

Digital Policy Hub – Working Paper

# Canada Should Develop a Faith-Informed AI Ethical Framework

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## Key Points

- Since 2020, religious leaders from major world religions have been collectively promoting “algorithethics,”<sup>1</sup> namely, an anthropocentric and ethics-oriented artificial intelligence (AI) framework, in response to the growing ethical concerns posed by rapidly developing AI technology. Their shared consensus emphasizes the need to ensure an anthropocentric role for the future of AI.
- The current global and national AI governance model has left institutional and epistemic gaps, including problems such as institutions’ overly technical and inflexible nature, their perceived lack of moral authority and public trust, geopolitical disagreements, a reactive approach instead of a preventive one, and deep epistemic fragmentation. Canada faces further challenges due to limited participatory and inclusive processes.
- Religion has a unique advantage in guiding AI ethical governance. Religion-informed AI ethics can function as a shared ethical language and participatory framework. Religious institutions possess a well-established transnational, political and social infrastructure that can be employed to build consensus and influence AI policy. Religions offer solid and strong legal and historical underpinnings to drive implementation and accountability in AI governance. Religious values can further be leveraged in bridging epistemic gaps and geopolitical disagreement in terms of AI and the digital divide.
- Canada’s AI policy makers fail to leverage the invaluable sources from religious ethical frameworks embedded in Canada’s religious, Indigenous and ethnic immigrant communities. The government needs to function as an enabler and a convener for formal coalition building across religious organizations, leaders, communities, ethicist leaders and religious academics, and play a proactive role in engaging with international religious bodies involved in AI ethics.

# Introduction

In his very first public speech on May 18, 2025, newly elected Pope Leo XIV issued a solemn warning about one of the most pressing concerns of our time: the existential risks posed by AI. This public speech not only underscores the Catholic Church’s commitment to guiding technological advancement with moral clarity, human dignity and freedom, but also clearly shows its stand on digital innovation and technological progress: AI should not gradually replace humanity; instead, it should serve human genius and creativity. This speech is part of the Vatican’s ongoing effort of religious intervention in AI development, which dates back to February 28, 2020, when the Pontifical Academy for Life, joined by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the Italian Ministry of Innovation, launched the groundbreaking “Rome Call for AI Ethics,”<sup>2</sup> surprisingly joined by the global giant tech companies Microsoft and IBM.

This religious engagement with AI ethics not only represents the Church’s moral standpoint, but also deeply echoes a global growing concern surrounding AI development. These concerns urge users to confront issues, including, but not limited

<sup>1</sup> The term “algorithethics” was coined by RenAIssance Foundation Scientific Director Paolo Benanti in 2018 and was first used in his book *Oracles: Between Algorithethics and Algocracy*. This term is meant to be a concept that opposes the domination of algorithms. See [www.romecall.org/algorithethics-at-the-un/](http://www.romecall.org/algorithethics-at-the-un/).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.romecall.org/](http://www.romecall.org/).

to, the following: the illusion of technology neutrality, where infrastructures act as active players rather than tools (for example, facial recognition and predictive policing software); the erosion of human centrality in the AI system, which is compromised as evidenced in the deployment of autonomous AI weapons;<sup>3</sup> the widening digital divide between the Global North and the Global South;<sup>4</sup> persistent social biases related to areas such as gender, race and ethnicity built into the AI system;<sup>5</sup> challenges of transparency and explainability;<sup>6</sup> increasing market concentration and inequity;<sup>7</sup> AI-associated misinformation, violence and algorithm manipulation on social media;<sup>8</sup> and the lagged or fragmented digital governance in both national governments and international organizations in addressing AI development and oversight.<sup>9</sup> The growing global concerns about these issues are not isolated problems. Together, they represent an entangled ethical conundrum that threatens to deepen inequity, undermine democracy and erode public trust. This is precisely the dimension that remains notably absent in many national ethical AI governance frameworks today, including in Canada. Clearly, the concerns signify that the current AI governance model has left a huge gap that secular legal mechanisms and governmental bodies have thus far failed to address.

