# DIGITAL IDENTITY AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ETHICS IN ORTHODOX SOCIETY

**CZU: [177:004]:281.9**
**DOI: https://doi.org/10.53486/tids2026.17**

**SERGEY BAZHENOV**
Science Horizons Foundation, Russia
e-mail: sbazhenov@mail.ru
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7593-0526

**ELENA BAZHENOVA**
Southern Federal University, Russia
e-mail: eubazhenova@sfedu.ru
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8253-5073

**DMITRY ABROSIMOV**
Southern Federal University, Russia
e-mail: dabrosimov@sfedu.ru
ORCID ID: 0000-0000-0000-0000

**Abstract.** The paper examines how digital identity and the ethical principles governing artificial intelligence might be brought into alignment with the Orthodox Christian understanding of the person. It analyzes the concepts of digital identity and Orthodox anthropology, together with the challenges that AI presents to traditional societies. The positions of local churches and individual theologians are surveyed, and public case studies are considered. A model of responsible digital identity is proposed, grounded in transparency, sobornost' (conciliarity), and digital asceticism.

**Keywords:** digital identity, artificial intelligence ethics, Orthodox Christianity, person, conciliarity (sobornost'), digital asceticism, algorithmic accountability.

**JEL Classification:** O33, Z12, A13

## INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation is reshaping contemporary society at an accelerating pace. Artificial intelligence (AI) now pervades nearly every sphere of life: it shapes what information people encounter, what goods are offered to them, and with whom they communicate. In parallel, digital identity is taking shape—the aggregate of data that represents a person online. Orthodox society, for its part, traditionally grounds its understanding of the human being in the teaching that man is created in the image of God. This teaching stresses the uniqueness, freedom, and irreducibility of the human being. The digital environment, however, constructs identity along different lines. It fragments the person and renders them controllable by algorithms.

The difficulty lies in the absence of systematic ethical reflection. Orthodox thought has not yet adequately engaged the challenges posed by AI. Clear principles for reconciling digital identity with spiritual integrity are lacking. The article therefore aims to propose a conceptual model for aligning digital identity and AI ethics with the Orthodox teaching on the person. Achieving this requires analyzing the concept of digital identity alongside Orthodox anthropology, identifying points of tension between the digital environment and Orthodox values, surveying existing positions and documents, examining public case studies without reliance on original surveys, and formulating a

strategy for responsible digital identity. Methodologically, the article is interdisciplinary, drawing on theological hermeneutics, philosophical analysis, document analysis, and secondary case analysis.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DIGITAL IDENTITY AND ORTHODOX ANTHROPOLOGY

In the social sciences, digital identity denotes the set of data that characterizes a person online—social media profiles, search history, geolocation, preferences, and the like. As Sherry Turkle observes, a person on the internet often experiments with different "selves". Erving Goffman described this phenomenon as impression management. Luciano Floridi adds that in the information society, identity becomes increasingly plastic. Digital identity is not fixed once and for all; it is constructed both by the user and by algorithms. Platforms offer ready-made templates: "verify your number", "select your interests", "like this". Gradually, a person begins to perceive themselves through the lens of recommendation systems.

Orthodox anthropology proceeds from the biblical statement that man is created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27). This means that the person is unique, free, and called to communion. Vladimir Lossky emphasized that the image of God is not reducible to individual properties; it is the whole fullness of the human being. Christos Yannaras develops the idea of the person as "hypostasis". The person is not an individual or individuality. The person is revealed only in love and conciliarity (sobornost'). Sobornost' is unity in freedom, where each remains oneself but acts together with the human being is a mystery. Their dignity does not depend on age, gender, social status, or digital footprint.

Several contradictions arise between digital identity and Orthodox anthropology. The first concerns the multiplicity of identities. The digital environment encourages different roles: one account for work, another for family, a third for hobbies. Orthodoxy, however, speaks of the wholeness of the person. A person should not fragment into roles; they are one before God. The second contradiction concerns the external construction of identity. Digital identity is constructed not only by the person themselves but also by algorithms. A platform may attribute to a person interests they do not have. Orthodox teaching asserts that the person cannot be an object of external construction; they are self-existent. The third contradiction relates to the quality of communication. In the digital environment, speed of response, engagement, and number of contacts are valued. Orthodoxy values depth, repentance, and constancy. Sobornost' presupposes not fleeting connections but stable communion in faith. Thus, a simple transfer of digital practices into Orthodox society is impossible. Reflection is required.

## ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF AI IN LIGHT OF ORTHODOX ETHICS

Artificial intelligence is increasingly making decisions without human involvement. Banks approve loans, police use facial recognition, news feeds are generated automatically. From an Orthodox point of view, any decision affecting a person must be morally responsible. But responsibility presupposes freedom. AI has no free will. It acts according to preset algorithms. Therefore, moral responsibility cannot be attributed to AI. However, the person who created and uses AI is responsible. Theologians, such as Deacon Vladimir Serdyuk, warn that transferring important decisions to a machine blurs the boundaries of responsibility. The human being ceases to be a subject. The problem of responsibility becomes acute when AI makes mistakes or discriminates. If AI recommends dangerous content to a user or denies a service based on implicit criteria, the question of who is guilty arises. Orthodox ethics insists on personal responsibility. There can be no

responsibility without a person. Therefore, any decision made by AI must be traceable to specific people. Situations where the phrase "the machine decided so" becomes an excuse should be avoided. This resembles the ancient temptation to shift blame from oneself to fate, demons, or technology.

Privacy and the seal of confession occupy a special place in the Orthodox tradition. A priest cannot disclose what he has heard in confession, even under threat of death. However, in the digital world, privacy becomes conditional. Messengers, cloud storage, fiscal data—all of this is accessible to states or corporations. The patristic teaching on thoughts teaches that a person's inner world is closed to external observation. Only God and the person themselves know the heart. Digital surveillance violates this principle. It makes the inner external, the secret public. For Orthodox society, this is not only a technical but a spiritual problem.

The digital environment gives rise to new forms of sin, which can be called "digital sin." Traditional sins—pride, envy, anger, despondency—take on digital guises. Pride manifests in the pursuit of likes and followers, in creating an ideal image on social networks. Addiction is expressed in endless scrolling of the feed, which replaces live communication and prayer. The substitution of communication occurs when a person places a chatbot or virtual friend above real relationships. Priest Sergei Chetverikov notes that the digital environment provokes the sins of condemnation, gossip, and anonymous aggression. At the same time, the person often does not realize the sin, because the screen creates an illusion of impunity. Orthodox ethics must develop criteria for evaluating digital actions.

## OVERVIEW OF EXISTING POSITIONS AND DOCUMENTS

The Russian Orthodox Church in 2020 presented a document titled "The Church and the Digital Environment". It is of a recommendation nature. The main points are as follows. The digital environment is a tool, not a substitute for real communication. Parish life cannot be fully transferred online. Digital hygiene and caution are needed. The Church should be present on the internet, but not dissolve into it. The document does not specifically address AI, but sets a general tone: technologies should not destroy church conciliarity.

Orthodox theologians in recent years have published several articles and interviews. Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemann, in retrospective reading, foresaw the danger of "techno-religion"—the belief that technology will save humanity. Contemporary authors, such as Priest Konstantin Parkhomenko, warn about the possible appearance of "AI spiritual directors", which is unacceptable. Greek theologians, such as Metropolitan Ignatius, discuss the problem of authority. If AI gives moral advice, who will verify its teaching? Orthodoxy insists on living tradition, transmitted from person to person, not through an algorithm.

A comparison with Catholic AI ethics provides useful material. In 2020, the Vatican issued the "Rome Call for AI Ethics". The document was signed by major IT corporations. Its main principles are: transparency, impartiality, responsibility, confidentiality, and human-centeredness. Orthodoxy can adopt the technical formulations from this document. But there is an important difference. The Catholic document appeals to natural reason and shared values. Orthodoxy, however, emphasizes the ascetic dimension. It is not enough to make AI "transparent". It is necessary for the person themselves to change their attitude toward technology.

## CASE STUDIES FROM OPEN SOURCES

As concrete examples, one can consider the use of AI chatbots by Orthodox dioceses. Some dioceses have launched Telegram bots with daily Gospel readings. The bot can remind about fasting, provide links to akathists. From an ethical standpoint, this is a neutral tool. However, there is a risk. A person might begin to perceive the bot as a spiritual guide. But a bot is incapable of empathy, does not know the secrets of the heart, and does not give penitential advice. Therefore, instructions for such bots should include a direct statement: "This is an information channel, not a substitute for a priest".

Another illustrative case is the controversy over facial recognition systems in churches. In Russia, in 2019–2021, the installation of cameras with facial recognition in churches was discussed. The idea was to enhance security. However, believers and priests opposed it. The arguments were as follows. The church is a place of openness, not total control. Facial recognition hinders prayerful concentration. Moreover, the data could be misused. This controversy showed that even a technically useful solution can be rejected on spiritual grounds.

