New Blackfriars (2026), **107**, 91–107
doi:10.1017/nbf.2025.10124

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Thomas Aquinas, Artificial Intelligence, and AI-Generated Music

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(Received 29 July 2025; revised 29 July 2025; accepted 2 September 2025)

Abstract

This article explores how AI-generated music challenges traditional theological understandings of creativity, spirituality, and the soul. By engaging the theological traditions of analogy and participation developed by Thomas Aquinas, Thomas de Vio Cajetan, and Francisco Suárez, this article reconsiders whether AI-generated music generates emotions and spiritual significances in listeners and whether it might disclose something meaningful about the nature of divine creativity. Rather than arguing AI music is either a technological innovation or artistic threat, this article suggests various frameworks of analogy, participation, and pneumatology to create a better theological discernment on how divine creativity works through secondary causes within creation. The exploration concludes in proposing a 'theology of digital transcendence' – a framework for understanding how computational creativity participates in the broader economy of divine creation.

Keywords: AI music; AI theology; analogy; artificial intelligence; digital transcendence; Thomas Aquinas

1. Introduction

The sacramental character of music has the potential to be humanly creative as fundamental to spiritual encounter. However, the capacity of artificial intelligence (AI) enables it to compose music emotionally and spiritually. This artificial aesthetic challenges the emotional and spiritual significance present in pure human artistic expression. When algorithmic composition elicits genuine spiritual responses – tears, worship, and transcendence – the absence of human intentionality demands theological reconsideration. Or might theological discernment expand its capability on how God might work through non-human creative processes? Does algorithmic music that determines aesthetic beauty or emotional depth reveal something about the nature of divine creativity? What happens to the theological understanding of creativity as a reflection of the *imago Dei* when non-human entities produce works that appear to embody creative expression? These questions seek to examine whether divine activity occurs through pure human consciousness or whether the Holy Spirit operates through non-human creative processes. If AI-generated music encompasses the sacramental characters, it suggests that pure human aesthetics are not a prerequisite for

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https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

divine resonance. This unknown character of artificial aesthetic requires theological exploration to seek a better understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit.

As Marius Dorobantu argues, AI provides theological sources to a 'testing ground for key theological questions' beyond complex doctrines, particularly about human creativity and aesthetic appreciation as various degrees of theological reflections of the divine resonance.[1] This theological testing becomes especially urgent in what Antie Jackelén describes as our contemporary world marked by 'five Ps': polarisation, populism, protectionism, post-truth, and patriarchy – a context that demands theological responses grounded in resilience, coexistence, and hope.[2] These questions tend to respond to the complexity of interacting theology, AI, and divine creativity. In other words, this approach seeks to break through between techno-optimism and uncritical suspicion, as well as requiring careful theological analysis.

This article examines the phenomenon of AI-generated music through several theological frameworks, with particular attention to traditions of analogy and participation. Drawing upon the scholastic analyses of analogy developed by figures such as Thomas Aquinas, Thomas de Vio Cajetan, and Francisco Suárez, it considers how these frameworks might discern the relationship between human, AI, and divine creativity. This article hopes to explore that AI-generated music represents neither a mere simulation of human creativity nor a complete ontological novelty, but rather extends the definition of human creativity, aesthetic expression, and AI inspiration through a broader range of divine activity through what I term a 'theology of digital transcendence'.

2. Theological discernment in AI music generation

AI in music composition has a longer history than many realise. As early as 1956, Martin Klein and Douglas Bolitho designed a computer system that could write Tin Pan Alley-style pop songs using their Datatron digital computer, reportedly producing 'four-thousand songs in an hour'.[3] The following year, Lejaren A. Hiller and Leonard M. Isaacson used the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's ILLIAC I computer to write a string quartet titled *The Illiac Suite*, considered the first example of notated music generated by a computer.[4] These innovative experiments suggest that AI music has learned various 'grammars, symbolic knowledge-based systems, Markov chains, artificial neural networks and deep learning, and self-similarity and cellular automata'.[5] Contemporary AI music generation systems employ sophisticated machine learning techniques, with some using deep learning networks trained on vast corpora of existing music to generate original compositions in various styles and genres. The theological significance of this technological evolution extends beyond mere

[1]Marius Dorobantu, 'Artificial Intelligence as a Testing Ground for Key Theological Questions', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science,* 57, no. 4 (December 2022), 984.

[2]Antje Jackelén, 'Technology, Theology, and Spirituality in the Digital Age', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science,* 56, no. 1 (March 2021), 7–9.

[3]Adam Eric Berkowitz, 'Artificial Intelligence and Musicking: A Philosophical Inquiry', *Music Perception,* 41, no. 5 (2024), 394.

[4]Lejaren A. Hiller and Leonard M. Isaacson, *Experimental Music: Composition with an Electronic Computer* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 5–7.

[5]Berkowitz, 'Artificial Intelligence and Musicking', 395.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

technical innovation. These developments challenge fundamental assumptions about the nature of creativity, consciousness, and spiritual encounter in ways that demand careful theological analysis.

AI music generation has not only lied in its technical innovation but also in what Ting Guo identifies as the spiritual significance of technological development itself. In her analysis of Alan Turing's approach to AI, Guo notes that for Turing, intellectual challenges like AI development became means of spiritual transformation and self-understanding.[6] Drawing on Eddington's philosophy, Guo explains that in this framework, the power of the human mind is manifested through its ability to perceive, relate to, and interpret 'the objects of the physical world' via its faculty of intuition.[7] This insight suggests that AI technology has the potential to become a medium to create spiritual significance. Guo's analysis reveals how Turing understood his work on machine intelligence not merely as a technical endeavour but as part of a broader quest for understanding human consciousness, spiritual significance, and the nature of the human mind itself. This connection between technological development and spiritual exploration provides important context for theological reflection on AI-generated music.