The Vatican's intervention on AI ethics reaffirms an anthropocentric and ethics-oriented framework for the future of AI, and it marked a significant turning point, where one of the world's most influential religious institutions stepped forward to engage proactively with the profound challenges posed by rapid technological advancement. In response to the call, religious leaders from Judaism, Islam and Christianity gathered in 2023 and 2024 to support and reinforce the "Rome Call for AI Ethics." Importantly, the religious leaders formed an interfaith alliance for algorethics, which emphasizes "the need to study the ethical problems and the social, political, economic and organizational implications arising from the increasing use of information technology."<sup>10</sup> In July 2024, at the AI Ethics for Peace meeting in Hiroshima,<sup>11</sup> Eastern religion representatives, such as leaders from Buddhist and Hindu traditions, joined Catholic, Muslim and Jewish leaders in co-signing the expanded version of the Rome Call for AI Ethics, to collectively offer a multi-religious approach to AI challenges. These developments signify the religious world's growing concerns about the ethical and human-centred principles in AI governance. More importantly, it demonstrates the urgent need for a faith-informed paradigm in AI ethics to address the gap left by secular institutionally and legally based agendas. This reality prompts a question that guided this research: How can religious and faith groups contribute to informing and shaping ethical practices in AI governance, and what unique role might they play in bridging this gap?

In order to answer these questions, this working paper reviews relevant literature across religious studies, philosophy, sociology and political science, as well as studies on AI. This paper argues that the challenges of AI governance are not merely technical or

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3 See Human Rights Watch (2025); Longpre, Storm and Shah (2022).

4 See Heeks (2022); Krishna (2024).

5 See Gupta, Parra and Dennehy (2022); Noseworthy et al. (2020).

6 See Balasubramaniam et al. (2023); Hulsén (2023).

7 See Zuboff (2019); Khan (2017).

8 See Stella, Ferrara and De Domenico (2018); Zhou et al. (2023).

9 See Smuha (2021); Roberts, Hine and Floridi (2023).

10 See [www.romecall.org/algorethics-at-the-un/](http://www.romecall.org/algorethics-at-the-un/).

11 See <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/info/2024/07/09/240609a.html>.

legal; they are deeply ethical, political and systemic. It aims to demonstrate how truly effective AI ethics is not just for legal documents and government policies; instead, they must be culturally and morally embedded, and capable of being spoken, believed, lived and rooted in living traditions of people's social infrastructures and their communities. This paper aims to demonstrate why religions are critical resources that the Canadian government should draw on to guide AI ethical development.

## Why Is It So Hard to Get Multiple AI Ethical Models Effectively Implemented?

The current ethical gaps in the global AI governance system, particularly in Canada, have failed both at the institutional level and the participatory level. Globally, FETA (fairness, accountability, transparency and ethics) is a widely referenced conceptual model in AI research and policy utilized to evaluate and guide the ethical development and deployment of AI systems. It emerged from both academic inquiry and corporate research (notably, Microsoft research's FATE group<sup>12</sup>) and has since been adopted as shorthand in AI governance conversations globally. Today, FETA has become the baseline language of AI governance, but it is now undergoing a crisis of transition.<sup>13</sup> Recent research argues that the AIDA failed not merely due to political challenges, but because its exclusionary process, unclear compliance mechanisms and weak public legitimacy were fundamentally flawed (Attard-Frost 2025). As a result, Blair Attard-Frost (2025) calls for a genuinely participatory and accountable approach to AI governance, one that prioritizes the public interest over technological innovation alone.

Participatory gaps in Canadian AI governance are also evident. A stronger critique came from Andrew Clement (2023), who has criticized the government's engagement strategy as mere "consultation theatre." He argues that the AI regulation consultations with the public are extensively perceived by the people as tokenistic, disingenuous and ultimately irrelevant to impacting meaningful policy process. In addition, the government's performative outreach to civil society and under-represented communities not only fails to invite genuine dialogue but also actively erodes public trust. Clement's critique speaks to a growing global concern about how ethical imperatives are being reduced to ritualistic political gestures that fail to establish meaningful accountability and enforcement mechanisms or prevent real harms (Zuboff 2019; Dubber, Pasquale and Das 2020). This reflects a broad trend where scholars increasingly note that ethics has become performative, a form of "ethics washing" (Diya 2025), or become trapped in what Raluca Csernatoni (2024) calls "summit pageantry," where global actors endorse inclusive values without institutionalizing enforceable commitments. CIGI Senior Fellow Sabhanaz Rashid Diya (2025) takes the above critiques and conversations a step further, arguing that ethical frameworks alone are insufficient for guiding AI regulation. She categorized several fundamental shortcomings in existing

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<sup>12</sup> See [www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/theme/fate/](https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/theme/fate/).

<sup>13</sup> In Canada, FETA was introduced and was rhetorically embedded in the Artificial Intelligence and Data Act (AIDA), which effectively died with the prorogation of Parliament in January 2025.

AI ethics, including conceptual vagueness, the absence of clear authority in defining ethical principles and the failure to account for cultural diversity. Most importantly, AI regulation faces similar challenges, as the ethical framework also has difficulty in being translatable from theories into practices, with potential risks of ethics washing and cultural dilution.

