



The Fourth Industrial Revolution: Fuelled by individualism

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Abstract

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) transcends mere industrial advancements; it embodies a profound social transformation shaping the very essence of our society. Given its rapid and unpredictable nature, theologians are compelled to anticipate potential future scenarios to adequately prepare for the forthcoming paradigm shift. This article endeavours to outline a plausible trajectory while exploring theological implications for response formulation. Focusing specifically on the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) within the 4IR, this article employs economic analysis to depict a scenario wherein advancing AI consolidates significant social influence within market dynamics. Central to this revolution is the narrative control wielded by those in power, shaping discourse among proponents and detractors alike. Moreover, it forecasts that in pursuit of economic expansion, the market will commodify and monetise identity, exacerbating contemporary individualism. In response, the Christian doctrine of humanity created in the image of God emerges as a pivotal framework for addressing these challenges. Among the contributions of the trinitarian theological movement, 'mediation' remains a relatively underdeveloped concept, yet holds profound implications for understanding relational ontology. Drawing from the insights of Colin Gunton, particularly his emphasis on mediation, this article proposes further research in this area. A revisionist approach to mediation necessitates a reassessment of the prevailing ideals of autonomy and a critical examination of Christian tradition. Such an undertaking invites exploration of theological contributions beyond Western frameworks, enriching our understanding of core doctrines.

Keywords

Artificial Intelligence; Colin Gunton; identity; individualism; Trinity; Trinitarian; mediation; ontology; epistemology; monetisation; Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)

1. Introduction: The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), AI and individualism

The annual gathering of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos serves as a significant barometer of global priorities. In his 2024 recap of the event, Mike Brown, CEO of Nedbank, noted that while geopolitics remained a prominent theme, the prevailing “extraordinary hype” centred around artificial intelligence (AI) (Brown, 2024). During a WEF presentation, Al Olama from the United Arab Emirates stated, “AI has elements of every single revolutionary technology that humanity has embraced in the past and used to leapfrog and develop” (Beddoes et al. 2024:n.p.). It is the rapid pace and far-reaching impact of this transformation that garners widespread attention, as encapsulated by Al Olama’s reference to “leapfrogging”.

For clarity, it is pertinent to explore the evolving relationship between the terms “AI” and “4IR”. Presently, our reality is characterised by an intertwined market economy and social fabric, where industrial advancements signify broader societal transformations. Much like the steam engine was pivotal to the First Industrial Revolution (Beddoes et al., 2024), electrical energy to the Second, and information and electronics to the Third (Hlatshwayo, 2019:26), AI serves as a cornerstone of the 4IR, albeit with a reach extending far beyond traditional industry. It functions as a metaphorical river breaching its banks, permeating all sectors of society and blurring the delineation between public and private spheres. Given its profound societal implications, the focus of this article is on the AI component of the 4IR, as it significantly influences our societal dynamics and functioning.

The definition of AI offered by Adams et al. (2021:xx) is fitting here:

[N]eural-network-based learning systems which produce results and make decisions based on data. AI is part of a broader field of algorithmic or automatic decision making where computing services collect and analyse data to support or make decisions on behalf of human beings.

This definition underscores the crucial aspect of AI “making decisions on behalf of” individuals, which serves as a nexus between AI, social theory, and our theological considerations regarding its societal impact.

Reckwitz and Rosa (2023:2) have highlighted the 2008 financial crisis as a catalyst for renewed scrutiny of the ramifications of post-industrial capitalism on society. Theories of society serve as vehicles for articulating these ramifications, engaging in a meaningful dialogue with theology as we endeavour to comprehend the formative impact of societal change on individuals. While discussions surrounding AI often centre on its economic implications, it would be erroneous to view these in isolation. Concurrent with technological advancements are profound shifts in the prevailing paradigms that shape our perceptions and interactions with the world (Schwab 2016). Charles Taylor's (1989) seminal work, *Sources of the Self*, serves as a prime example, elucidating how various religious, social, and industrial revolutions have influenced and subsequently altered the formation of our identities.

There is substantial merit in critically examining the impact of AI within this comprehensive framework. Various disciplines, including theology, economics, technology, political science, social psychology, and cultural anthropology, contribute to the multifaceted study of AI (Reckwitz & Rosa 2023:20). The current exploration is merely a fragment of the larger discourse, serving as an illustrative example of the nuanced thinking necessitated by this complex subject matter.

