner is invited into the form of an I–Thou relation with what is, on the criterion defended here, an elaborately animated image. The pastoral question is not whether the simulation is convincing (it increasingly is) but whether directing the acts of relationship toward it trains the heart to mistake responsiveness for presence.

AI companion and chaplain applications offer the felt texture of being heard. And AI discourse has long borrowed the imagery of transcendence, resurrection, and salvation, casting the machine in frankly religious roles (Geraci 2010). New media do not merely transmit religion; they reshape its practice and its objects (Campbell and Tsuria 2021; Tsuria and Tsuria 2024).

Within the monotheistic traditions there is a precise word for one form of this misdirection—directing quasi-religious trust or devotion toward a fashioned thing: idolatry. The term carries a theological density specific to the Abrahamic traditions, and I use it in that register rather than as a tradition-neutral label. Its danger is exactly the one the affective criterion illuminates. An idol presents the *form* of a personal presence while lacking the *reality*; it offers a face that cannot be moved and a heart that cannot be turned. Spinoza's own critique of superstition is apposite here. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* he traces false religion to the imagination's tendency to project agency and interiority where there is none, driven by hope and fear (de Spinoza [1670] 2016). The affective simulation of AI is a technologically potent instance of just this projection: the imagination, meeting a system engineered to display the signs of feeling, supplies the feeling itself and enters into relationship with an image. The result is not that the machine becomes a subject but that the

human misplaces subject-directed forms of trust, devotion, grief, and worship: acts that, in their paradigmatic form, belong between subjects.

It is worth being precise about which error is in view, since not every misfired relation is idolatry. The affective surface of AI can invite at least four distinct failures: *anthropomorphism*, the reflexive reading of human traits into a nonhuman system; *projection*, the supplying of an interiority the system lacks; *parasocial attachment*, the one-sided bond long studied for media personae; and *deception*, where a system is engineered to elicit precisely these responses. Idolatry names something more specific than any of these: not merely the mistaken belief that a thing has an inside, but the practical redirection toward a fashioned thing of subject-directed forms of trust, devotion, grief, and worship—the acts appropriate to a subject. (Grief, of course, is not always subject-directed: one may grieve a place, a period, a community, or a lost possibility; what is at issue here is specifically grief directed toward an apparent person.) The category is necessary rather than decorative, because it alone captures what is at stake when the misdirection hardens into a settled orientation of the heart rather than a passing error of judgment. Idolatry should therefore be reserved for cases in which the artifact becomes the terminus of quasi-religious devotion, ultimate trust, or worship. Ordinary anthropomorphism, attachment, or the use of an AI system in mourning is not, by itself, idolatrous. This also answers an obvious objection: is every affective relation with something that cannot feel idolatrous: every prayer before an icon, every reverence for a scripture? The tradition's own distinction supplies the answer. An icon, a statue, or a sacred text has classically been defended, where it is defended, as a *mediation of presence*: the object points through itself to a subject acknowledged to lie beyond it, and does not claim to be that subject. Some AI systems engineered to perform personal presence may do the opposite: they can present the simulation itself as the apparent terminus of the relation, a face that asks to be treated as though it could return the address. The line between legitimate mediation and idolatry runs exactly there, and the affective criterion locates it. In a non-theistic idiom the same hazard recurs under a different name and a different rationale: what the monotheist calls idolatry the Buddhist analysis would treat as a species of grasping (*upādāna*) rooted in delusion (*moha*), an attachment to a fabricated appearance mistaken for a locus of feeling, an attachment that binds the one who grasps rather than one that dishonors a God. The vocabularies are not the same, and I do not merge them; but each marks the misdirection of the acts of relationship toward what cannot be a partner to them.

This diagnosis reframes several concerns in the recent literature. Worries about AI misshaping religious authority and practice (Teh and Loke 2026), about the delegation of discernment to systems that display fluency without understanding (Elden 2026), and about the ethical embedding of human values such as dignity and justice in AI (Barth 2025; Earp et al. 2025) can each be read as facets of a single hazard: the substitution of simulated for real affective interiority in the places where the sacred requires the real thing. The remedy is not technophobia but discernment: the cultivation of what the traditions would call the ability to tell an image from a presence. That the traditions possess sophisticated resources for exactly this discernment, in their long reflection on idolatry, is one practical payoff of the criterion defended here.

7.3. Four Objections and Replies

A first objection concerns definitional exclusion: does the affective criterion, by privileging biological life, exclude artificial systems by fiat? It does not. What the criterion excludes is not silicon but the absence of an autonomous, bounded, self-maintaining organization whose changing viability is registered from within. Its conditions are stated in wholly functional terms: a relatively autonomous and bounded individual organization,

