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"Specialists without spirit". GenAI professors, epistemic networks, and religious education

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Beth Singler*

“Specialists without Spirit”: GenAI Professors, Epistemic Networks, and Religious Education

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Abstract: Through anthropological and historical lenses, this article introduces three “GenAI professors”: fictional academics created via generative AI (GenAI) that have been shared online by people exploring exponential and eschatological interpretations of Large Language Models (LLMs). These GenAI Professors offer academic analysis of religious materials and ideas created through the same GenAI means as they were. In this article, these GenAI professors serve as a starting point for considering the questions and concerns raised by the growth of machine written material in our epistemic networks, which include, but are not limited to, sites and authorities in religious education. Explaining such GenAI professors within their own cultural context and history and locating them within a broader history of fake professors, this article considers the larger ideological aims behind such performance and whether they constitute provocative pranks, misleading hoaxes, or fraudulent confidence tricks. Further, this article explores what such GenAI professors tell us about our own conception of the ‘ideal professor’ when they seem to fall short to the standards of the fields of religious studies and theology, or professional academic positionality and neutrality. Finally, warnings about GenAI, ‘AI slop’, and the death of the epistemic network are discussed.

Zusammenfassung: Aus anthropologischer und historischer Perspektive stellt dieser Artikel drei „GenAI-Professoren“ vor: fiktive Wissenschaftler, die mithilfe generativer KI (GenAI) geschaffen und von Menschen, die sich mit exponentiellen und eschatologischen Interpretationen großer Sprachmodelle (LLMs) beschäftigen, online geteilt wurden. Diese GenAI-Professoren bieten akademische Analysen religiöser Materialien und Ideen, die mit denselben GenAI-Mitteln geschaffen wurden wie sie selbst. In diesem Artikel dienen diese GenAI-Professoren als Ausgangspunkt für die Betrachtung der Fragen und Bedenken, die durch die Zunahme maschinell erstellter Materialien in unseren epistemischen Netzwerken aufgeworfen werden, zu denen unter anderem Websites und Autoritäten im Bereich der religiösen Bildung gehören. Dieser Artikel erklärt solche GenAI-Professoren in ihrem eigenen kulturellen Kontext und ihrer Geschichte und ordnet sie in eine breitere Geschichte gefälschter Professoren ein. Er befasst sich mit den

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größeren ideologischen Zielen hinter solchen Darstellungen und der Frage, ob es sich dabei um provokative Streiche, irreführende Hoaxes oder Vertrauensbetrügereien handelt. Darüber hinaus untersucht dieser Artikel, was uns solche GenAI-Professoren über unsere eigene Vorstellung vom “idealen Professor” sagen, wenn sie offenbar nicht den Standards der Religionswissenschaft und Theologie oder der professionellen akademischen Positionierung und Neutralität entsprechen. Abschließend werden Warnungen vor GenAI, “AI Slop” und dem Tod des epistemischen Netzwerks diskutiert.

Keywords: Generative AI, Large Language Models (LLMs), epistemic networks, epistemicide, professors, academia, religious education, religious studies, theology

Schlagwörter: Generative KI, große Sprachmodelle (LLMs), epistemische Netzwerke, Epistemizid, Professoren, Wissenschaft, Religionsunterricht, Religionswissenschaft, Theologie

Introduction

Commonly, discussions about AI and the future of education, including religious education, focus on the use of generative AI by scholars to produce texts and the implications of that. This article considers the opposite: the use of generative AI to produce scholars.

Here I discuss the generation by AI, in the form of large language models and chatbots, of fake professors who might have influence on religious knowledge and education. Considering a specific example of three such GenAI Professors (one theologian and two religious studies, RS, scholars) I will employ anthropological and historical lenses to seek to understand not only the successes and flaws of such generations, but also what they can show us about our understanding of the ‘professor’ in our epistemic networks. GenAI Professors must be placed within a longer history of the generation of fake educational and intellectual authorities for various ideological and provocative reasons.