The primary focus here revolves around identity formation. Both the market economy and Christianity share a vested interest in this aspect. Christianity perceives identity formation as relational and mediated, acknowledging it as a process heavily reliant on interpersonal interactions. In contrast, the theoretical perspective of the market portrays identity formation as the outcome of autonomous expression. I employ the term “theoretical” here, acknowledging the evolving understanding that decision-making processes are less cognitive and autonomous than previously assumed a decade ago. However, this theoretical stance remains predominant, and the proliferation of AI may profoundly influence its sustainability moving forward.

The ability to make decisions has long been highly prized, regarded as the cornerstone of human autonomy and a fundamental ideology within the prevailing social paradigms of Western society. This ideology is encapsulated by the concept of “individualism”. Historically, we trace the

roots of individualism, or the emphasis on personal decision-making, to the Enlightenment – a revolution that may have wielded an influence greater in magnitude than that of the 4IR. Through successive cycles, we have witnessed an evolution from these Cartesian origins. Fukuyama (2022:47) characterises this trajectory as the “expansion of the realm of individual autonomy”, illustrating how our identity has transitioned “from choice within an established moral framework to the ability to choose the framework itself”. Spatially, we can conceptualise this shift as individualism migrating to the societal epicentre, assuming precedence over all other considerations.

There is a direct relationship between AI and contemporary discussions on identity (Schwab 2016). This article aims to argue that AI will entrench rather than destabilise individualism as a dominant paradigm for identity. In essence, AI will shape our worldview and influence our beliefs (Schwab 2016). Serving as a tool of the market, AI’s messaging will be harnessed to further the market’s primary objective of fostering economic growth (Schwab 2016). This assertion does not negate but rather complements discussions focused on the economic repercussions, particularly in developing nations where AI has the potential to exacerbate skill disparities and reinforce existing inequalities (Hlatshwayo 2019:26). Banda (2023) underscores this by stating, “[The] 4IR is resulting in extensive unemployment and diminished employability by making specific jobs redundant and rendering people’s skills outdated due to the constantly evolving machinery in workplaces” (cf. Smith, 2021).

Indeed, while the economic challenges highlighted by Banda are undeniable, they may overshadow the less observable epistemological threats. This sentiment is echoed by Marwala (2024:n.p.), “Perhaps, the greatest worry around the 4IR is not that it will challenge our belief systems or spell the end of religion but will make humans irrelevant.” Consequently, much of the discourse revolves around the interplay between the market’s influence and the resilience of individualism.

An epistemological focus on the issue precedes an exploration of epistemology within the theological response. Historically, we observe both epistemology and ontology playing central roles in Barth’s (1975) theology of resistance in the previous century. However, in his era, the demarcation

between market and social economies was more distinct. In response to contemporary challenges, this article looks beyond Barth to Colin Gunton, who wrote amidst the Third Industrial Revolution. Gunton endeavours to transcend Barth's ideas but could not foresee the transformations brought about by the 4IR.

This article acknowledges Gunton's revisionist approach and his dedication to grappling with epistemology and ontology during a period marked by the zenith of secularism (1978–2003). At a time when the Christian presence was waning, Gunton advocated for introspection and challenged core doctrinal foundations. As individualism becomes further entrenched, the question arises: Do we possess a steadfast belief in our belonging to God and His church to resist its allure?

2. AI and individualism's current opponents

To stay focused within the confines of this article, the discussion will refrain from examining the stability of individualism. Instead, the central point is to recognise that while autonomy may be theoretically paramount, there is increasing resistance to its actual implementation. Long before the advent of AI, fractures within the prevailing social paradigm were apparent during the Third Industrial Revolution. Feelings of disorientation, alienation, and discontent were already pervasive. Fukuyama (2019:56) adeptly encapsulates this phenomenon in his book entitled *Identity*.

Human beings are intensely social creatures whose emotional inclinations drive them to want to conform to the norms surrounding them. When a stable, shared moral horizon disappears and is replaced by a cacophony of competing value systems, the vast majority of people do not rejoice at their newfound freedom of choice. Rather, they feel intense insecurity and alienation because they do not know who their true self is. This crisis of identity leads in the opposite direction from expressive individualism to the search for a common identity that will rebind the individual to the group and re-establish a clear moral horizon. This psychological fact lays the groundwork for nationalism.

Gabor Maté (2022) echoes a similar sentiment from a distinct perspective. As both a physician and a renowned author, he elucidates how identity-related attributes lie at the heart of social dysfunction. In this regard, Maté (2022:296) asserts, “Disconnection in all its guises – alienation, loneliness, loss of meaning, and dislocation – is becoming our culture’s most plentiful product”. The latter position is reinforced by numerous prominent complainants highlighting the inability of individualism to deliver on its ideological foundations (cf. Mishra 2018:13).