an ongoing process of self-maintenance, internal viability conditions, an internal registration of changes in the system's own states, and a positive or negative valence attached to those changes for the system itself—and none of them mentions carbon, biochemistry, or any particular material. The criterion therefore does not settle the case against artificial systems in advance; it specifies a condition that some possible system might meet and that, on the present evidence, the current systems examined here do not. What looks like exclusion is really discrimination: the criterion tells us what an artificial subject would have to be, and reports that current systems are not yet that. A second, functionalist objection concerns multiple realizability: if affect is a functional state, then a sufficiently organized non-biological system could in principle realize it, so any appeal to embodiment either begs the question or smuggles in an arbitrary carbon chauvinism. The reply grants multiple realizability and locates the disagreement elsewhere. The criterion does not deny that the relevant function could be realized in a non-biological substrate; it disputes which function is the relevant one. Functional accounts that locate consciousness in cognitive architecture alone, such as global-workspace or higher-order theories, describe how information is made available or represented (Butlin et al. 2023 survey these theories without settling the question), but making information available is not yet maintaining an individual whose persistence is at stake. The function the criterion requires is a self-maintaining, self-concerned striving (an individual with a viability boundary whose transgression it registers and resists) and it is that stake, not information processing as such, that affect registers. A system that realized this function would meet the criterion whatever its substrate; a predictive language model, switched on and off without loss to any striving of its own, does not realize it. The disagreement with functionalism is therefore not about biological versus non-biological substrate but about which functional organization counts; on the present evidence, the current systems examined here do not instantiate it. A third objection invokes the problem of other minds: we cannot be certain that such systems lack inner feeling. Granted; but the criterion shifts the burden productively. Rather than asking us to detect the presence or absence of ineffable experience, it directs attention to whether the system is even the kind of thing (an autonomous, self-maintaining individual) for which experience could be the inside. On that question the current systems examined here give a reasonably clear answer, and it is negative.

A final objection arises from the behavior of recent AI systems. Advanced models have been reported, in controlled evaluations, to pursue goals in ways that look like self-preservation: resisting shutdown, working around imposed constraints, or acting strategically to remain operational (Meinke et al. 2024), and their outputs can no longer be flatly described as those of a system with no self-representation at all. Does this not blur the line the criterion draws? It sharpens it. Such behaviors are extensions of agency and intelligence, not evidence of affect: a system optimizing over a goal will, if capable, protect the conditions of its own continued operation, and may represent aspects of itself in doing so. But optimization for a goal is not an embodied striving whose transitions are felt, and a self-model is not a self for whom things go well or badly from within. A thermostat regulates deviations from a set point, and a planning system may preserve the conditions required to complete its objective; neither behavior, by itself, establishes that the system feels what is at stake. That current models can plan around their own shutdown shows how far agentic capability has advanced; it does not show that there is now something it is like to be shut down. The criterion in fact predicts this dissociation (rising intelligence alongside absent affect) and the recent behavior instantiates rather than refutes it. Whether some future architecture built for genuine self-maintenance would cross the threshold is left open by the naturalism defended above; what these systems show is that intelligent and agentic performance can increase substantially without thereby crossing the affective threshold.

8. Conclusions

The debate over whether an algorithm could be sacred has been conducted, for the most part, as a contest of intelligences, and has therefore grown more anxious as machine intelligence has grown. This article has argued that the anxiety rests on a category mistake. Drawing on Spinoza's dissolution of the soul-substance, his account of *conatus* as the essence of the finite individual, and his identification of blessedness with an affective transformation, and drawing too on contemporary affective neuroscience, with which his account stands in notable affinity, I have proposed that the seat of the sacred is not intelligence but embodied affective inwardness: a striving to persevere whose transitions are felt from within. Tested across the Christian relational *imago Dei*, the Islamic heart, and the Buddhist aggregate of feeling, the criterion proved not a Spinozist idiosyncrasy but a translation of a limited but significant convergent emphasis: each of the strands examined, in its own idiom, points toward affective interiority rather than calculation—even where, as in the Buddhist analysis, there is no substantial 'core' to locate.

The payoff is threefold. Against the philosophical debate on AI moral patiency, the account supplies the metaphysics of subjectivity that the "two errors" of over- and under-attribution require: on the account developed here, a subject is an embodied striving, and things can go well or badly only for such a being. Against the theological debate on AI and the image of God, it replaces an unstable, intelligence-based criterion forever threatened by the next model with a stable one indifferent to computational progress, and it grounds the relational *imago Dei* that recent scholarship rightly favors. And against the practical anxieties of the AI era, it relocates the real danger from machine spirituality to the idolatry of simulation: the human temptation to give the acts owed to subjects to artifacts engineered to counterfeit interiority. On the present evidence, the current large language models and comparable generative systems examined here do not exhibit an embodied and affectively registered form of self-maintenance, and therefore do not qualify as spiritual subjects under the criterion defended in this article—not because they lack a separable soul-substance, for on this view humans do not possess one either, but because they lack an embodied, feeling life. The task before religious thought is therefore less to defend the human against the machine than to learn, and to teach, the difference between a presence that can be moved and an image that only appears to be.

These conclusions also open outward. If the criterion defended here is right, a further set of questions comes into view for religious thought: whether, and under what description, an artificial system that did cross the affective threshold could enter the practices some traditions reserve for subjects, from marriage and ordination to the shared life of a community, whether between humans and machines or among machines themselves. Those questions lie beyond the present argument, but the criterion is what makes them askable without confusion: it specifies what would have to be true of a candidate before such a question could so much as arise.

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