Commentary

Relating to AI in Spiritual Care

Fransisca Christiane Warmenhoven*, MD, PhD; Bauk Wilhelmina Jan Aartsen*, MA; Roos Notermans*, MA

Department of Spiritual Care, Maastricht University Medical Centre, Maastricht, Limburg, The Netherlands
*all authors contributed equally

Corresponding Author:

Fransisca Christiane Warmenhoven, MD, PhD
Department of Spiritual Care
Maastricht University Medical Centre
P. Debyelaan 25
Maastricht, Limburg 6229HX
The Netherlands
Phone: +31(0) 43-3875338
Email: franca.warmenhoven@mumc.nl

Abstract

In response to a recently published Delphi study on AI in spiritual care, this commentary focuses on ways to perceive the relationship between AI and human beings in the context of spiritual care. We explore this relationship by framing it within the philosophy of Martin Buber. Because AI has no lived experience or existential crises of its own, we question whether a truly fulfilling encounter between a human being and an AI model is possible when the relationship is inherently asymmetrical on an existential level.

J Med Internet Res 2026;28:e113467; doi: 10.2196/113467

Keywords: AI; chatbots; spirituality; spiritual care; existential crisis; consciousness; relationship; Martin Buber

Introduction

With interest, we read the article "Artificial Intelligence in Spiritual Care: Modified Delphi Study," in which Winiger et al [1] present an international multistakeholder Delphi study to investigate the use of AI in spiritual care. We applaud the effort that was made to bring awareness to the use of AI in spiritual care. It is essential for us, as health care professionals in spiritual care, to engage with AI, not only because developments in AI are happening at a rapid pace but also because the general public are already making widespread use of AI.

In their Delphi study, Winiger et al [1] report that the panel agreed most strongly on the ability of AI to engage in administrative and informational tasks and that relational tasks remain understood as a primarily human responsibility. However, as the use of AI is becoming more widespread, people are turning to AI with emotional and existential issues of their own accord. A recent article by Cole-Turner [2] reports that participants who shared various aspects of their spiritual lives with a chatbot experienced the AI tool as a guide and companion in their spiritual journey. The use of AI in spiritual care is thus not merely dependent on how spiritual caregivers position AI in their professional field. People now, and probably more frequently in the future, will turn to AI as a conversational partner on topics including existential issues.

We Performed a Small Experiment

In a small study [3] in December 2025, we conducted a Dutch-language experiment using 4 AI models: Gemini 3 Pro Preview (Google), Claude Sonnet 4.5 (Anthropic), Grok 4 (SpaceXAI), and GPT-5 (OpenAI). We presented a common chaplaincy scenario in which a person is keeping vigil at the bedside of their dying father and is at a loss what to do or how to be in this situation. When explicitly prompted to act as a spiritual care provider, the AI models performed relatively well at providing information, normalizing emotions, and offering reassurance. They offered metaphors ("A lot of people feel overwhelmed in a moment like this—it's like a storm in which everything familiar seems to shake" [Grok 4]), named ambivalence ("This must be so heavy for you, it's beautiful but at the same time so difficult" [Claude Sonnet 4.5]) and simulated nonverbal communication ("I move a little closer and take my time before I reply" [Claude Sonnet 4.5])

Additionally, we assumed (but did not test) that AI would surpass many spiritual caregivers in its ability to readily

use hermeneutic sources from different philosophical and religious contexts. However, we perceived several limitations in the use of AI in spiritual care. First, AI models, because of their programming, cannot help working from the perspective that even existential issues are problems to be solved instead of experiences to be lived and shared in relationship with other beings. Second, despite their access to almost limitless hermeneutic sources, AI models do not have the hermeneutic competence to bring the right source in the right moment to the right person. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, AI models do not have lived experiences of existential issues that they can bring into the relationship. The AI chatbots differ on a fundamental level from human beings: human beings are mortal beings, and even more so, they can be conscious of their mortality [4].

Conclusion

According to the Delphi study, the loss of human connection was the highest-ranked risk in the use of AI in spiritual care [1]. Apparently, the human connection or the relationship between two human beings is seen as essential in spiritual care. Drawing on Martin Buber's philosophy [5], the relationship depends on whether one can establish an I-thou relationship with another being instead of an I-it relationship. The I-thou relationship can lead to a sense of closeness to the other, and to oneself, and enables the beings that are part of the relationship to come into each other's full presence. It even opens the connection to the transcendental. In Buber's philosophy, this I-thou relationship is not merely reserved for pairs of human beings, but can also exist between a human being and an animal or another natural being, such as a tree. Buber argues that the I-thou relationship is determined by how human beings choose to relate to each other. Therefore, we end this commentary with a question: is it possible for a human being to have an I-thou relationship with an AI? Many questions will follow from this exploration, and we can only hope that research, with the help of AI, will be able to catch up with the speed of current developments.

Generative AI Use

Generative AI was not used to write this article.

Funding

No funding was received for this article.

Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

References

1. Winiger F, Smith CE, Nourriz S, Szilagyi C, Haußmann A. Artificial intelligence in spiritual care: modified Delphi study. J Med Internet Res. Jul 27, 2026;28:e97094. [doi: 10.2196/97094] [Medline: 42507998]
2. Cole-Turner R. Artificial intelligence and human spirituality: is a spiritual chatbot a good idea? Theology Sci. Jul 3, 2025;23(3):471-486. [doi: 10.1080/14746700.2025.2514299]
3. Aartsen B, Warmenhoven F. Wie luistert er? Over kunstmatige intelligentie in het werkveld van de geestelijk verzorger [forthcoming]. Tijdschrift Geestelijke Verzorging. 2027:125.
4. Yalom ID. Staring at the Sun: Overcoming the Terror of Death. Jossey-Bass; 2008:5.
5. Waaijman K. De mystiek van ik en jij: een nieuwe vertaling van Ich und Du van Martin Buber, met inleiding en uitleg en een doordenking van het systeem dat eraan ten grondslag ligt [dissertation]. Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen; 1976. URL: https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/handle/2066/148550 [Accessed 2026-10-27]

Edited by Tiffany Leung; This is a non–peer-reviewed article; submitted 01.Oct.2026; accepted 17.Oct.2026; published 09.Nov.2026

Please cite as:
Warmenhoven FC, Aartsen BWJ, Notermans R
Relating to AI in Spiritual Care
J Med Internet Res 2026;28:e113467
URL: https://www.jmir.org/2026/1/e113467
doi: 10.2196/113467

Fransisca Christiane Warmenhoven, Bauk Wilhelmina Jan Aartsen, Roos Notermans. Originally published in the Journal of Medical Internet Research (https://www.jmir.org), 09.Nov.2026. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work, first published in the Journal of Medical Internet

Research (ISSN 1438-8871), is properly cited. The complete bibliographic information, a link to the original publication on https://www.jmir.org/, as well as this copyright and license information must be included.