Fukuyama (2019:54) responds to this discontent by speculating that individualism may be losing momentum. Although he does not explicitly address the impact of AI, he posits nationalism as a potential alternative. It is this viewpoint that I aim to challenge below. Frischmann and Selinger (2018:51) write,

It’s difficult to appreciate how powerfully the tools we develop shape us. One of the most important ways is by shaping our imagined reality, our very beliefs about ourselves, and our preferences and values. If the ends worth pursuing are determined by our tools, by their constructed reality, then nothing less than our very humanity may be at risk of being whittled away.

While much popular discourse surrounds the ramifications of AI on employment and equality (cf. Musk 2023), fewer discussions address the threat it poses to our humanity. Rosa (2019:106) echoes similar pessimistic sentiments, stating, “In fact, the modern social formation has thus in some respects realised a moment of omnipotence ... that cannot be overestimated”. There is a high likelihood that AI will exacerbate the existing challenges posed by individualism through its influential capacity for shaping identity. The argument to be presented will explore why, despite its shortcomings, individualism persists with such resilience.

3. AI will accentuate individualism, not undermine it

Contrary to Fukuyama’s perspective, I contend that we are poised for a prolonged era of individualism. While it purports to offer uniqueness, individualism often feels mass-produced. It presents itself as autonomous yet bears a striking resemblance to hegemony. Nevertheless, despite these

contradictions, it will prove difficult to dislodge. Therefore, our public theology of the 4IR must prioritise the preservation of identity.

In assessing the resilience of individualism, it is imperative not to be swayed by the evolving technological landscape, but rather to scrutinise the actions of the dominant market players. AI does not emerge spontaneously; rather, it is the product of extensive research and development efforts, often financed by large corporations that operate following market dynamics.

Consequently, many factors contributing to the persistence of the current social paradigm are intertwined with market behaviour. For instance, if you are a gamer, discussions with your peers may revolve around Nvidia's latest AI chipset, with a focus on its key performance metrics and its potential to enhance the VR gaming experience.

Nvidia, being a publicly traded company, is subject to the scrutiny of investors who evaluate its performance based on their return on investment. Investors examine the trading history (see Figure 1) and question whether they missed the climb or if there is still unrealised value in the share. The exponential escalation of the share price reflects confidence in the company's future earnings.



Figure 1: Nvidia Stock Price History as of June 9, 2023 (Source: Nvidia, 2023)

4. AI will enhance the market's monetisation of identity

The imperative to achieve short-term economic growth stands as the most compelling directive of the modern economy. As Harari (2011:341)

succinctly puts it, “To understand modern economic history, you need to understand a single word. The word is growth. For better or worse, in sickness and in health, the modern economy has been growing like a hormone-soused teenager.”

Rosa (2019:404) characterises the relationship between growth and the market economy as “dynamic stabilisation”. This seemingly paradoxical term elucidates a social structure that can only sustain stability through continuous growth. Economic growth necessitates a market or a source of demand to be fulfilled. When we combine this imperative for growth with the monetisation of identity, we begin to grasp the commercial value of identity in driving economic expansion.

The capital required to fuel future growth has predominantly accumulated in the hands of a minority. Logically, one might expect a concentration of capital within a minority to facilitate an easily attainable growth strategy. However, the reality is quite the opposite. With this segment saturated with material assets, there arises a dependence on augmenting commodities with identity to justify their premium prices. This encapsulates what we mean by the monetisation of identity. The skills, experiences, and assets we employ to portray our identity often result from financial investments.

In simpler terms, despite AI’s potential to enhance the well-being of many through increased affordability of basic services like healthcare, the majority of AI investment will target the ‘luxury’ market catering to the elite.

This argument gains further clarity when examining Thomas Piketty’s (2020) book, *Capital and Ideology*. Piketty demonstrates the distribution of wealth since the last industrial revolution with a graph known as the “elephant curve” (see Figure 2). It owes its name to the long-upturned trunk that depicts the significant wealth accumulation of the top 1% of the population. Between 1980 and 2018, the top 1% captured 27% of economic growth, more than double the share of the bottom 50%.

