Episode 167 Righteous AI

This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.

Gretchen Huizinga
Hey, I'm Dr. Gretchen Huizinga. And that "Doctor" is a new tag for me. I just finished a PhD at the University of Washington. And the title of my dissertation was *Righteous AI, the Christian Voice in the AI Ethics Conversation*. And I'm sure we'll talk about that more. In my other life I'm a podcast host myself. I'm excited to be here with David Capes and talking on the other side of the microphone.

David Capes
Gretchen, welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast. Thanks for being with us. You've been here now for a little more than 24 hours. What's your impressions of the Lanier Theological Library?

Gretchen Huizinga
In a word, overwhelmed. But in a good way. Overwhelmed at the magnitude of what's here. And I guess being from the West Coast and having certain ideas about Texas in general.

David Capes
Well, you did ride in a pickup truck.

Gretchen Huizinga
I did get to ride in a pickup truck in Texas. That's going to be checked off a bucket list. The campus here at the Lanier Theological Library is just gorgeous. And I find my mind going to how did this all happen? Who conceived of all of this? I know there are stories, and I don't know them all.

David Capes
We're glad that you're here. You're here to be on a panel discussion with John Lennox. Talking about AI and the future of humanity. That's his big topic, and we'll have the links in the show notes to that. Alright, for those who don't know, Gretchen Huizinga, who is she?

Gretchen Huizinga
You know, I liked what Gary Habermas said in our panel yesterday, which was I am who God says I am, which is a succinct way of saying that is my ultimate identity. And being in Christ as a huge identity badge for me. Badge is probably the wrong word, but the second word would be eclectic. I don't know if you've ever tried to sell a house. But when you're in a neighborhood, it's easier for the realtor to sell a house if all the houses are the same, because you have comps. You know what the house is. You know how much it should cost.

My background is so varied, that you can't ever say, oh, that's what Gretchen is. I've had multiple phases of life. We'll call them my many identities. I started out as an English school teacher for high school and middle school. And then I moved into media production in Seattle in the 90s, when grunge

was big, and Seattle film was big, and before the cities smelled like things I don't want to talk about right now. And then it's been a series of occupations. I know they're callings from God, because he has woven together this really bizarre and beautiful place that I am in right now. That was a really bad metaphor.

David Capes
But I got it. People get it.

Gretchen Huizinga
English majors should not do that with metaphors. So right now, I'm working as a podcast host, and I feel like God has called me to this area of AI ethics and Christianity for a number of reasons.

David Capes
You recently got your PhD from the University of Washington, and you've been in podcasting for years and know technology. And you've been talking with people dealing with technology for many years. Let's talk about artificial intelligence as a friend, because part of what I heard you talking about last night is righteous AI. That was the term you used, and I'd never heard that before. I've heard other terms used with AI, and there's a lot of concern about it. There's a lot of negative possibilities, but there's a good sense in which AI can help us.

Gretchen Huizinga
Absolutely helping us for sure. Lots and lots of people have written and spoken on the benefits of technology and the vision that it is part of the redemptive work of Christ. We are to create tools, create things. Or I should say make tools and make things because God's the creator, and we use his raw materials to make things out of them. AI is one. And it's got some fabulous applications that you would say, if we can do that with AI, I'm in. Who's going to say no to having an AI that can help an oncologist define a tumor so that they are very targeted with the surgery? Oddly enough, we talked about gene editing where the sales pitch is, we can keep your kid from having a genetic disease. And you'd say, no, thank you, I'll just have that kid with a genetic disease. But then, you have the peril side of it, the unintended consequences, or just the things that we know will happen. But we want the money more than we want to prevent that from happening.

David Capes
There's so much concern about Big Pharma and all those kinds of issues and about money getting involved. Not so much humanitarian or altruism. It's more about how much money can we make through this, and that becomes in itself a kind of evil, I suppose. But now you've been talking about righteous AI. What does that term mean?