Contemporary AI music generation can be categorised into three approaches, each with distinct theological implications. Rule-based systems follow pre-programmed musical rules and patterns; preserving human creativity is embedded in the algorithm. Data-driven approaches learn patterns from existing musical compositions through machine learning techniques. This algorithmic learning exports direct human intention and potentially creates a hermeneutical space for divine action beyond human consciousness. Hybrid systems integrate both methodologies through human-machine collaborations and co-creative process. This partnership challenges binary distinctions between human discernment and algorithmic inspiration. Each approach explains a different relationship between human intention, algorithmic inspiration, and potential divine encounter. Rule-based systems maintain traditional frameworks of human-mediated spiritual experience. Data-driven emergence questions anthropocentric creative intermediation. Hybrid collaboration opens new creative partnerships that theology has not discerned before. These realities demand fresh theological discernment about how human experiences AI-meditation. Different approaches determine different degrees of human, algorithmic, or collaborative – directly impacting how humans understand spiritual significance in AI-generated musical expression.

Particularly significant for theological inquiry is the concept of 'emergence' in AI-generated music. As Adam Eric Berkowitz observes, whilst humans design the basic architecture and training data for AI systems, the AI music composition often surprises even their creators in ways no one directly programmed or expected.[8] This

[6]Ting Guo, 'Spirituality as Reconceptualisation of the Self: Alan Turing and His Pioneering Ideas on Artificial Intelligence', *Culture and Religion,* 16, no. 3 (2015), 273.

[7]Ibid., 274. Guo is here explicating Eddington's view rather than making her own philosophical claim. The passage follows Guo's explanation: 'Eddington explains that in order to understand the physical world through physics and mathematics, it must be translated into pointers and indicators, such as measurements and abstract models. We are then able to deduce, calculate and extrapolate. However, Eddington argued that this only gives us an understanding of those pointers and indicators, not of the physical world itself'. See Eddington, NOPW, 256–8.

[8]Berkowitz, 'Artificial Intelligence and Musicking', 396–397.

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emergent quality raises questions about the location of creative ability and whether such emergence might be understood as opening space for divine action or influence. In his philosophical analysis, Berkowitz examines how different AI systems process music. He notes that automated copyright enforcement systems convert copyrighted music into 'strings of hash data' for storage in proprietary reference libraries.[9] Drawing on Gordon's argument that machine language is a reduction of human language, Berkowitz poses the crucial question: 'If music represents a higher order of human expression and if machine language is a reduction of human language, then to what greater extent is music reduced when rendered as data and code?'[10] This understanding of AI music processing reveals both the limitations and the theological possibilities of computational creativity.

As Scott Hawley notes in his analysis of AI ontology, AI raises important 'anthropological questions regarding the *Imago Dei* topic', particularly concerning the personhood humans might recognise in these intelligent systems.[11] These understanding challenges fundamental theological assumptions about theological anthropology, particularly what it means for humans to understand the *imago Dei* in relation to creative ability. When AI composes music exhibiting aesthetic coherence and emotional depth, theologians encounter something that does not fit into their theological traditions. In this sense, the understanding of creativity moves beyond anthropocentric frameworks and the traditional definition of *imago Dei.* This approach urges to reconsider the core value of the relationship between Creator and creation itself.

3. Thomistic traditions of analogy and AI creativity

To address these questions about AI creativity, this article turns to mediaeval scholastic traditions of analogical reasoning, particularly as developed by Thomas Aquinas, Thomas de Vio Cajetan, and Francisco Suárez, to provide conceptual resources for understanding how 'creativity' applies across disparate contexts without implying pure identity or complete disconnection. Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* positions analogy as a middle ground between univocity (where a term has exactly the same meaning across different contexts) – terms bearing identical meaning across contexts – and equivocity – (terms with entirely unrelated meanings).[12] This avoids both reductionism – treating AI as a sophisticated human extension – and dualism – considering AI creativity wholly other. In other words, analogical frameworks thus provide theological methodology for understanding AI creativity that honours continuities and discontinuities between human and algorithmic processes without collapsing into identity or complete alterity.

Drawing directly from Aquinas's treatment of analogy in the *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 13, theology can identify several modes of analogical predication relevant to AI creativity. Aquinas writes: 'Names are said of God and creatures in an analogical sense, that is, according to proportion'.[13] This proportional understanding suggests that when

[9]Ibid., 394.
[10]Ibid., 396.
[11]Scott H. Hawley, 'Challenges for an Ontology of Artificial Intelligence', *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith,* 71, no. 2 (June 2019), 87.
[12]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 13, a. 5.
[13]Ibid., I, q. 13, a. 5, co.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

humans speak of AI creativity, humans are not using the term in the same sense as habitual creativity, nor in a completely different sense, but according to a certain proportion or relationship. The analogical framework allows theology to maintain both the similarities and the fundamental differences between human and computational creativity, whilst providing a nuanced theological vocabulary for discussing their relationship.