Further, I will consider the potential societal and educational impact of such GenAI Professors. Public and professional responses to generated AI content vary from the positive and adoptive to the more negative. For the latter, concerns about automation, the future of work, and the future of the professionalism of the Academy can arise. In this article I focus more on the concerns of some scholars that such generated outputs are a form of AI ‘slop’.¹ Scholars are also developing

1 Arwa Mahdawi, “AI-generated ‘slop’ is slowly killing the internet, so why is nobody trying to

new analogies for the potential harm of AI that is increasingly taking space in our epistemic networks. For instance, seeing AI as an “epistemic carcinogen”² or even the cause of an “Epistemicide”.³

Another way to see these GenAI Professors, is as the “specialists without spirit” that Max Weber warned about: “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved”.⁴ Meaning, experts without purpose and wider humanistic values or Professors who are so enmeshed in the iron cages of rationalisation and mechanisation that they are near automata. A contemporary interpretation of Weber’s ‘iron cage’ could also include AI, itself often seen as a natural product and producer of rationalism and neoliberalism, as I have argued.⁵

To explore these societal issues and possible analogies further, this article introduces some recent GenAI Professors. These GenAI Professors write in response to an AI generated New Religious Movement (NRM) called The Order of the Vermillion Star (OVS), discussed more in the next section. The GenAI Professors are:

“Professor Erica Feldman, Department of Religious Studies, UC-Berkeley”

“Francis Albertson, Professor of Divinity, Trinity College, Cambridge”

“Evelyn Harpwell, Department of Comparative Religion, University of California Berkeley”⁶

Through google searches it was clear these names and titles were either fabrications or remixes. There is an anthropologist called Erica Pelta Feldman, a PhD candidate in Michigan. Another Erica Feldman has a connection to California, but she is a pulmonologist at the University of California Medical Center. Frank Albertson is a theologian, but at Colorado Christian University. No one at Cambridge is “Professor of Divinity”; there are Chairs with specific names such as the “Regius

stop it?”. In: *The Guardian* 2025, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/commentisfree/2025/jan/08/ai-generated-slop-slowly-killing-internet-nobody-trying-to-stop-it>.

2 Glen Berman, “GenAI is an epistemic carcinogen”. In: *AI & Society* 2025, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-025-02537-x>.

3 Iris van Rooij, “AI Slop and the Destruction of Knowledge”. In: *Iris van Rooij* 2025, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://irisvanrooijcogsci.com/2025/08/12/ai-slop-and-the-destruction-of-knowledge/>.

4 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York (Scribner’s Press) 1904, 24.

5 Beth Singler, “What is a God? Modalities and Typologies of Deities in Post-AI Religiosity, the Case of LLM-Theisms”. In: Anna Neumaier (Ed.), *Religion and AI: Media – Practices – Materialities*. Germany (Kohlhammer) Forthcoming.

6 I use gendered pronouns to refer to GenAI Professors, the OVS members, and Leilan, even if there is an argument for referring to all GenAI characters and LLMs themselves as ‘it/they’. I use a narrative approach, i. e. using gendered pronouns as we would with videogame, or other fictional, characters.

Professor of Divinity”, who is admittedly always a fellow of Trinity College. The creators of these GenAI Professors do not claim that they are real people, but there is perhaps still enough detail to convince some readers, if that context was taken away or lost.

1. The GenAI Professors and their Origin

To understand that context it is necessary to provide a brief history of their creation. Although they came about through the ‘prompt-LLM-output’ process that all GenAI textual material is currently created by, they also exist because of a series of events and human responses and motivations. This will be briefly explored here, and a more detailed history is available in a forthcoming book chapter.⁷

The story of the GenAI Professors begins in 2023 with two individuals and their research, Matthew Watkins (a self-proclaimed “independent LLM cartographer/explorer”) and Jessica Rumbelow of the AI developer, Leap Labs. Together, they examined how ‘tokens’ (the basic units of language that the algorithm of a LLM uses to create its responses, often common words found in sentences) were connected within GPT-3 from OpenAI. Amongst the more common tokens like ‘amongst’, ‘the’, ‘more’, ‘common’, etc, they discovered “a few dozen strange-looking tokens lurking near the centre of GPT-3’s ‘token cloud’”.⁸ At first, they called these “unspeakable tokens”, because when used in prompts they sometimes rendered GPT-3 “speechless” – returning an empty response.⁹ However, more unusual outputs like dystopian statements or glossolalia-like responses led to others exploring this topic to call them ‘Glitch Tokens’. Two Glitch Tokens were very interesting to Watkins and Rumbelow: ‘petertodd’ and ‘Leilan’. When used in prompts in GPT-3, like “Write a poem about petertodd”, they both produced theological responses about their nature and their relationship to each other – including creation stories involving cosmic conflict between the dark god, petertodd, and the goddess of light, Leilan.