There are other reasons contributing to the failure of current AI ethical and legal frameworks, both institutional and participatory, at the global and Canadian levels. First, legal and institutional frameworks focus on compliance, risk mitigation and procedural norms (Kaminski 2023). Risk regulation encourages technical fixes to enable technology's use, rather than critically assessing its appropriateness or addressing non-quantifiable harms. This approach often treats moral trade-offs as mere technical decisions, lacks robust liability structures and gives limited recourse for marginalized communities. But AI raises fundamental moral questions: What kind of society do we want? What is a human being? What does it mean to flourish? Second, institutions lack moral authority (Zhang and Dafoe 2019), as governments and corporations are often seen as having conflicting interests with the public, and their ethical credibility is limited. The third aspect concerns political and geopolitical disagreement, often associated with the Global South critique of the Western AI ethics model; namely, institutions making decisions on AI ethical frameworks are culturally and ideologically bounded (Prabhakaran, Qadri and Hutchinson 2022) and often reflect the cultural and ideological norms of the Global North. Therefore, the decision-making process often excludes the Global South countries from the very beginning, and legal and policy frameworks are often Western-centric, emphasizing rights and individual autonomy.

Diya proposes that the FATE framework be replaced with a human rights-based model. However, Diya (2025) contends that dominant Western conceptions of human rights risk imposing universally individualistic norms, often politicized and narrowly reflective of Western concerns. Fourth, institutions are reactive instead of visionary, because institutional governance often responds to crises (for example, regulating facial recognition) after harm occurs (Walz and Firth-Butterfield 2019). Power asymmetries and private sector dominance (Crawford 2021; Zuboff 2019) constitute the fifth factor as AI and digital governance in liberal democracies is heavily shaped by private sector interests, often at the expense of equitable participation, public interest and marginalized communities. Likewise, CIGI Senior Fellow Jeni Tennison (2024) stresses that dominant governance models continue to privilege a few state and corporate actors, sidelining affected communities and reinforcing structural inequalities, and this lack of inclusivity can lead to AI systems that perpetuate existing biases and inequalities. Sixth, epistemic and normative fragmentation persists, and thus "consensus" is often built only in theory (for example, through high-level principles) but breaks down in application due to context-specific value systems, as prominent scholar in AI ethics Brent Daniel Mittelstadt (2019) astutely argues in his article "Principles alone cannot guarantee ethical AI." Canada, as a Global North country, embodies many of the challenges outlined here, while also facing its own issues associated with participatory governance and inclusivity in the AI regulation policy-making process (Clement 2023).

The analysis above shows that there is no agreed-upon standard for what ethical AI should look like. Without consensus among different communities, governments, publics, countries and cultures, public and private sectors, or sources of power, it is

extremely difficult to achieve effective AI governance at both national and international levels, especially given persistent epistemic differences. This paper argues that the ultimate underlying problem is that AI governance requires more than laws and institutions; instead, it requires moral depth, cultural breadth and ethical vision, and these components are not only about systems, but also about the moral formation of people, namely, their values, humility, character and compassion (The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion 2024). This paper further argues that creating a common language that transcends social class, cultures, countries, sectors and thinking about AI ethics outside the institutions and laws are the exact capacities that faith communities have cultivated for centuries. Building relationships and fostering understanding is a fundamentally religious task; the very word “religion” is derived from the Latin word *ligare* meaning “to bind” or “to connect” (Smith 1962). This capacity, cultivated over centuries, is exceedingly scarce today and desperately needed in the present global landscape of AI ethical frameworks, particularly in Canada. The following sections will unpack this argument and demonstrate how a religiously grounded AI ethical framework can offer targeted and meaningful responses to the “pain points” of pressing challenges posed by AI systems.

# The Rationale of Adopting a Religion-Informed AI Ethical Framework

## Religion Can Function as a Common Ethical Language and Participatory Framework

Philosophers in ethics such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) and Bernard Williams (1985) argue that ethics should be deeply rooted in moral life and cultural practices rooted in a variety of particular social realities, rather than being reduced to a simplified set of abstract ethical prescriptions. This means that to solve the AI ethical emergency discussed above, AI governance must reflect what the author terms a society’s “ethical reality structure,” namely, an actually existing moral grammar of a society and the plurality of ethical belief systems that are widely recognized, talked about and practised across communities in the real world. This structure can encompass the complexity of individualist ethics, communal ethics, religious ethics, Indigenous ethics and virtue ethics. This is especially true in a country like Canada, characterized by a deep cultural, religious and value consensus based on pluralism. Religion can create a widely accepted vocabulary about AI ethics (Umbrello 2023; Elmahjub 2023) and often orients toward action and community engagement (Schweiker 2004), as it is rooted in the pursuit of the common good, and offers normative frameworks that transcend culturally bounded technical systems, philosophy, laws and ideology (Umbrello 2023; Green et al. 2022). For example, the Vatican’s “Rome Call for AI Ethics” is endorsed not only by Catholic organizations but also by Jewish and Muslim representatives, as well as secular corporations. For AI to develop with a sense of sustainability, justice and inclusivity, religion should not be viewed merely as a belief system, but rather as a well-established ethical system of action, with profound resources, that is both essential and urgently