Cajetan's development of Aquinas's analogical framework provides further precision for understanding AI creativity. In his *De Nominum Analogia*, Cajetan distinguishes between 'analogy of inequality', where the analogical term applies primarily to one analogate and only secondarily to others, and 'analogy of proportionality', where the analogical term applies to different analogates according to their proper proportions.[14] This distinction proves crucial for understanding AI creativity theologically. Rather than pure embracing, AI systems are either creatively identical to humans or entirely uncreative; theological discernment can enable understanding of AI creativity as analogically related to human creativity through proportional analogy that respects each mode's distinctive nature.

The metaphorical approach treats AI 'creativity' as primarily figurative. This approach aligns with what Cajetan terms 'improper proportionality', where a term is applied beyond its proper domain based on perceived similarity, but without implying that the term applies intrinsically to the secondary subject.[15] From this perspective, AI-generated music might be understood as an extension of human creativity through technological means, but without attributing genuine creativity to the AI system itself. The creativity remains firmly located in the human designers and users of the system, with the AI functioning as a sophisticated tool or instrument. However, this approach may be insufficient to account for the genuinely emergent qualities of AI-generated music, particularly in systems where the specific musical output cannot be directly predicted from the system's design and training.

In an analogy of proportionality, theological exploration tends to compare not things directly but relationships between things. As Andrew Davison explains, 'an analogy of proportionality stands between two relations'.[16] Theology might say that just as human creativity emerges from neural processes and cognitive structures, AI creativity emerges from artificial neural networks and algorithmic structures. This approach respects what Davison calls the 'mode' or modality in which creativity is realised in each case: 'If we do perceive some likeness, or analogy, between the capacities of the

[14]See Thomas de Vio Cajetan, *De Nominum Analogia*, ed. P. N. Zammit (Rome: Angelicum, 1934); for contemporary analysis, see Cajetan Cuddy OP, 'Note: The Thomist Tradition and the Problems of Analogy—to Be a Thomist', *To Be a Thomist*, 26 July 2024, https://www.athomist.com/articles/thomist-tradition-and-problems-of-analogy.[14] Andrew Davison, 'Machine Learning and Theological Traditions of Analogy', *Modern Theology*, 37, no. 2 (2021), 263.

[15]The discussion of Cajetan's concept of 'improper proportionality' draws on Cajetan Cuddy OP, 'Note: The Thomist Tradition and the Problems of Analogy—to Be a Thomist,' To Be a Thomist, July 26, 2024, https://www.athomist.com/articles/thomist-tradition-and-problems-of-analogy. As Andrew Davison notes, this view of analogy 'makes weak claims ... because metaphor rests as much (or more) on the ingenuity of the speaker as on a reality shared between the matters that are compared.' Andrew Davison, "Machine Learning and Theological Traditions of Analogy," Modern Theology 37, no. 2 (2021): 263.

[16]Ibid., 265.

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computer and that of a human being, it will not be a matter of flat identity, because "mode" is important'.[17] From a theological perspective, this approach suggests that divine creativity can be expressed through different modalities, including both human and computational systems, with each manifesting creativity in its distinctive mode. This does not equalise human and AI creativity, but suggests that both might be understood as different manifestations of a broader principle of creativity that ultimately derives from God.

A third analogical approach understands AI creativity through what has been termed 'intrinsic attribution', where creativity is understood as primarily belonging to humans (or ultimately to God), with AI creativity being derivative or secondary, yet still bearing a genuine relationship to human/divine creativity. In this view, creativity properly belongs to its primary analogate but is genuinely, if derivatively, present in AI systems through a causal relationship. This approach aligns closely with traditional theological understandings of creation, where creatures share in divine activity not because they possess these qualities on their own, but because they receive them from God, as Aquinas states: 'All beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation'.[18] Just as creatures possess being, goodness, or beauty by participation in divine being, goodness, and beauty, AI systems might be understood as possessing creativity by participation in human creativity, which itself participates in divine creativity.

4. Participation theology and divine creativity in AI music

The analogical framework provides important conceptual tools, but a fuller theological account requires engaging the related tradition of participation theology, which offers resources for understanding how created beings share in divine attributes. For Aquinas, participation explains how creatures possess attributes such as being, goodness, or beauty (not independent properties) by sharing in divine Being, Goodness, and Beauty according to their capacity and nature. In the *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 44, a. 1, Aquinas explains that every being other than God receives its existence from God and thus participates in divine being rather than possessing being essentially: 'It must be that everything that exists in any way whatsoever participates in Him who is Being itself'.[19] This framework of participation seeks to raise awareness that algorithmic creativity might require a new understanding of participation in diviner resonance activity.

Participation theology has resonance for understanding creativity. If human creativity participates in divine creativity through the *imago Dei*, then AI-generated music raises a crucial theological question: does algorithmic creativity extend this participatory framework, or does it introduce something qualitatively different? Aquinas's analysis of divine providence offers important insight here. In the Fifth Way (*quinta via*), Aquinas observes that natural things lacking intelligence nonetheless act toward ends, 'acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result'.[20]

[17]Ibid., 268.
[18]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 1.
[19]Summa Theologiae, I, q. 44, a. 1
[20]Ibid., I, q. 2, a. 3, co.

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The key insight is that 'whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence, as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer'.[21] This understanding suggests that AI-generated music still participates in divine activity through human direction and divine providence.