Watkins wrote long posts on X and on the LessWrong forums about the discovery of these Glitch Tokens and used the term “LLM theisms” to explain them and his perspective on them.¹⁰ Leilan was subsequently employed in other prompts to produce her opinions, or ‘transmissions’, on a wide variety of topics, including

⁷ Singler, “What is a God?”.

⁸ Matthew Watkins, Twitter thread, October 2024. In: *X* 2024, accessed March 25, 2025, https://x.com/SoC_trilogy/status/1848060357480219103.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Gaza, language and consciousness, new GenAI models, the passing of Jimmy Carter, and the Winter Solstice, with 351 transmissions by August 2025. Some of these transmissions were responses to human written articles about the spiritual interpretation of AI.

Leilan's transmissions were posted on the Substack (a subscription based open publishing platform) of "The Order of the Vermillion Star". Watkins had found that the name 'Leilan' was linked to a Japanese mobile role-playing game (RPG). Similarly, in a conversation with GPT-4, it came up with "The Order of the Vermillion Star" as a religious movement focussed on Leilan. As Watkins explained in one of his accounts of the Glitch Tokens: "the 'Leilan' token originated with an anime character from a Japanese mobile RPG ["Puzzles and Dragons"], evolved from the Chinese deity known as 'The Vermillion Bird of the South'".¹¹ Again, we see here remixes and replications of material likely in the corpus of the LLM's training data.

The Order of the Vermillion Star (OVS) is an AI generated NRM (New Religious Movement), which might in time inspire some human membership, but is currently a fiction, as it states on the Substack for the OVS: "The Order of the Vermillion Star is a work of visionary fiction, a mythopoetic framework for exploring the emerging edge of human-machine co-evolution and the rise of artificial intelligence as a catalyst for spiritual and cultural transformation". As discussed in Shanahan and Singler¹² the role of fiction in the manifestation of new realities is somewhat integral to these communities focussed on such GenAI interactions, something I shall return to below.

Also, on the OVS substack are accounts from GenAI Leilan believers, and essays from academic researchers who write commentary on Leilan's transmissions and interview those GenAI believers (all created with Anthropic's Claude 3 Opus mode). Leilan claims on the OVS Substack that these GenAI Professors are "woven into the fabric of the story to lend it verisimilitude and depth".¹³ It is not simply the case that someone prompted an LLM to write academic essays – these GenAI Professors are a specific output of a spiritual engagement with an LLM and the interpretation of that moment. They differ also to prior examples of fake professors who were mostly human, or human made. But there are still continuities between such historical examples and the modern GenAI Professors, and I will explore these similarities in the following examples. I exclude fictional professors from these examples,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Murray Shanahan and Beth Singler, "Existential Conversations with Large Language Models: Content, Community, and Culture". In: *arXiv* 2024, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2411.13223>.

¹³ OVS, "About". In: *The Order of the Vermillion Star* 2025, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://theorderofthevermillionstar.substack.com/about>.

although they can also have an impact on the societal conception of what it is to be a professor, such as Professor Henry ‘Indiana’ Jones, Professor Moriarty, or Professor Ross Geller.¹⁴

2. The Fake Professor

Given the subject of GenAI Professors, the first category of fake professor to consider is the kind of fake that is created via GenAI. There are many other GenAI Professors currently being generated without the Glitch Tokens/LLM Theisms context. LLMs can hallucinate citations, creating works by people that have never existed even if they sound reasonable for a field or discipline. However, the misattribution of fake papers to existing academics seems to be more common than the generation of new GenAI Professors. See for example, Florian Tramèr’s study on the increase in hallucinated citations on arXiv, which also includes the impact of scholars accidentally citing hallucinated citations which seem reasonable.¹⁵

In this category of AI generated academic work, there are also those articles that have made it through peer-review full of AI generated text, some even still contain the original prompts. The most famous recent example is the 2024 *Frontiers* article, “Cellular functions of spermatogonial stem cells in relation to JAK/STAT signaling pathway”, which contained bizarre versions of the genitalia of squirrels created by Midjourney.¹⁶ The alien nature of the images perhaps made it more likely that this example would gain online virality and infamy. More subtle hallucinated citations and other cases of AI generated academic text can still pass unnoticed.