Gretchen Huizinga
That's a really good question. And I would say, it's as much a reaction to the terminology that's out there in the secular world, for how we frame AI systems that are benevolent, beneficent, robust, but good. In fact, many companies have arms that are called AI for good. And the differentiation is, the subtext is, it's not AI for profit. It's AI for things that won't make a lot of money, but we think they're good things to do for accessibility, medical care, environmental issues, and things like that. So that's what

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they're doing. But I know that their marketing agencies and their internal organizations are working on what they call it. For example, at Microsoft, it's called responsible AI, and they have an entire office dedicated to forming principles and saying we'll live up to those principles. Other people call it ethical AI. Others call it reliable, trustworthy or a synonym that will make everyone think the AI is warm and fuzzy. And as I was talking to all these scientists, and hearing some of these terms, I was feeling like, you know, that's a pretty low bar. Do no bad, do no harm. I mean it's a good place to start.

David Capes
Medicine started with that. Do no harm.

Gretchen Huizinga
Yes, it's the Hippocratic oath for artificial intelligence, and that's fine. But it just struck me that the word we're really aiming for is righteousness. And you get a bit of pushback on that. Because people think it's judgmental, self-righteous, that's got a lot of baggage. Then you get to the Bible, and you get to God's character in nature. It's a beautiful word. And so I just thought, hey, why don't we start calling it that? And let's figure out how then to work backwards. But I do still fall on the standard, that it's not the machine that's going to be righteous, it's the people who make it and the people who use it. So ultimately, it's an upstream question.

David Capes
In a sense, trusting people. Would you say that?

Gretchen Huizinga
It's an interesting phrase. Am I trusting people? Generally, no.

David Capes
But what I'm hearing you say is the people behind this, that are designing it, that are funding it, that are pushing it on and implementing it, you're trusting them to do the right thing,

Gretchen Huizinga
Right. And they want you to do that too, because they don't want to be regulated. Because there's a lot of ways that you can make money with AI that people are actually unaware of. The fact that we are trusting people, ultimately, to create this thing that is good for most, but also good, not as we would always define good as profitable, but as good for everyone, good for the environment, good for people.

David Capes
From what I heard John Lennox say, not everybody really understands how AI works. Even people in the industry don't know exactly why AI does certain things, and it does it as if it's almost its own intelligence, its own sentience. I don't think that's really what it is. But I think it's just something we don't really have a grasp of yet.

Gretchen Huizinga
Yes, and I think if you put on an entrepreneurial hat, and say, what do I want to make that will help people? I think that's a motivation in a lot of industries, including technology. AI is another tool belt for

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those kinds of promises. But we know if we look in Scripture, that trusting people just didn't even do it. Jesus didn't even do it. You know, it's like I know what's in your heart. I know it's in your heart. And so, we can even think we're good. I'll tell a little story. In interviews, I had a guy who was doing AI ethics out of Santa Clara, and I started with this premise that there's ethical tension. That you might encounter something that you want to be robust, but you want people to have privacy as well. And one of the key things on AI is it has to know stuff about you to make recommendations for you. So that's the trade off, the ethical tension. And I said to this guy, what do you think about that? And he said, I don't think that's the thing. I think everyone knows the right thing to do. They just don't want to do it if it's too expensive or takes too long to do.

So he said, we could have a much more private, artificial intelligence with differential privacy. That's a term that they use in the industry to say, I can know about you but not know who you are. They use mathematical terms like homomorphic encryption, where you can say I'll put in the code here. It goes into underground, no one can see it, we can do stuff with it, but then it comes out on the other side, and only you know what's going on. That's a really simplistic way of explaining it. But let's go back to the trust issue. We are living in the honor system. We use tools every day. You get an opportunity to have an app on your phone, and you have a binary choice, accept or decline. And except for the lawyers in the room, no one reads the twenty pages of fine print. You don't know what you're giving up? So, we do live in pretty good circumstances. But I think back to the trust thing, every tool that we make, as Christians, we understand there's an evil force that would like to take that tool and use it for our harm and ultimately to destroy God. AI is just a very sophisticated toolset.