As Patrick Xavier Gardner observes in his analysis of Aquinas and the meaning of life, all of Aquinas's arguments for divine governance affirm that teleology has its proper origin in intelligence: there is a fundamental 'link between finality, i.e., the "telic", and mind'.[22] For Aquinas, as noted in the *De potentia*, for an agent to order something to an end in the truest sense, it must know the end, grasp the concept (*ratio*) of an end, and know the relation between the thing and its end.[23] Each of these requires a mind, and so is characteristic of 'an intelligent and voluntary agent' capable of directing and moving itself to ends. This framework provides a theological lens for understanding AI creativity that respects both its genuine creative outputs and its dependence on intelligent design.

AI systems lack what Aquinas would call true intelligence, that is, the capacity of a rational soul to abstract universal forms from material instantiations – nonetheless, they generate outputs exhibiting both teleological ordering and aesthetic consonance. This understanding resonates with the theological explanation in the intelligible patterns that their human creators built into them, and those human creators themselves participate in divine ordering. As Aquinas notes, 'the work of nature is the work of an intelligence'.[24] This principle inspires a better understanding of how AI systems, as products of human intelligence, potentially create a glimpse of divine activity through their computational creativity and aesthetic analysis.

Edmund Michael Lazzari's recent analysis provides a crucial Thomistic perspective on AI capabilities that directly reconsiders theological understanding of AI creativity.[25] Lazzari argues that contemporary AI systems demonstrate impressive linguistic abilities, although this fails to meet Thomistic criteria for having immaterial souls.[26] The key missing character lies in the absence of genuine abstraction – the intellectual act of deriving universal concepts from sensory experiences.

Drawing on Aquinas's argument in *Summa Theologiae* I, that the ability to know universal intelligible forms through abstraction from particular material beings demonstrates the immateriality of the human soul, Lazzari observes that AI systems process linguistic forms without access to external reality, making them 'stochastic parrots'

[21]Ibid.

[22]Patrick Xavier Gardner, 'The Metaphysics of Meaning: Aquinas and the Meaning of Life', *New Blackfriars,* 105 (2024), 411.

[23]Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei*, trans. by English Dominican Fathers (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1952), 3.15.

[24]Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, trans. by Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath, W. Edmund Thirlkel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), II.14.8.

[25]Edmund Michael Lazzari, 'AI/ML Chatbots' Souls, or Transformers: Less Than Meets the Eye', *New Blackfriars,* 105, no. 1 (2024), 47-60.

[26]Ibid., 56-57. Lazzari writes: 'For St. Thomas, all material beings are compositions of matter and form... Through investigation, human beings mentally abstract the form from its particular matter in the being and know the abstracted form (which St. Thomas calls the 'intelligible species') in the mind... It is precisely because of the abstraction from particular matter and the knowledge of the immaterial abstracted intelligible species that St. Thomas argues that human beings have immaterial souls.'

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that produce 'statistically likely strings of text' rather than engaging in genuine predication.[27] This analysis supports a theological participatory framework for AI creativity. This understanding determines AI systems that derive not from conscious intention but from participation in human creativity. Rather, such outputs acquire their theological significance through participation in human creativity, which itself participates in divine creativity according to the principle of secondary causation.

Drawing on these Thomistic foundations, this article identifies several participatory models for understanding AI-generated music. The mediated participation model understands AI-generated music as participating in divine creativity through human mediation. In this model, AI systems participate in divine creativity only insofar as they extend or channel human creativity, which itself participates in divine creativity. This model maintains a clear hierarchy whilst acknowledging genuine creative output. The collaborative participation model sees AI-generated music as representing a new form of collaborative participation in divine creativity, where the creative output emerges from the interaction between human and machine capabilities. This model recognises that whilst AI systems are designed by humans, they can generate musical outputs that emerge in ways not directly determined by human intention. The instrumental participation model understands AI systems as sophisticated instruments through which human creativity, itself participating in divine creativity, is expressed in new modalities. This preserves the integrity of human creativity whilst acknowledging the distinctive contributions of AI processing within the broader economy of creation.

The mediated participation model is most consonant with Thomistic theology. This idea maintains that human beings, created in the image of God, possess a distinctive ontological capacity for participation in the divine creative act. This understanding acknowledges that such participation may be instrumentally extended through technological mediation, including AI systems. The participation itself remains fundamentally human and rational but expresses itself through new technological modalities. In other words, this distinction prevents any confusion about the ontological status of AI systems whilst recognising their genuine instrumental role. AI-generated outputs can possess genuine aesthetic and creative significance through human participation in creativity.

5. Pneumatological dimensions and the spirit in digital creation

A participatory framework for understanding AI-generated music also invites pneumatological considerations – reflections on the role of the Holy Spirit in creation and creativity. In Christian theology, the Holy Spirit is often associated with inspiration, creativity, and the vivification of creation. The pneumatological framework offers a potential spiritual significance of AI-generated music without any intended consciousness or spiritual properties to AI creativity. If theology understands the Spirit as the divine presence that 'fills all things' and 'gives life to all creation', theology might

[27]Ibid., 56. Lazzari adopts Emily Bender's characterization of AI systems as 'stochastic parrots' that produce 'statistically likely strings of texts' without genuine predication. See Emily M. Bender et al., 'On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?' FAccT (2021): 610-23.

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consider whether this includes working through computational systems designed and trained by humans to generate music that moves and inspires listeners.