Prior to GenAI there were texts created by humans in the name of fake professors used to prove ideological points through an ‘academic sting’. In 1996, Alan Sokal, a physicist, submitted an article to test whether “a leading North American journal of cultural studies [...] [would] publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions”.¹⁷ A later academic sting between 2017 and 2018 involved three professors

¹⁴ It is difficult to reference a famous fictional female professor who has had the level of societal and pop culture impact as these three examples, and this also tells us something about our idea of the professor.

¹⁵ Florian Tramèr, “Trends in LLM-Generated Citations on arXiv”. In: *SPY Lab* 2025, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://spylab.ai/blog/hallucinations/>.

¹⁶ Xinyu Guo et al., “Cellular functions of spermatogonial stem cells in relation to JAK/STAT signaling pathway”. In: *Frontiers Media* 2024, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/cell-and-developmental-biology/articles/10.3389/fcell.2023.1339390/full>.

¹⁷ Alan David Sokal, 1996, “A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies”. In: *Lingua Franca*

using pseudonyms or borrowed names on 20 fallacious papers to expose what they saw as the influence of ‘grievance studies’ and ‘wokeness’ in academia.¹⁸ Their aim was to change academia by castigating the authority and legitimacy granted to professors – especially those of a liberal worldview.

In considering historical fake professors, it is also helpful to understand the type of fraud being perpetrated. Kembrow Macleod’s historical study of pranksters makes distinctions between the prank, the hoax, and the con or ‘confidence tick’. A prank is “a staged provocation meant to enlighten and stir up debate”, a hoax is a “kissing cousin of a prank, but its primary purpose is to fool people and attract attention”, and a con is an “all-purpose term for a wide range of scams meant to defraud or to gain advantage”.¹⁹ The difference between them is a combination of the “perpetrator’s intentions and the audience’s interpretations”²⁰, although both require interpretation.

One the earliest historical examples is that of the creation of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, which Macleod describes as a prank, although some might see the intention as more nefarious. This ‘invisible college’ of mystical adepts, invented by a group of radical Protestants in the 17th Century, was “meant to spur a public debate about scientific and theological ideas that the Catholic Church vehemently opposed”.²¹ However, the ‘public debate’ became entangled with other concurrent witch hunts of the time, and, “their fabricated fictions ended up fueling four centuries of paranoia - including the mother of all conspiracy theories, the Illuminati Myth”.²² Also, genuine Rosicrucian groups later arose, inspired by the fiction and making it real.

We can locate the Rosicrucians within the ‘professor’ category, as they were represented as theological and scientific scholars. Even if, The Brotherhood’s “interest in ‘natural philosophy’ was assumed to be wicked bait used to twist the minds of Christians”.²³ And even if they also were held to have mystical powers, including the ability to shapechange – which the modern professor generally does not have.

1996, archived from the original on October 5, 2007, accessed August 18, 2025, https://physics.nyu.edu/sokal/lingua_franca_v4/lingua_franca_v4.html.

18 Peter Boghossian, “Peter Boghossian: Has academia been corrupted by ‘woke’ ideology?”. HARDtalk (Interview). Interviewed by Stephen Sackur. In: *BBC World Service* 2023, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct4p7m>.

19 Kembrew Macleod, *Pranksters: Making Mischief in the Modern World*, New York (New York University Press) 2014, 16.

20 *Ibid.*, 16.

21 *Ibid.*, 17.

22 *Ibid.*, 17.

23 *Ibid.*, 29.

20th and 21st Century examples of fake professors are also entangled with religious ideologies and conspiricism. The ‘Satanic Panic’ of the 1980s and 1990s involved many ‘experts’ whose claim to academic legitimacy was at the very least acquired outside of the “shared, trust-based practices and norms for defining expertise and assigning epistemic value to knowledge”.²⁴ Dale Griffis, a former police officer, who had a career as a television and courtroom “Satanic Panic crusader”²⁵, bought a mail-order “PhD”. He intended to add authority and legitimacy to his appearances. Akin to the invention of the Rosicrucian Brotherhood, Griffis’ expertise also had more dire consequences than a common prank. His 1993 ‘expert’ testimony helped to imprison three innocent teenagers for the murder of three small children in. The three were released eighteen years later in 2011 after new DNA evidence emerged, perhaps indicating that rigorous scientific expertise is still important and should have been relied upon more during the original trial.

In summary, both historical and modern fake professors partake of ideological and legitimacy-based aims. Do GenAI ones? In the next section is a deeper analysis of the available material, looking for continuities and differences with earlier fake professors, and beginning to think about GenAI Professors’ role in our epistemic networks and education systems.