The third case concerns recommendation algorithms and Orthodox content. YouTube and other platforms use recommendation algorithms to hold a person's attention. A person who watches a sermon may then be shown aggressive political content or overtly occult videos. This phenomenon is called "algorithmic radicalization." For the Orthodox user, this is a serious risk: someone weak in faith may be led astray. The algorithm does not distinguish true teaching from heresy. It is driven by engagement. Therefore, Orthodox media must themselves shape their content ecosystem, without relying on AI.

## A STRATEGY FOR ALIGNMENT: A MODEL OF RESPONSIBLE DIGITAL IDENTITY

Based on the analysis, several principles of AI ethics derived from Orthodox teaching can be proposed. The first principle is the principle of the person. Any AI decision affecting a person must treat the person not as an object but as a subject. The person cannot be reduced to a profile. The second principle is transparency. A person has the right to know how the algorithm works, what data is collected, and who bears responsibility. The third principle is conciliar governance. The introduction of AI into public institutions, including church institutions, should be discussed openly, with the participation of clergy, laity, and experts. The fourth principle is non-interference in the mystery of the person. The use of AI for surveillance of confession, thoughts, or inner religious life is prohibited.

The Orthodox tradition knows practices of abstinence and spiritual discernment. In the digital environment, these practices can be framed as digital asceticism. Its elements include limiting time on social networks following the pattern of fasting, consciously rejecting recommendation feeds in favor of targeted search, daily reflection on what one has watched and why, and using tracker blockers and open-source software as an act of resistance to total data collection. Digital asceticism does not reject technology but disciplines one's relationship with it.

For church-state dialogue, the following steps can be proposed. It is advisable to create expert groups on AI ethics within synodal departments. A church document should be developed on the boundaries of permissible AI use, for example, stating that automatic absolution of sins or the generation of sermons by neural networks is inadmissible. Legislative initiatives should also be pursued to protect personal data in the religious sphere, especially concerning the seal of confession.

## CONCLUSION

The article has analyzed the concepts of digital identity and Orthodox anthropology. It has shown that there are serious contradictions between them. The digital environment fragments the person, AI algorithms deprive them of responsibility, and total surveillance destroys inner secrecy. However, this does not mean that Orthodox society must reject digital technologies. On the contrary, active reflection and the development of ethical norms are required.

The final conclusions are as follows. Digital identity does not cancel but demands a deeper understanding of the person. AI is a tool, not a subject of relationships. Responsibility always remains with the human being. Orthodox AI ethics should be based on transparency, conciliarity, and non-interference in the mystery of the person. Digital asceticism is a necessary practice for preserving spiritual integrity.

A limitation of this study is the absence of empirical data, such as surveys or interviews. The article is theoretical and conceptual in nature. Directions for future research include the theology of AI (can AI bear the image of God?), digital confession and remote sacraments, a comparative analysis of AI ethics across three confessions (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism), and the development of specific digital asceticism programs for parishes.

## REFERENCES

Lossky, V. N. (1991). Essay on the Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church [Ocherk misticheskogo bogosloviya Vostochnoy Tserkvi]. Moscow. (in Russian)

Yannaras, Ch. (2005). Person and Eros [Lichnost' i Eros]. Moscow: ROSSPEN. (in Russian)

Turkle, S. (2005). The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit. MIT Press.

Floridi, L. (2013). The Ethics of Information. Oxford University Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Anchor Books.

Report “The Church and the Digital Environment” [Doklad “Tserkov' i tsifrovaya sreda”]. (2020). Russian Orthodox Church. (in Russian)

Chetverikov, S., priest. (2021). Digital sin: challenges and responses [Tsifrovoy grekh: vyzovy i otvety]. Living Water [Voda zhivaya]. (in Russian)

Serdyuk, V., deacon. (2019). Artificial intelligence and Christian anthropology [Iskusstvennyy intellekt i khristianskaya antropologiya]. (in Russian)

Rome Call for AI Ethics. (2020). Vatican / Pontifical Academy for Life.

Parkhomenko, K., priest. (2022). Can AI be a priest? [A mozhet li II byt' svyashchennikom?]. Radio Vera. (in Russian)

Metropolitan Ignatius (Greece). (2021). Orthodox Ethics and Artificial Intelligence [Ορθόδοξη Ηθική και Τεχνητή Νοημοσύνη]. Αθήνα. (in Greek)

Schmemann, A., protopresbyter. (1974). Liturgy and Life [Liturgiya i zhizn']. Paris. (in Russian)