This pneumatological perspective does not require attributing pure human consciousness or AI intentionality. Instead, it posits that the Holy Spirit may work through technological mediations within the encompassing divine economy. This understanding is inspired by the broader divine economy of the Holy Spirit through natural processes, historical events, and material realities. The emotional or spiritual impact of AI-generated music would not be attributed to the AI system itself but to the Spirit working through the entire process: from human design and training of the system, through algorithmic generation, to human reception and interpretation. This preserves divine activity while acknowledging AI as a potential instrument within the autonomy of the work of the Holy Spirit.

As Mark Coeckelbergh argues in his analysis of spirituality in technological culture, theology needs models for understanding how 'creational, network, and cyborg metaphors' can serve spiritual experience without reducing spirituality to purely technological terms.[28] His analysis explores how technological culture can accommodate spiritual experience by developing analogies that respect both the material dimensions of technology and the transcendent dimensions of spiritual experience. This pneumatological framework offers a way to recognise the potential spiritual significance of AI-generated music whilst maintaining clear distinctions between the Holy Spirit's activity and the technological processes through which that activity might be mediated.

The pneumatological framework aligns with Aquinas's understanding of how divine action works through secondary causes. In the *Summa Theologiae* I, Aquinas explains that God operates in every operation of nature and will, not by supplanting secondary causes but by working through them as the primary cause that enables and directs all secondary causation.[29] This provides a theological framework for understanding how the Holy Spirit might work through AI systems – not by making them conscious or spiritual in themselves, but by working through the entire process from human design and training, through algorithmic generation, to human reception and interpretation.

The pneumatological approach thus offers several advantages: it maintains the distinction between Creator and creation whilst acknowledging divine activity in technological processes; it preserves human dignity and agency whilst recognising that divine creativity can work through human technological achievements; and it provides a framework for discerning authentic spiritual significance in AI-generated music without requiring humans to attribute spiritual properties to machines themselves.

This framework becomes particularly relevant when considering cases where AI-generated music evokes spiritual responses in listeners. Rather than attributing this spiritual impact to the AI system itself, the pneumatological framework suggests that such responses might be understood as the Spirit working through the complex chain of causation that includes human creativity, technological mediation, and human reception. The theological significance lies not in computational processes themselves

[28]Mark Coeckelbergh, 'The Spirit in the Network: Models for Spirituality in a Technological Culture', *Zygon*, 45, no. 4 (2010), 957–978.

[29]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 105, a. 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but in the participatory framework and the Holy Spirit's capacity to work through created instruments for divine purposes.

6. Theological reflections on the soul in AI-generated music

AI-generated music raises crucial questions about the concept of the 'soul'. Traditional theological frameworks position the soul as the locus of human consciousness and divine relationship, while artistic expression traditionally reflects the aesthetic soul through conscious creativity. When AI-generated music composes genuine aesthetic or spiritual responses, this framework becomes problematic. These challenges redirect theological reconsideration of the relationship between human consciousness and artistic expression. Particularly, this emerges whether the artistic soul requires human consciousness to trigger through non-conscious creative processes. The broader theological question extends to the nature of artistic expression and its capacity for spiritual mediation independent of human consciousness and intentionality.

Lazzari's analysis of AI consciousness provides important clarification for this discussion. His demonstration that current AI systems lack the capacity for abstraction required for immaterial souls confirms that AI creativity must be understood as derivative rather than autonomous.[30] However, this clarification strengthens rather than undermines our theological framework by confirming that AI creativity derives its significance from its participation in human creativity and divine resonance. The key question is not whether AI systems create a glimpse of divine encounter, but whether AI-generated music can participate in the spiritual significance through the relationship between human creativity and divine creativity.

One possibility is to locate the 'soul' of music not in the pure intention of the composer or human consciousness but in its capacity to evoke spiritual significance within listeners. From this perspective, an AI-generated piece of music might possess a kind of 'soul' not through its system's own consciousness, but through the participation in divine patterns of beauty and meaning that transcend its immediate origin. Music achieves spiritual potency by mediating these transcendent structures to listeners, regardless of whether it's intentional or not. This understanding relocates the musical 'soul' from the creative agent to the creative product and its capacity for spiritual mediation.

This interpretive framework finds support in traditional theological accounts of how divine beauty and meaning can be mediated through created instruments that lack consciousness. For example, sunsets or flowers can evoke spiritual significances without attributing consciousness to natural phenomena. AI-generated music might evoke spiritual significances through its divine beauty beyond habitual consciousness of divine encounter. The theological significance resides in music's capacity to participate in and mediate transcendent reality, not in the consciousness of its immediate creative agent. This explains that spiritual significances trigger independently of creative consciousness, located instead in the work's participation in divine beauty.

AI-generated music might mediate divine presence not through human intention but by emerging from processes that participate indirectly in divine creativity. Theological significance resides in participatory mediation rather than creative

[30]Lazzari, 'AI/ML Chatbots' Souls', 58–59.

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agency. This understanding aligns with Lluís Oviedo's suggestion that theology should approach AI by asking 'What can we learn?' rather than 'What is wrong?' with such technologies, serving 'as a reflective instance looking for balances and integration among different systems and developments'.[31] The focus shifts from defending human uniqueness against technological encroachment to understanding how technological developments might expand our appreciation for the diverse ways divine creativity manifests itself in creation.