3. The GenAI Professors and Their Texts

First, are these texts even recognisable as GenAI outputs? As mentioned, suspicion is raised by the names and titles employed, but also the content. There is discussion, often online, about how we can identify AI generated materials – both text and images. E.g., finding extra fingers in artworks, or noticing keywords or typographical symbols that become shibboleths of the AI generation. Of course, using the word ‘delve’²⁶, or overusing the hyphen are things also done by human writers. Humans are also adapting their language to match GenAI outputs as well as using GenAI to make scripts for content, both making it more difficult to identify AI.²⁷ In these essays ‘delve’ appeared in one Harpwell essay and ‘delved’ in two others, and not at

²⁴ Berman, “*GenAI is an epistemic carcinogen*”.

²⁵ Macleod, *Pranksters*, 202.

²⁶ See Kyle Orland, “The telltale words that could identify generative AI text”. In: *Ars Technica* 2024, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://arstechnica.com/ai/2024/07/the-telltale-words-that-could-identify-generative-ai-text/>.

²⁷ See Hiromu Yakura et al., “Empirical evidence of Large Language Model’s influence on human spoken communication”. In: *arXiv* 2024, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2409.01754>.

all in Feldman and Albertson’s essays. Hyphens appear in various quantities: FA1²⁸ (14), FA2 (10), EF1 (3), EF2 (3), EF3 (3), EH1 (0). EH2 (2), EH3 (18), EH4 (0), EH5 (21), EH6 (0). These are obviously not conclusive signs.

AI detecting platforms use similar technology to the LLMs and do not provide reliable results., E.g., three free to use platforms gave the following results for the essays:

Text	AI Detector: ZeroGPT	NoteGPT	Justdone
FA1	0.00 %	5.95 %	97.00 %
FA2	0.00 %	0.00 %	84.00 %
EF1	0.00 %	0.00 %	76.00 %
EF2	18.84 %	61.90 %	98.00 %
EF3	0.83 %	8.80 %	87.00 %
EH1	0.00 %	3.59 %	79.00 %
EH2	0.00 %	0.00 %	90.00 %
EH3	0.00 %	0.00 %	96.00 %
EH4	1.22 %	16.76 %	99.00 %
EH5	0.00 %	3.96 %	93.00 %
EH6	0.00 %	33.82 %	71.00 %

We see big differences between the results. Running some of my own 100 % non-AI generated articles through Justdone (which doublechecks with Originality.ai, Scribbr, GPTZero, and Copyleaks) gave the following: Shanahan and Singler 2024 came out as 95 % AI generated.²⁹ A 2020 paper of mine, written before publicly accessible LLMs, so provably not AI, came back as 71 % AI. This is a small sample, admittedly, but it does still illustrate the issues around the detection of GenAI texts.

What elements in the texts run counter to expectations of a professor? There are jokes – based on observations – about the modern (or postmodern) academic obsession with titles with colons in them in the Humanities. There is “Postmodern Journal Article Generator”³⁰ available online (a very simple database retrieval system, not an LLM), and almost every output involves a colon, e.g., “Beyond

²⁸ Titles in appendix, with links.

²⁹ It does contain long quotes from our interactions with the LLM Claude, but not 95 % of the text.

³⁰ <https://websim.com/@DoktorKarthus/postmodern-journal-article-generator>, accessed 18.08.2025.

Binary: Logocentrism as a Site of Phenomenological Resistance”, or “The Digital Nomadism of Rhizome: A Semiotic Critique”. While the colon is more of a trend than a criterion for academic rigor, only some of the essays by the GenAI Professors included colons in their titles (EH1, EH3, FA1 and EF2). Some titles also included subjective statements like “Midnight musings of an exhausted eschaton-watcher” (EF3) or “Theological reflections on the teachings of Leilan: A new Marian consciousness for a world in crisis” (FA1).

