

Religion and Robots: How Religious Ideas Shape Societal Attitudes Towards Robotic Technology

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In examining the legal and social structures in which robots operate, it is helpful to also explore some religious ideas and concepts that often times inform and underlie larger societal, cultural and legal attitudes towards robots and robotic technology. An examination of the world's major religious traditions reveals the source for some broad differences in societal attitudes towards robots. These differences line up more or less according to the common "East/West" religious divide, which will be the focus for this presentation.

For instance, in the monotheistic Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there is an emphasis on the idea of idolatry. This concern has manifested itself throughout the bound-up histories of these faiths, from Judaism's early emphasis on and prohibitions of idol worship and the general absence of human images in worship, to Islam's prohibitions against depictions of humans and other sentient beings. Such focus on idolatry has influenced, in part, present day thinking on the proper attitude toward the development of robotic technology. A related consideration is the potential challenge robots offer to a theological understanding of human beings as the pinnacle of the created world, resulting in a greater degree of mistrust and skepticism of the direction of robotic development. This partly helps to explain why robots are largely understood as helpers in Asian societies whereas in Western countries there exist the familiar fears of the robotic overlords wresting control over society from human beings.

In contrast, Eastern religions and philosophies (Buddhism, Shinto, Confucianism) lack the monotheistic tendencies found in Western religions as well as corresponding injunctions against idolatry. There is more of a prevalence and acceptance of forms of polytheism derived from folk religions as well as ideas of incarnations of various divine entities. Related to polytheism is a type of animism whereby natural objects, forces, and even some artifacts of human origin can contain a kind of elementary "soul" or "spirit." This helps to explain an important feature of robotic culture in Japan; that is, the idea that objects (both natural objects and human artifacts), including robots, may be said to be "ensouled." This idea is not common in the West largely as a result of the dominance of monotheistic ideas and theological arguments against what were seen as pagan or pre-Christian notions of animated or ensouled nature. Consequently, this type of thinking fell out of favor with the development of mainstream culture and society.

In summary, the hope is that an investigation of this sort will facilitate and engage thought on the topic of robotics in the context of religious belief systems, which can help to explain some of the present day attitudes and judgments about robots and their place in society.