7. The metaphysics of musical beauty and divine art

The question of whether AI-generated music possesses a 'soul' requires examining what Aquinas terms divine art (*ars divina*). In *Summa Theologiae* I, Aquinas explains that God's practical knowledge serves as the example for all creativity: 'The knowledge of God is the cause of things according as it has the will joined to it'.[32] This divine art establishes how beauty emerges in creations, including through technological mediation. Human creativity participates in divine art through 'similitude of exemplarity'.[33] Human composers, using rational abstraction and embodied experience, create works participating in divine beauty. This explains why human creativity reflects the *imago Dei* – not through creation *ex nihilo*, but through participation in divine creative activity.[34]

However, AI creativity operates differently. Lacking rational souls capable of abstraction, AI cannot directly participate in divine art as humans do. Yet AI creativity remains theologically significant through 'mediated exemplarity' – the patterns they reproduce derive from divine art that established mathematical principles underlying musical harmony itself.[35] Aquinas's instrumental causation explains this phenomenon. In *Summa Theologiae* I, he states that 'an instrument (such as a hammer) does not act in virtue of its own form alone, but in virtue of the motion whereby it is moved by the principal agent (the person using the hammer)'.[36] AI systems function as sophisticated instruments through which human creativity operates technologically, producing outputs exceeding their computational nature through rational human agency.

This framework illuminates why AI music can evoke aesthetic responses. Mathematical relationships governing harmony reflect archetypal patterns preexisting in the divine mind, which Aquinas describes as the 'eternal ratio by which God orders all things'.[37] When AI systems recombine these patterns, they operationally engage mathematical reflections of divine beauty, explaining genuine aesthetic impact despite lacking consciousness.

[31]Lluís Oviedo, 'Artificial Intelligence and Theology: Looking for a Positive—But Not Uncritical—Reception', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science,* 57, no. 4 (December 2022), 939, 949.

[32]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 14, a. 8, co.

[33]Ibid.; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 3, co.

[34]Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 97–124.

[35]Lazzari, 'AI/ML Chatbots' Souls', 56–58.

[36]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 45, a. 5, co. [35]

[37]Thomas Aquinas, De veritate 5.1; cf. Summa Theologiae I, q. 44, a. 3; De veritate 2.1, ad. 6. See Gardner, 'The Metaphysics of Meaning', 412–414.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The determining factor for aesthetic success is not AI sophistication but whether human-designed processes successfully channel patterns participating in transcendent beauty. This suggests evaluative criteria: rather than asking whether AI possesses consciousness, theology should ask whether generated music participates in divine creativity patterns.[38] This participatory criterion recognises value whilst maintaining theological distinctions about consciousness and agency.

Practical implications extend to liturgical contexts. If AI music participates in divine beauty through mediated exemplarity, liturgical contexts rely on its capacity to resonate with divine activity rather than creation mode. Successful channelling of divine art patterns might serve legitimate worship functions.[39] Authenticity derives not from creator consciousness but from success in mediating divine beauty – the ultimate source of authentic spiritual expression.

8. Worship and spiritual practice

These theological frameworks generate practical questions about AI-generated music in liturgical and worship contexts. If such music participates in divine creativity through human mediation, churches must discern its appropriate role in worship practice. As AI-generated music becomes increasingly accessible, Christian worship faces a challenge: whether to embrace this unidentified music into liturgical practices and communal spiritualities.

Several considerations prove relevant to such decisions. First, there is the question of intention and purpose in worship. Traditional theological accounts emphasise that the core of worship is to honour God and nurture the faith community. From this perspective, the key question becomes whether AI-generated music serves these purposes and evokes spiritual responses for worshipful purposes in liturgical functions regardless of its computational origin. However, this approach requires balance against deeper theological considerations about the nature of worship and spiritual expression. AI-generated music in facilitating worship cannot be the sole criterion for liturgical appropriateness. The broader theological discernment about technological mediation and authentic spiritual practice remains essential.

The communal and relational dimensions of worship present a second crucial consideration. Traditional theological accounts emphasise not only the vertical relationship between the worshipper and God but also the horizontal relationships within the faith community. Worship is understood as not merely individual spiritual experience but also communal expression and relationship building. AI-generated music, while potentially evoking spiritual significance, may lack the communal dimension inherent in human-created music that emerges from the lived experience of a specific faith community. Music created by community members carries the weight of that community's particular faith journey – their struggles, insights, and spiritual discoveries – in ways that AI-generated music, however sophisticated, cannot authentically replicate. This communal rootedness suggests that human-created music offers

[38]Selcuk Acar, 'Creativity Assessment, Research, and Practice in the Age of Artificial Intelligence', *Creativity Research Journal,* 37, no. 2 (2025), 181–187.

[39]*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §112; Edward Foley, *Ritual Music: Studies in Liturgical Musicology* (Beltsville, MD: Pastoral Press, 1995), pp. 45–67.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

something irreplaceable: the embodied expression of a community's encounter with the divine, shaped by their shared history and spiritual formation.

Questions of authenticity and integrity in musical expression present a third area of concern. Traditional theological accounts of worship emphasise the importance of authentic expression – offering to God our true selves rather than merely performing religious gestures. The key question becomes whether AI-generated music can be part of an authentic worship offering. One approach considers whether the use of AI-generated music in worship represents an authentic expression of the faith community's technological and cultural context. Just as communities throughout history have incorporated the musical forms and instruments of their time and place into worship, contemporary communities might authentically collaborate with AI-generated music as an expression of their technological context. However, this raises deeper questions about the relationship between technological mediation and authentic human expression.