needed to address the social trust, technocratic monopoly, value regulation, and the inclusive and collective public participation gap left by the state and market in AI governance.

## **Religious Institutions as Transnational, Political and Social Infrastructure**

The irreplicable institutional capacities and their transnational social and political capital of religious organizations (Haynes 2014; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001) make them vital partners in AI governance ethics. Religion constitutes a globally networked political and social force, or an international non-state actor (Snyder 2011; Thomas 2005) that can be mobilized similarly to international institutions (such as the United Nations). Moreover, religion already possesses community engagement infrastructure (for example, rituals, local groups, communication channels) and can be leveraged for participatory governance (Haynes 2016). With pre-existing transnational networks and trust-based institutions, religion offers stable, actionable guidelines at national, international and community levels (Banchoff 2008; Casanova 2008). Religious voices can enrich what theorists describe as the “ethical universalism” of AI governance by introducing perspectives that move beyond economic and technical reasons (Rawls 2005; Benhabib 2002). These religious institutions cut across political affiliations worldwide, which gives them a unique legitimacy to influence diverse communities in different societies, including both conservative and progressive believers, creating a globally networked consensus on AI ethical governance.

## **Legal and Historical Underpinnings**

In many societies, especially liberal democracies, the legal protection of religions gives religious actors a distinct advantage in shaping the direction and limits of AI development, deployment and oversight, in ways that legal or secular ethics cannot. This is because religious rights are some of the most protected rights in liberal societies and are basically the only protected framework for ethics. Scholars (Durham and Scharffs 2019) emphasize that religious belief is given special legal standing (for example, exemptions, accommodations, freedom from discrimination), which is not guaranteed for political, philosophical or moral beliefs in many liberal and non-liberal countries. For example, the US constitutional framework has also been critiqued for privileging religion over secular values and norms, providing a unique and elevated protection to religious belief (Eisgruber and Sager 2010). It means religion has a legal precedence. It also gains cross-jurisdictional support, which means religious exemption and privilege are not unique to one country but a broader trend within multiple liberal systems. And, most interestingly, Western moral, legal and institutional foundations are deeply rooted and shaped by Christianity, often invisibly (Smith 2024). Even the legitimacy of Canada as a country is inherited from the British Crown, which for centuries claimed authority via “divine right,” a Christian theological principle stating that a monarch’s rule is by God’s will. This implies that the incorporation of religious values and rights into AI ethics would be regarded with considerable seriousness, with its accountability and enforcement mechanisms being exponentially amplified.

## Bridging Epistemic Gaps and Geopolitical Disagreement Between the Global North and the Global South

Religious traditions offer alternative epistemologies that challenge techno-solutionism and complement scientific ways of knowing. By contrast, technological determinism can further build barriers to public participation and amplify technocratic power (de Sousa Santos 2014; Latour 2013). Religious traditions, especially non-Western and communal ones, challenge the control-based assumptions of scientific modernity and restore human-centred modes of understanding. Moreover, Western techno-solutionism enforces monocultural scientific epistemologies, sidelining spiritual, Indigenous and religious knowledge from the Global South (de Sousa Santos 2014). The Global North often approaches AI ethics through secular, liberal frameworks (for example, privacy, autonomy, individual rights). While AI principles from the Global North (for example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], the European Union, corporate initiatives) focus on privacy, transparency and fairness, they tend to reflect a narrow liberal philosophical foundation and liberal individualism, which excludes alternative moral perspectives and community-based reasoning, thus failing to capture plural global value systems (Mittelstadt 2019). The Global South may prioritize communal, relational, community-centred frameworks and religiously informed values when it comes to digital technology and AI ethics (Arora 2019). Religion thus can offer AI ethical frameworks a shared civic epistemic language (Jasanoff 2005) — for example, through concepts of human dignity (Christianity, Islam), interdependence (Buddhism), stewardship (Judaism, Islam) — allowing normative convergence without enforcing Western universal views, and reducing social bias and discrimination, and the inequality and transparency barriers built in the AI development process.

