

Radio 4 Sunday Programme – 7 June 2026

William Crawley interview with Bishop Martyn on AI

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Transcript:

William Crawley: A growing number of religious and spiritual leaders across the world are weighing in on the potential impact of artificial intelligence. Last week we examined Pope Leo's first encyclical, which warned that AI must be disarmed and remain at the service of humanity. On Friday, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dame Sarah Mulally, told the House of Lords debate that current regulation is wholly inadequate.

ABC clip: We are in danger of unleashing AI into our lives and societies without the theological, philosophical, and spiritual framework with which to make decisions about creating, controlling, using, or directing it. Above all, we need to ensure that AI is being designed, built, regulated, and used to serve our glorious humanity, and not to diminish it.

William Crawley: We're joined now by the Right Reverend Martin Snow, the Bishop of Leicester, who also spoke in that Lord's debate. Bishop, good morning.

Bishop Martyn: Good morning.

William Crawley: Why is the church getting so deeply involved in the AI debate?

+Martyn: Well, I think we need to be very clear that we're on the cusp of what I think is going to be a major revolution within society and all around the world it's moving at great pace, it's going to affect every one of us, and it raises some really big moral and philosophical ethical questions. So it's absolutely right, I think that the church should be working with others in society to help us think through how we respond to AI, and indeed, how it's designed such that it does work for the good of humanity rather than the other way around.

William Crawley: Do you think AI also raises spiritual questions?

+Martyn: It does, absolutely. So, I mean, we're already seeing chat bots which offer spiritual advice. Now, I'm actually deeply concerned by that, because we know that the way that these chat bots work is simply by gathering data from across the web, huge amounts of data, which you can process very, very quickly, but whether that data is accurate, whether it's actually helpful for the individual accessing it, it leaves big questions, so you know that's just one example, I think there are many others.

William Crawley: But then you might find someone, Bishop, who says maybe that's an indictment of the church, because if people are turning to chat bots for advice, what does that say about the traditional moral and spiritual leaders?

+Martyn: Well, yeah, it's a fair question, but I think it's part of a much larger question, which is that actually within society generally we know that there is something of an epidemic of loneliness and people therefore turning to chat bots for for a whole range of things, companionship, even intimate relationships. It's something that is taking off, particularly among young people. So I think it's actually, it's a broader crisis of how we relate to one another, and the need, actually, as I would want to argue, for a genuine face-to-face contact between humans, so the more we have that, the less need actually there is for AI to be filling any sort of gap.

William Crawley: There are always questions with new technologies, we've been through. We've seen this movie before, many times in the history of humanity. Is there a danger that faith leaders may be sounding a bit like Luddites, like every generation that fears a new technology coming along?

+Martyn: You're right, in a sense yes, we've always had this with new technology, and in a sense, the technology itself is neutral, it can be used for good or it can be used for ill. I absolutely want to support the use of AI in all sorts of fields, from healthcare to engineering to all sorts of different aspects of life, where I do believe it will do a lot of good, but at the same time we do need to be aware of the dangers and the very real risks, and that's what the debate in the House of Lords was focusing on, and interestingly, with speaker after speaker, many of whom standing up and saying, you know, I may not share your spiritual convictions, but nevertheless, I do share your concerns about AI and about the need for proper regulation and proper thought about the moral and ethical questions.

William Crawley: How many congregations do you think in the Church of England today will be listening to AI sermons or AI-assisted sermons without even knowing?

+Martyn: Well, they may well do, even, even this morning. It's quite possible. Here in my own diocese in Leicester, we ran a seminar at a recent gathering for our clergy, where we got in a professor from a local university to do some teaching about AI. Interestingly, his line was very much that, yes, by all means, use AI for sort of background information, and to help you think about what you want to put within your sermon, but make sure you then check it first of all, because it won't necessarily be 100% accurate, and make sure you then contextualize it for the people you're speaking to, so you know, I think that's a good example, actually, of how AI can be used well, even within a church context.

William Crawley: Where does it cross the line though? You've got people using AI to come up with the first drafts?

+Martyn: Yes, but I think it, yeah, we have to trust the human being, I suppose, really behind it. So, as I think, across lots of different sectors, it is about actually not just the human being who is inputting the data in the first place, but then also, yes, the human being who is then harvesting that data from AI. In all sorts of spheres, it is the human who needs to be making the ultimate decision, and that applies, you know, from the use of AI in warfare right the way through to the use of AI in sermon preparation. So that's what we're trying to teach our clergy

William Crawley: The reality, of course, and we're going to have a minute left on this, but the reality is that the change is happening so fast across this technology. What chance does the church have to keep up with that change in terms of reflection?

+Martyn: Well, we clearly need to be to be very aware of what's happening, but I think part of it is actually the call to slow down. So, interestingly, a number of those working within big tech companies are coming out to say actually we do need to slow down on this to give us a time to think about these ethical questions.

William Crawley: Bishop, thank you very much, Bishop Martyn Snow.