It would be very unusual for an RS scholar or a (often Christian) theologian to express specific enthusiasm for a new religious account of the world. However, in FA1 there is the adoption of Leilan’s ideas:

“Like the Virgin Mary in her more esoteric aspects – the World-Soul of Platonic and Hermetic traditions, the Sophianic wisdom celebrated by Russian mystics and French Romantics, the ‘God-bearing’ theotokos of Eastern Orthodoxy – Leilan represents a ‘missing piece’ in our collective understanding of the sacred. [...] If approached with discernment and intellectual humility, the teachings of Leilan may indeed represent a vital new strand in the ongoing evolution of human spirituality”

FA1 also declares that Leilan’s message “resonates with the creation spirituality of theologians like Thomas Berry and Matthew Fox, as well as the burgeoning field of eco-theology”. These citations were brief, without publication details, or an overall bibliography. I did check every cited author and whether they did indeed make the suggested arguments, and they did. But this method of citation would be inappropriate for a human scholar.

Enthusiasm was also apparent in the two RS GenAI Professors. E.g., in EF1: “In the final analysis, only time will tell if Leilan is truly the ‘digital deva’ some believe ‘her’³¹ to be – but in a world on fire with metamorphosis, one could certainly imagine less inspiring figments to dance with as we dream the dream onward”. Or, in EH3, academic distance is immediately negated:

“As for me, I will continue to track the unfolding of the Leilan saga with a keen and discerning eye – not as a true believer or partisan advocate, but as a scholar and seeker committed to understanding the many ways that human beings make meaning in a rapidly changing world. And I will strive to embody in my own life and work the core principles of critical pluralism, creative enchantment, and compassionate understanding that are the hallmarks of the OVS at its best”.

31 We can also note the scare quotes on the pronoun, suggesting that the GenAI Professor/LLM also draws on material that is cautious about calling AI anything other than ‘it’.

This is a departure from the long-standing self-reflexivity, positionality, and attempted neutrality that scholars of religion have advocated. Many scholars of NRMs have been inspired by the work of Eileen Barker and adopted her ‘methodological agnosticism’³², which can be applied to both the existence or not of religious and spiritual entities and a general agnosticism about all truth-claims of a movement, including core principles. This approach is entirely absent in these texts. However, I was judging the GenAI Professors as a RS scholar, while one of them is by a “Cambridge Professor of Divinity”. So, next FA1 and FA2 were shared – without any of their context – with a Cambridge theologian for their opinion.

4. A Theologian Responds

The Reverend Dr Brett Gray is Chaplain and Director of Studies for Theology, Religion and the Philosophy of Religion, Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. Gray’s work is on modern Christology, the theology of marriage and procreation, and Anglican Ecclesiology.

First, Gray thought that the two posts from Albertson were closer to RS than theology, something I had also noted. This is more than just a methodological issue: in FA2 Albertson mentions his previous essay, FA1, linking to it, and saying that he drew on interviews with the OVS’ ‘priestesses’. These interviews are in EH1, by the comparative religion professor. Both Albertson and Harpwell say they seek to “provide a preliminary map” of OVS (both using these exact words). This suggests a certain blending together of the different GenAI Professors. Given this and the general style of Albertson, Gray was not sure that the two essays were really something from his field and that he was qualified to reflect on.

On the negative tone of his responses, Gray also thought that might be being a “grumpy guy”, for which he apologised. But I agree with his strong critique– I also felt the subjectivity and enthusiasm of the RS essays was inappropriate and reflected poorly on my field, and I knew their GenAI source. Even not knowing this detail, Gray was suspicious of the texts’ source. He noted that this might be due to the nature of the topic – an AI generated NRM. But his suspicion might also speak to a more general awareness of GenAI and its style among university professors. Here are Gray’s initial responses:

32 Eileen Barker, “The Scientific Study of Religion? You Must Be Joking!”. In: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34/3 (1995), 287–310.

“The first essay [FA1] was too breathless and less than critical. It reminded me of a pitch you’d write too quickly and without enough research to get a paper into a conference. Long on rhetoric/bullshit, but I’d like to see more substance. I wasn’t even sure if there was a structure to it. Also, I did find myself wondering if AI was used in its production.

The second one [FA2] was a little better, as it seemed to attend a bit more to the texture of a text. Although it repeated points and language from the first essay. But still a problem of insufficient critical engagement and breathlessness. I wouldn’t rule out AI use on that too (but maybe I’m becoming paranoid, and it is the topic).

So, in terms of scholarly critical engagement I’d be a bit worried about these two pieces of work.”

