THE ECONOMIST – 11 GIUGNO 2026

Silicon Valley needs to get God

POPE LEO XIV recently presented the Catholic Church's first encyclical on digital technology, Magnifica Humanitas. Silicon Valley's atheist critics complained that the Holy Father had missed a chance to humble humanity before artificial superintelligence. Yet in the document is something more useful: an opening between technology and religion that may be society's best hope in the age of AI. The case for bridging the divide is both principled and practical; spiritual and secular.

Some in the tech industry have rejected the protective, regulatory impulses of the encyclical, but in doing so they miss the deeper opportunity it offers. The greatest risk for the AI industry today is not rules but uncertainty: policy that swings wildly from one administration and jurisdiction to the next. The stabilising and consistently influential force of ancient traditions offers technology the roots it needs to grow. It provides predictability for the guardrails required and a defence against the caprices of politics.

More than that, partnership with religious traditions is not merely a short-term political convenience. Rather, it offers a way to steer and legitimise technology broadly, trading some immediate speed for far wider adoption and the avoidance of a devastating social backlash.

This was the bargain Leo offered: that the Church can embrace and even sanctify AI if its builders raise walls to protect diverse traditions rather than a Tower of Babel to overshadow them. That would mean, for instance, engineering digital services to protect and strengthen rather than disrupt communities, and making work more dignified and creative rather than irrelevant. It is notable that among the groups that provided amicus briefs in defence of Anthropic, as it battled America's Department of War on the issue of lethal autonomous weapons and mass surveillance, were organisations of religious leaders, including one I help lead, the Faith Family Technology Network.

Geopolitically the case is sharper still. The countries that will choose between an American and a Chinese technology stack, across Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and South and South-East Asia, are overwhelmingly devout. They have no wish to enrol their children in an automated atheism.

China has built the repression of faith into its most advanced systems, from the surveillance of mosques in Xinjiang to the monitoring of unregistered churches. Religious liberty was among America's most potent instruments of soft power during the cold war. In the technology contest it lies almost entirely unused, squandered by an industry that treats the convictions of most of humanity as an embarrassment.

These arguments are abstract; what persuaded me personally, as a political economist deep in the tech sector, was my encounter with the technology culture in Asia. That culture is suffused with the spirit of technology as a guardian and manifestation of cultural traditions—such as Japan's Doraemon robot cat echoing traditional *kami* (spirits)—rather than a replacement for them.

The most capable technologist I have met is Audrey Tang, Taiwan's first digital minister and the first openly non-binary cabinet minister anywhere, whose work on digital "plurality" the pope repeatedly alluded to in the encyclical. Her life follows the word of a scripture more completely than anybody's I have ever seen: it is ordered by the "Tao Te Ching", a central text of Taoist philosophy. Yet she has overseen the world's most advanced digital exporters, whose workforces are more devout than the populations around them—in sharp contrast to the "closeted" Christians portrayed in the American television show "Silicon Valley".

The pattern recurs across Asian development. Japan, in the Meiji era of 1868 to 1912, industrialised faster than any nation, under the banner of "Japanese spirit, Western technology". New factories were blessed at Shinto shrines. India, as this newspaper has reported, has a booming faith-tech sector. Singapore, among the most advanced countries in the world, is also among the most diversely devout, and recognises religion in its social arrangements more fully than almost any state outside the Middle East.

It is no surprise, then, that the populations of these countries are far more hopeful about technology. Some 50% of Americans, 45% of Canadians and 39% of Britons are "more concerned than excited" about AI, compared with just 28% of Japanese, 19% of

Indians and 16% of South Koreans, according to a global survey by Pew Research. Anchoring change in tradition does not need to slow a society down. In many cases it helps it move faster, by carrying more of its people along and avoiding the cycles of hype, despair and backlash that periodically paralyse the West.

None of this requires Silicon Valley to convert. It requires only that it recognise what it already is. The technology sector's faith in progress, in disruption, in the primacy of individual choice and in a future unburdened by the past, is itself a creed. And it is as culturally particular as any other. The moment calls not for the tearing down of one orthodoxy to install a purer one, but for something like the Edicts of Toleration that ended Europe's wars of religion: the recognition that no single tradition holds a monopoly on truth, and that there must be room for others inside the institutions now building the future. That would mean more open technology design and culture: building products for the large, underserved religious market segment and, for instance, allowing parents in those communities to steer AI models to their standards.

The hand has been extended. The tech industry would be wise to close the deal.