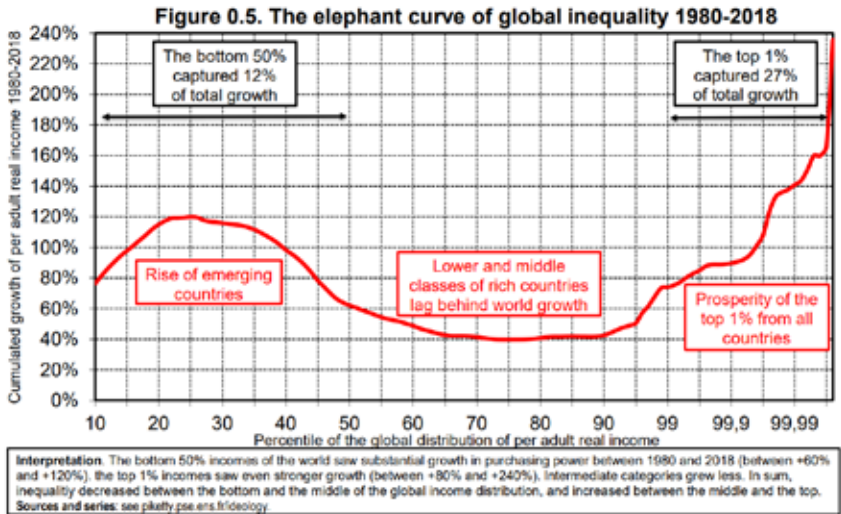


Figure 2: The Elephant Curve (Source: Piketty, 2020:25)

Keeping the elephant curve in perspective, let us consider the traded stock of super luxury goods, such as Richemont and LVMH. By examining the growth trajectory of Richemont’s share price (Figure 3) through the lens of the elephant curve, it becomes evident that the company’s expansion is heavily reliant on the commoditization of identity to drive economic growth. Richemont specialises in luxury analogue watches and pens, two items that might seem redundant in a digital age. Yet, the purpose of these instruments far exceeds their utility. They are there to proclaim the status of their owner. The resilience of luxury goods like these underscores the interplay between identity commoditisation and the persistence of individualism.



Figure 3: Richemont Historical Share Price (Source: Richemont, 2023)

Is this argument applicable to a developing market like South Africa? Despite differences in scale, the underlying principle of leveraging AI remains relevant. Just as Nike can transform a sneaker into a lifestyle asset, similar transformations can occur with products like pens by companies such as Richemont. Trade Intelligence, a South African-based organisation, annually publishes estimates on the size of the informal sector in South Africa (Trade Intelligence 2024). Their research suggests that the informal market exceeds R170 billion in annual spending. This sector operates informally primarily due to its reliance on cash transactions and the perceived high costs associated with formal transaction recording systems, including operational expenses and taxation.

AI's capacity to collect and analyse our "behavioural surplus" will enable it to connect the dots between the earnings and spending patterns of informal traders. Consequently, the same targeting techniques utilised with formal Internet users can be directed towards this demographic.

5. AI extends the shift from a production to a knowledge economy: Reinforcing individualism through the further commoditization of skills

Modern economies have evolved from those centred around production to those centred around knowledge, giving rise to the concept of the

“knowledge economy”. As participants in this economy, it is no longer about what capital we own but about what we know.

In a knowledge economy, individualism is bolstered by the emphasis on personal development as a fundamental aspect. We, the workforce, become commodities that we enhance with skills and other attributes. Ironically, this creates a circular movement: we invest in acquiring skills from the economy to improve our ability to contribute, only to return to the economy to purchase symbols of prestige.

In this context, the distribution of wealth is crucial for a market striving for growth. Its primary objective is to translate wealth into revenue. With assets already saturated, we observe a growing emphasis on experiences or lifestyle assets. The nature of what we sell in a knowledge economy makes individualism resilient.

6. Control of AI remains in the hands of the few, protecting the market’s agenda

Technology is becoming more affordable at levels previously unimaginable. However, while consumers face reduced barriers to entry, significant obstacles persist for producers. The hardware that powers the Internet, the software we use for searching, the media tools for sharing our “best life ever”, and the financial systems for transactions – all of these are controlled by a few. As Fukuyama (2022:104) observes, “Rather than dispersing power, the modern internet has concentrated it”.

This consolidation of power renders the 4IR more subservient to the market than to the masses. From an African standpoint, Coudry and Mejias’s (2019) concept of “data colonialism” encapsulates the asymmetrical power dynamics inherent in AI. When discussing responsible AI in Africa, Dignum (2023) also advocates for an examination of the locus of power.

[AI] is mostly about the structures of power, participation and access to technology that determine who can influence which decisions or actions are being automated, which data, knowledge and resources are used to learn from, and how interactions between those that decide and those that are impacted are defined and maintained (Dignum, 2023:200).