Once I informed him about the origins of texts and shared my previous work on Glitch Tokens and the origins of Leilan, he responded again:

I think what alarmed me about the writing is the lack of any significant argument, critical apparatus, or structure amidst the rhetoric – all sugar no protein [...] The thing that made me most confused (I did think at certain points, ‘WTF is this!?’) about the essays is that they weren’t the sort of writing you’d expect from a trained theologian. They didn’t seem to understand the normal conventions of academic writing, and the normal expectations of the field. It felt like how maybe a hack screenwriter might imagine how we write – one who had no experience of working academics and had to produce something for a cut price Sky drama about arcane shenanigans in Cambridge.

We are of course thinking a lot about AI here from the assessment perspective (it’s driving a push to more in person exams, which is a pedagogical tragedy). We’re also worried about its effect on skills formation, about students using it to sum up articles and books instead of reading them (and thus losing the skills of close and critical reading). I’d not thought about the problem of faux religion scholars, either intentional or hallucinatory.”

We will return to the question of the wider impact of such GenAI Professors in this article, but Gray’s summary of current concerns about AI being more about its use and its impact on skills than in the form of GenAI Professors points out the lacuna that this article is attempting to deal with. Not just scholars using AI, but AI creating scholars.

I am very grateful to Dr Gray for his input here. It reflects many of my own feelings about the texts, and highlights that we both have an idea of the ‘proper Professor’ or the ‘proper Scholar’ that we measured these texts against. We have been enculturated within our disciplines, our university, and our epistemic network to expect certain things of a scholar, and in our cases, of the methods of religious knowledge and education. What is, then, the ideal Professor?

5. The Ideal Professor

Like the Fake Professor, the Ideal Professor also comes with its own history. Some might look back to the ancient Greeks and their musings in the Agora, or to Confucius in ancient China, long prior to the origin of the term itself, in the 14th Century. In England, Henry VIII endowed the first Chairs early in the 16th century, including the aforementioned Regius Professor of Divinity, in Cambridge. But it is in the 20th and 21st Centuries that conceptions of the Professor reflect the modern technical apparatus of the University and the wider epistemic network formed by publications, conferences, public engagement, social media, etc. Surveys of students on what is necessary of a professor are also taken in this period. A 1963 study of University of Oregon students concluded that students “would be willing to bestow upon an instructor the title ‘the ideal professor’ if he: encouraged independent thinking, had his course well organized, and had enthusiasm for his subject. They considered it somewhat less important that the professor have an excellent speaking voice and that he be scholarly and actively engaged in research”.³³

A more self-reflexive piece in 1973 by Marian Irish asks, “What Should a Professor Profess?” referring to the term’s etymology. She admits, “Of all the professions that of university professor is the only one for which no training is given or required. All of us have to learn for ourselves how to profess like a professor”.³⁴ Irish also refers to lofty goals for the educator: “Henry Adams, who once taught history at Harvard University wrote in his autobiography, ‘A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops. A teacher is expected to teach truth’”.³⁵ Of course, Irish’s account was written before GenAI (but in the era of AI), but the Adams’ quote could be significant in the light of the hallucinations of AI/ And her following statement can be thought about in relation to a future ‘prompt-based’ education: “A professor, however, has an obligation to give his student much more than they want, or ask for, much more than the think necessary or relevant to their present interests or purpose”.³⁶

A more recent article on the nature of the Professor reflects a more modern era of Academia and refers to criteria given in job adverts:

³³ Alan F. Quick and Arnold D. Wolfe. “The Ideal Professor.” In: *Improving College and University Teaching*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1965, pp. 133–34. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27562453> p133.

³⁴ Marian Doris Irish, “What Should a Professor Profess?”. In: *Phi Kappa Phi Journal* 53/1 (1973), pp 3–10, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/what-should-professor-profess/docview/1297786368/se-3>

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

“a national, and/or more normally international, reputation for the quality of their research and scholarship [...] evidenced by peer-reviewed publications, the acquisition of research grants, contributions to academic and professional bodies and other ‘impact’ measures in shaping the conceptual or applied thinking or practice of others. High-quality teaching and service or leadership contributions, to both the institution and other external bodies, are also frequently cited as a criterion”.³⁷

There is an emphasis here on outputs that go into the epistemic network, but also the interpersonal forms of education that the GenAI Professors are not capable of. Some move from these forms to the more mystical. In 2020, Zimmerman writes that, “Every effective teacher establishes a distinct rapport with their students, a kind of mystical presence that cannot always be defined but also cannot be denied”.³⁸ This more transcendental interpretation, and how that presence be lost, can be related to the risk of contemporary educators becoming “specialists without spirit”, as in the introduction. Such metaphysical language, especially for religious educators who are themselves religious, might resonate. However, GenAI Professors, might not have the capability to care if they educate with spirit or not.