There's a term that's been used by some AI ethicists from Google, though actually, they're no longer there. But the term is stochastic parrot. Stochastic, meaning random. And it's based on random statistics. It's a statistical machine. And the parrot is, I'm going to parrot what you said. It's the next-word pattern prediction. It's a prediction engine, basically. And as John talked about narrow AI and then artificial general AI, that kind of differentiates task specific stuff. It's optimized for a very specific task. And they usually assess it by benchmarking it. So, if humans in general can do this phenomenal level of something, that's the benchmark for AI to beat, and that's how they assess how good the AI is. But with the new models that are generative in nature, they're still kind of the same, but they feel a lot different. There are some emergent qualities that the scientists are saying, I don't know how it did that. I know the math that I wrote behind the algorithm, but it did something I didn't expect, and then that comes out kind of magically. It's like, okay, what happened there. And you find this shift into scientists on the other side, actually saying we need to do psychological tests on AI. And suggesting psychometrics as a new benchmark and into more human-centered testing, which is a really interesting shift in the industry right now.

David Capes
So how do you go about taking your ideas and getting them into the minds of people who are looking at ethical AI, responsible AI? Podcasting, obviously, is one way you can do it. But speaking and other things. You're thinking about publishing?

Gretchen Huizinga

Yes, that's right. I love that you asked that question, David. Because I was just talking to somebody about what my next steps are, what my next things are. And looking back at 2021 to 2022 and the year succeeding those years. I never did anything that I thought of and said this is my plan. I had thoughts and ideas and then I hiked with the Holy Spirit. And I feel like he has trained me, that he's going to say what's the next thing. And that if I look at scripture, and I look at how many times God says let me do it. It's my fight, not yours. Gideon is one of my favorite characters, because he says too many guys, too many guys, still too many guys. Okay, 300 guys, that's enough, that's enough. And also, no weapons.

David Capes
You can take a jar and a trumpet to serenade them to death!

Gretchen Huizinga
I'll confuse the enemy. If we look at who our enemy is, it's Satan, not people. And then I look at who my boss is, it's God, not people. And certainly not me, although I did apply for the job of Holy Spirit once and didn't get it, or somebody else had it already. So, I have a list of things that I have in my journal from my hikes that I feel are potential (options).

David Capes
So, this is your process time, hiking?

Gretchen Huizinga
It is. I live in the Seattle area. I hike the Tolt Pipeline. I call it my pipeline to God or His pipeline to me. I don't know if I want to articulate what I believe specifically God's calling me to, because I think he's had me cooking on it for a year.

David Capes
So, what should people read? What are some books that people should read if they want to know more about this?

Gretchen Huizinga
Using your search engine, you just type in AI and Christianity, and you'll get some really interesting articles and books. But I don't even think those books are necessarily what you want to read. It's people like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman. And some of the people who were thinking about the impacts of rock and roll. And if you can read them in the original French, you are way cooler than I am. These are authors that had seen things 50,70,100 years ago, that feel like they just wrote them today. And I think there's a lot of authors that can speak into this. John Lennox's book '2084'. That was instrumental.

David Capes
Because things are moving so quickly, John is constantly keeping that book up (to date) and publishing new editions. My sense talking to you is you're optimistic that things are going to go well, with AI. Is that a fair assessment?

Gretchen Huizinga

You know, somebody asked me yesterday, is AI a tool of Satan? And the answer is the same, yes and no. In the panel, we were asked what are you afraid of? And I came out of the gates saying I'm not afraid of anything, because the Holy Spirit's in charge. But I think fearing a totalitarian society which AI enables in a grand way is something to not like. I don't think I want to live in that culture. But lots and lots of people are already and sometimes God does his best work with the church and with people who don't know him, when things are going wrong.

David Capes
A friend of mine says it this way, speaking of Christians and Christian culture, in this country we used to be the home team. Now we're the visiting team. And not only are we the visiting team, but we are the rivals. We're the ones who are booed when we take the field, and people throw bottles at us. It's a different time. But like you said, and like he said, the church does some of his best work during that time.

David Capes
Gretchen, thanks for being with us today on The Stone Chapel Podcast.

Gretchen Huizinga
Thanks for having me.

A Nugget of wisdom from Dr. Gretchen Huizinga
There's an old Sunday school song that goes like this. Read your Bible. Pray every day. That's my nugget.