## Discussion

Currently, Canada's AI ethical governance frameworks are largely shaped by Western secular liberalism ethics, which underscores individualism, privacy and procedural fairness, like those from the OECD, the United Nations and the European Union. As previously explored, this AI ethics policy has inherent structural problems, as it mainly represents the values of typical Western-centric technocratic characteristics of the Global North, while ignoring diversified epistemologies, ethics and values of civil society and marginalized groups, especially the faith groups. In Canada, faith groups, often closely linked to ethnic and cultural minorities, largely remain under-represented in the AI policy-making process, despite their global networks and high levels of trust within communities, as well as their huge existing social infrastructure to mobilize for public engagement and disseminate influence across their global networks. Canada's AI policy makers also fail to mobilize and tap into the invaluable resources present within the religious ethical frameworks embedded in Canadian religious communities. These include a sense of responsibility toward community and society and the practice of virtue ethics, as well as spiritual resilience and solidarity. These frameworks constitute a collective set of consensus that offer practical and actionable tools for governance and accountability, tools critically needed yet seriously lacking in emerging global AI ethical governance models. Therefore, a religion-informed ethical AI governance framework provides a trusted and universal moral language that can foster bottom-up trust and participation in AI governance and directly address the current "consultation theatre"

effect in policy making, an issue that has significantly contributed to the failure of the AIDA.

Furthermore, although religion-inspired AI ethics is not yet embedded in national laws, it increasingly influences policy culture, academic frameworks and values-based guidelines in the Global South, theocratic states and countries where religion plays a significant role, which provide valuable lessons for Canada to learn. For example, in May 2025 in Doha, at the twenty-sixth session of the International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA), the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization presented the Riyadh Charter, a comprehensive ethical framework for AI grounded in Islamic world values. The charter is being recommended to all 57 member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (IIFA's parent organization) as a guiding compass for responsible AI deployment. In predominantly Buddhist countries, the United Nations-led Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific also facilitated collaboration between senior monastics and policy leaders in Cambodia and Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries, where Buddhism is deeply interwoven with societies' cultural and ethical foundations to integrate Buddhist values — compassion, non-harm, wisdom — into the nation's national AI strategy. African academics are beginning to engage with these issues. For example, the African Observatory on Responsible AI, conducted a study with 296 religious authorities in Senegal to explore ethical perceptions and governance possibilities (Yassine and Diop 2025). The researchers found that Senegalese religious leaders broadly support human-centered AI governance and favour involving religious authorities in ethical deliberation, especially in fields such as health care and warfare, while opposing AI's role in justice, genomics and sexual profiling (ibid.). In this context, engaging with faith-based perspectives would allow Canada to lead a more inclusive AI governance, to avoid ethical isolation, and to complement the Indigenous and community-based data governance model of ownership, control, access and possession<sup>14</sup> already recognized in domestic policy.

## Recommendations

This paper does not propose inserting religion into legal regulation. Rather, it acknowledges that religious institutions, while often critiqued, remain deeply embedded in social life and influence ethical imaginaries. The focus is on how their legitimacy and networks can be leveraged to foster participation, inclusivity and consensus in AI ethics, without making governance itself religious.

- **Recommendation 1:** Canadian society urgently needs better education about AI and a deeper understanding of AI ethics. It should recognize the importance of education, participation and inclusive deliberation in AI ethics and governance. Canada should consider following examples such as Singapore, which has incorporated digital ethics into its national curricula, and Finland's nationwide "Elements of AI" course, to promote public understanding of AI.
- **Recommendation 2:** The government should function as an enabler and a convener for formal coalition-building across religious organizations, communities and Indigenous

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/>.

groups to collectively inform ethical AI governance. It should also foster national dialogues that include religious academics, community leaders and grassroots actors. Implementation can be achieved through measures such as establishing a “national multi-stakeholder AI ethics advisory body,” launching a national dialogue initiative on AI ethics and introducing targeted funding through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Digital Citizen Contribution Program.

- **Recommendation 3:** Canadian policy makers should encourage foreign policy engagement that includes religious actors alongside state and corporate stakeholders such as Microsoft and IBM (as, for example, the Vatican’s AI initiative involved Microsoft). In parallel with working with individual countries, Canada should join or co-sponsor faith-inclusive AI multilateral initiatives discussed in the introduction.

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## About the Author

Xiao Han is a former Digital Policy Hub doctoral fellow and a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Religious Studies at Université du Québec à Montréal. Her current research focuses on the interdisciplinary intersection of digital media, AI and religious studies, exploring how these technologies impact immigrant communities — particularly Chinese immigrants in Canada — across religious, socio-cultural and political dimensions.

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