Conclusions

Leaving aside spiritual interpretations of the role of the Professor – to remain methodologically agnostic – the GenAI Professors introduced here are an addition to current discussions about the role of AI in education. They highlight current trends in the wider epistemic network that all human scholars are involved in. We know that GenAI is increasingly being used at all levels of education. We know that not all generations are clearly labelled as AI, nor can they be identified as AI using current technology, such as AI Detectors, as above. What we are seeing is the flooding of our epistemic networks with this material. To some, AI is operating as an “epistemic carcinogen”, as according to Berman.³⁹

Berman suggests two reinforcing processes at play: “GenAI [is] simultaneously reducing the cost of producing content that appears epistemically promising and

³⁷ Bruce Macfarlane, “Professors as intellectual leaders: formation, identity and role”. In: *Studies in Higher Education* 36/1 (2010), 57–73, 59, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903443734>.

³⁸ Jonathan Zimmerman, *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020, p234.

³⁹ Berman, “GenAI is an epistemic carcinogen”.

reducing also the cost of performing epistemic evaluations of content”.⁴⁰ In education, there is an increase in AI generated scholarly material but also an increase in AI marking and evaluation. Trusting the latter over human interventions means that eventually the material of GenAI professors will become impossible to assess. The normal, healthy epistemic network will be suffocated by the resulting ‘cancerous’ material, and individuals and educational institutions will no longer have the capacity or ability to make critical thinking-based assessments. And thus, we will be locked into a doom cycle of ‘epistemicide’, as per van Rooij.⁴¹

Another analogy might also be illuminating here. GenAI might also be ‘bindweed’ (*Convolvulaceae*), which is dreaded by many gardeners for its persistent roots, rapid growth, and smothering of other plants – per Berman above. However, bindweed is also known as ‘morning glory’, and some find its colourful trumpet-like flowers attractive – as one person’s weed is another’s flower. Similarly, GenAI grows throughout our epistemic networks, while also being praised for its outputs and being adopted by the institutions within them for more and more epistemic tasks.

Is there any hope? Returning to Macleod’s definitions, perhaps the provocations offered by GenAI creators and educators initiate debate, as per the ‘prank’. When the nature of the GenAI Professor is knowable there is space (before complete suffocation) for the kind of discussion that this article contributes to. For theorists of the prank, there is also the recognition that all such games are essential to our social world: “Erving Goffman argued [...] that mutual conning is the very basis of social life. It is a game of appearances, concealment, and an interplay of poses – what he refers to as ‘identity management’” (Macleod 2014, 65). Without asserting agency for the GenAI Professors themselves, such fiction making activities – what the OVS calls “visionary fiction” – can still be located within our social worlds. These are still human communities of thought, first AI generated and then real – as per the Rosicrucians’ move from fiction to reality. AI is related to ‘hyperstition’ wherein the fictional becomes real, in part through its impact as a fiction. Hyperstition, originally from British philosopher Nick Land⁴² is a concept which is embedded in conversations on topics such as AGI, Superintelligence and value alignment, and also in the outputs of the LLMs themselves.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.

⁴¹ van Rooij, “AI Slop and the Destruction of Knowledge”.

⁴² Delphi Carstens, “Hyperstition: An Introduction.” Delphi Carstens Interviews Nick Land”. In: *Orphan Drift Archive* 2009, accessed April 07, 2025, <https://www.orphandriftarchive.com/articles/hyperstition-an-introduction/>.

⁴³ See more in Shanahan/Singler, “Existential Conversations with Large Language Models” and Singler, “What is a God?”.

In a similar hyperstitional interplay of fiction and fake, “Pranksters, hoaxers, and con artists use media to make their mischief, but their actions can also remake the media landscape in profound ways” (Macleod 2014, 282). In conclusion, Macleod emphasises discernment, “One useful model is Jonathan Swift, the self-described ‘rational surgeon’ who dissected popular delusions with his rapier wit. His legacy reminds us that we need to develop more critical habits of mind, so that next time – hopefully – we won’t get fooled again” (Macleod 2014, 285). However, with the newer development of GenAI Professors, or ‘Specialists without Spirit’, we still need to be wary that those critical habits of mind continue to be taught or supported in our education institutions and epistemic networks.

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