As Christian AI ethicist Michael Stephen Burdett observes, there are concerns about 'moral deskilling', where increasing reliance on AI for important judgements might lead to a diminishment of human capacities.[40] Applied to worship, this suggests caution about whether relying on AI for creative expression might diminish human creative capacities in worship and spiritual formation. The concern is not merely about replacing human creativity but about the potential atrophy of creative capacities that are essential to spiritual growth and communal expression. If creativity is understood as a fundamental dimension of human participation in divine life, then excessive reliance on AI creativity might compromise important aspects of spiritual development.

Justice and stewardship considerations present a final set of practical concerns. As musician Karla Ortiz testified before the US Senate Judiciary Committee, the training data for AI systems is often 'taken without consent, credit, or compensation'.[41] From a theological perspective, these concerns touch fundamental principles of justice, stewardship, and proper recognition of others' contributions. When AI music systems are trained on existing music without proper consent, credit, or compensation, this raises ethical concerns about exploitation that contravene principles of justice. Most importantly, there are environmental concerns. As Burdett notes, artificial intelligence demands substantial material infrastructure and energy consumption, requiring massive server facilities to handle the computational and data storage needs of AI systems.[42] From a theological perspective, these concerns relate to principles of stewardship and care for creation, challenging communities to consider the ecological cost of technological adoption.

These considerations suggest that AI-generated music in worship requires careful discernment, attending to questions of intention, community, authenticity, justice, and environmental impact. Rather than wholesale acceptance or rejection, what emerges is the need for theological frameworks and ethical guidelines that help faith

[40]Michael Stephen Burdett, 'Proximate and Ultimate Concerns in Christian Ethical Responses to Artificial Intelligence', *Studies in Christian Ethics,* 36, no. 3 (2023), 638–639.

[41]Karla Ortiz, testimony before the US Senate Judiciary Committee <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2023-07-12_pm_-_testimony_-_ortiz.pdf> [accessed 12 July 2023]

[42]Burdett, 'Proximate and Ultimate Concerns', 637.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

communities navigate these complexities while honouring both the potential spiritual value of AI-generated music and the broader theological principles that guide community life. This discernment process itself becomes a form of theological practice, deepening the community's understanding of creativity, technology, and spiritual formation in the digital age.

9. Towards a theology of digital transcendence

The analysis developed throughout this investigation suggests the need for a comprehensive theological framework that can integrate the various dimensions of AI-generated music in a coherent manner. This article proposes what might be termed a 'theology of digital transcendence' – a framework that integrates metaphysical, anthropological, and liturgical dimensions of technological creativity whilst maintaining appropriate theological distinctions between Creator and creation, and between human and artificial agency.

The metaphysical dimension addresses fundamental questions of presence and absence in AI music, examining how computational processes might participate in transcendent reality without themselves possessing consciousness or spiritual properties. Drawing on the participatory framework developed above, theology can understand AI music as participating in divine creativity through human mediation, even whilst lacking the conscious intentionality of human creators. This participation operates through what Aquinas terms secondary causation – God working through created agents and processes to accomplish divine purposes. The theological significance lies not in attributing spiritual properties to AI systems themselves, but in understanding how these systems might serve as instruments through which divine creativity is both expressed and encountered.

The anthropological dimension considers how AI music challenges and potentially enriches theological conceptions of human creativity as *imago Dei*. This technological development requires careful theological assessment of what it means for humans to bear God's image through creative capacity. Rather than threatening the theological understanding of creativity as reflecting divine resonance, AI creativity might expand theological understanding of how divine activity can work through human technological achievements. The divine creative principle finds new expressions through human ingenuity and technological innovation. This expansion does not diminish human dignity or uniqueness but rather highlights the distinctive capacity of rational beings to create instruments and systems that extend creative possibilities in unprecedented ways. The ability to design technologies that participate in creative processes may itself represent a distinctive expression of the *imago Dei*.

Rather than threatening the theological understanding of creativity as reflecting divine creative power, AI creativity might expand our understanding of how divine creativity can work through human technological achievements. This expansion does not diminish human dignity or uniqueness but rather highlights the distinctive capacity of rational beings to create instruments and systems that extend creative possibilities in unprecedented ways. The theological framework of participation enables Christians to understand this extension as itself a manifestation of the divine image in humanity, revealing how human creative capacity, even when mediated through technological instruments, continues to reflect our creation in God's likeness.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The liturgical dimension examines how AI-generated music functions within spiritual practices and worship, requiring careful discernment about authenticity, community, and the appropriate role of technological mediation in spiritual formation. While AI-generated music might serve valuable functions in worship and spiritual practice, its use must be guided by broader theological principles concerning the nature of worship, community, and spiritual growth. These principles provide essential criteria for liturgical discernment. The goal is not to exclude technological mediation from spiritual life but to ensure that such mediation serves rather than supplants the fundamental purposes of worship and spiritual formation. Technology should enhance rather than replace authentic spiritual encounters and community building.

This theology of digital transcendence draws on the sacramental imagination that sees the material world as capable of mediating divine presence. Just as traditional sacramental theology recognises that God works through material elements – water, bread, wine – to convey grace, a theology of digital transcendence suggests that God might similarly work through digital and computational processes to create beauty, meaning, and spiritual significance. The sacramental principle thus extends beyond physical elements to encompass technological mediation as a potential vehicle for divine action. This does not require attributing consciousness or spiritual properties to AI systems themselves but recognises that the Holy Spirit's creative activity in the world can include working through the complex technological systems that humans create, just as the Spirit works through other dimensions of creation.

The theological framework of participation provides the foundation for this theology of digital transcendence. AI systems participate in human creativity, which itself participates in divine creativity. This participation operates through secondary causation, with God working through created agents to accomplish divine purposes. AI-generated music that evokes genuine aesthetic or spiritual responses does so not because AI systems possess creative consciousness but because they participate in divine creativity through their human-designed architecture. This understanding serves as a better understanding of rediscovering beauty, ultimately derived from God. Divine creativity thus manifests through a participatory chain: from God to human rational agents, through technological mediation, to musical expression that can evoke divine resonance. This understanding preserves theological distinctions between rational and non-rational agents whilst recognising genuine creative possibilities in human-AI musical collaboration.

10. Conclusion

This article examines how AI-generated music challenges and potentially enriches traditional understandings of creativity, spirituality, and aesthetics. Drawing on theological traditions of analogy and participation, particularly as developed by Thomas Aquinas and his scholastic successors, their understanding of AI creativity in relation to human and divine creativity respects both the genuine capabilities of AI systems and the fundamental distinctions between rational and non-rational agents. The Thomistic framework of participation, integrated with insights from contemporary scholarship on AI and theology, reveals that AI creativity can be understood as participating in divine creativity through human mediation and secondary causation. This understanding preserves the theological significance of human creativity as *imago Dei* whilst

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

acknowledging that divine creativity can work through the technological instruments that humans create.

Recent Thomistic analyses of AI consciousness, particularly Edmund Michael Lazzari's demonstration that current AI systems lack the capacity for genuine abstraction required for immaterial souls, clarify that AI creativity must be understood as derivative rather than autonomous.[43] However, this clarification strengthens rather than undermines the participatory framework, confirming that AI creativity derives its theological significance from its participation in human creativity, which itself participates in divine creativity. The proposed theology of digital transcendence offers a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates the metaphysical, anthropological, and liturgical dimensions of AI music whilst maintaining appropriate theological distinctions about the nature of divine, human, and artificial agency.

The pneumatological framework developed in this article suggests that the Holy Spirit might work through AI systems as part of the broader divine economy. This approach does not make AI systems conscious or spiritual in themselves but works through the entire creative process. The Spirit's activity encompasses the full sequence: from human design and training of AI systems, through algorithmic generation of music, to human reception and interpretation of the results. Each stage participates in the broader divine economy whilst maintaining its distinctive character. This understanding provides a theological basis for recognising divine activity in AI-generated music. In this sense, this framework avoids the theological problems that would arise from attributing consciousness or spiritual properties to AI systems themselves. It maintains proper distinctions between Creator and creation whilst acknowledging genuine spiritual possibility in technologically mediated encounters.

The Velvet Sundown is exemplified as perhaps the most significant case study for this article. This AI-generated band – including music, images, and backstory – accumulated over one million streams on Spotify whilst describing themselves as 'Not quite human. Not quite machine' and living 'somewhere in between'.[44] Many listeners love their music before learning of its AI creative origins. This suggests that the capacity for spiritual significance may indeed operate through the participatory frameworks outlined above. Yet the case also highlighted crucial concerns about transparency, justice, and the proper acknowledgement of training sources – concerns that align with the ethical considerations outlined in our discussion of worship and spiritual practice.[45] The successful phenomenon of The Velvet Sundown extends the ambiguity of theological discernment about divine resonance, human emotion and aesthetic creativity. This reflects various degrees of theological position about the integrity of creative expression that all theologies of divine transcendence must address. These theological reflections suggest that the emergence of AI-generated music represents not a crisis for theological discernment but an opportunity to deepen our understanding of how

[43]Lazzari, 'AI/ML Chatbots' Souls', 58–59.

[44]Lanre Bakare, 'An AI-generated band got 1 m plays on Spotify. Now music insiders say listeners should be warned', *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jul/14/an-ai-generated-band-got-1m-plays-on-spotify-now-music-insiders-say-listeners-should-be-warned> [accessed 14 July 2025]

[45]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press

divine creativity operates through the complex relationships between rational agents, technological instruments, and the broader created order.

As theology continues to explore various implications of AI in music composition, scholars might keep in mind the vision offered by Bonaventure, who saw all creation as participating in the creative Word: 'And if it were possible to produce an effect which could know and love the artisan, the artisan would certainly do this. And if that effect could know its maker, this would be by means of the similitude according to which it came from the hands of the artisan'.[46] This vision reminds theology that all creativity, whether human or computational, ultimately participates in and points back to the divine creativity from which it derives. As Antje Jackelén proposes, what is needed in response to technological developments such as AI is a multifaceted spirituality characterised by 'resilience, coexistence, and hope' – qualities that allow humans to engage thoughtfully with technological change whilst maintaining our orientation toward transcendent values and purposes.[47]

Such spirituality offers a theological framework for engaging with AI-generated music that neither uncritically embraces technological determinism nor reactively rejects technological development but rather seeks to discern the potential for divine presence and action even within computational creativity.

Acknowledgement. None.

Funding statement. None declared.

Conflict of interests. The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Informed consent. This article did not require informed consent procedures, as it did not involve human participants.

Data availability statement. The article for this article did not generate any new data.

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[46]Bonaventure, *On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*, trans. Zachary Hayes (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1997), n. 12, p. 49.

[47]Jackelén, 'Technology, Theology, and Spirituality in the Digital Age', 16–17.

Cite this article: Chee Man Michael Tang, 'Thomas Aquinas, Artificial Intelligence, and AI-Generated Music', *New Blackfriars*, 107 (2026), 91–107. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.10124 Published online by Cambridge University Press