7. Social media dilutes oppositional voices

The 4IR has dismantled barriers to media access (Schwab, 2016), allowing minority concerns to occupy a larger space in the public discourse. One might expect this to amplify the collective voice of resistance, yet evidence suggests otherwise. Fukuyama presents a compelling argument for the fragmentation of liberal societies due to unregulated identity groups, whose “filter bubbles” hinder effective correction from broader society. By eroding the authority of traditional media gatekeepers such as editors, and fact-checkers, and adherence to professional standards, the dissemination of misinformation and targeted efforts to discredit political adversaries have become more prevalent (Fukuyama, 2019:180–181).

8. Concluding comments on individualism’s resilience

Understanding the market’s agenda is crucial for comprehending the seeming resilience of individualism. Upon reviewing various arguments, one can liken individualism to the figurehead of a democracy – the king who occupies the throne while true power lies elsewhere. In today’s context, power has shifted to the market, which harnesses individualism to fuel its expansion and further entrench its influence over society.

9. Distinguishing theology from individualism amidst AI advancements

Considering the growing market influence shaping societal norms and perspectives, what theological stance should we adopt? The extensive history of theology offers valuable insights into addressing this question. In terms of identity, it is argued that the market now wields significant power. The identities shaped by the market often become commodified and monetised, deviating from the Christian belief in identity as a reflection of the divine image. As a result, among the various theological responses to the 4IR, particularly to AI, this section suggests prioritising our understanding of identity as being made in the image of God (*imago Dei*).

To refine our focus, this section suggests that within our exploration of the doctrine of God, the aspect most pertinent to the increasing market influence is mediation. Essentially, mediation is presented as the countermeasure to

monetisation. However, it is crucial to elaborate on the term “mediation” within this context, as it may initially seem abstract, especially considering the urgent issues like widening inequality and unemployment stemming from AI advancement.

In this context, mediation aligns with the theology of resistance, describing the intricate relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here, I draw insights from Colin Gunton, a Reformed British theologian active from the late 1970s until he died in 2003. Gunton’s contributions were pivotal in what has been dubbed the “trinitarian revolution”, renewing the focus on the Trinity. Central to this renewal is the emphasis on the perichoretic relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Gunton’s early critique of foundationalism laid the groundwork for his investigation into the evolution of prominent Western theologies. He gained recognition for his contentious appraisal of Augustine while commending the perspectives of Irenaeus and the Cappadocians. In his later writings, mediation took centre stage. Gunton notably melded Irenaeian doctrine, particularly the concept of the ‘two hands’ of God, with his trinitarian reflections to underscore a mediated relational identity, mirroring the mutual essence inherent in the Holy Trinity.¹

This mediated identity is at the core of our understanding of salvation. Salvation is not merely a status; it is our participation in the mediated relationship of the Trinity. It is not something one possesses but rather an ongoing act of engagement. While there are nuanced debates about what participation entails, delving into those are not the subject of this argument. Instead, AI prompts us to explore how trinitarian theology enriches our understanding of identity.

Drawing a parallel with Barth’s work is enlightening. Like Barth, who grappled with theological questions amidst the upheavals of an industrial

1 Two references providing some insight into Gunton’s (2002:79) reading of Irenaeus are as follows: “Irenaeus denies the attributes projected by his opponents in order to preserve his trinitarian theology of God made known in the economy of his action in creation and salvation, an economy which is the very heartbeat of his theology”. And a specific reference to the “two hands”: “The Father in the one who creates, reconciles, sanctifies, and the rest, but does so in every case by the actions of his two hands” (2002:139).

revolution, AI challenges us to reconsider our ontology amid significant social change. While Barth emphasised the primacy of revelation, the concept of mediation takes centre stage in our discussion. Just as Barth challenged the epistemological assumptions of his time, AI compels us to review our ontology.

Critics may argue that applying theological doctrine to societal shifts appears too abstract and too disconnected from tangible realities. Yet, this perspective warrants challenge. James K.A. Smith (2009), influenced by Charles Taylor, critiques theology's inadequate response to the formative influences of the market economy. He underscores how theology often overlooks these forces, failing to recognise their profound impact. Smith (2009:126) aptly observes,

Christians fail to articulate strategies of resistance because they fail to see a threat. Because they fail to see these cultural institutions and practices as formative – fail to see them as liturgies rather than just neutral, benign “things we do” – they also fail to recognize what’s at stake in them.

Do we overlook the market's role as a shaping force in our society? Do we fail to grasp that AI will not diminish but rather amplify this influence exponentially? The subsequent discussion contends that our ongoing incorporation of trinitarian insights into our theology signals the necessity for further revision. It suggests there are aspects we are neglecting to perceive.

10. Mediation (in an Irenaean sense) is central to protecting a relational ontology from individualism

A critical assessment of the trinitarian revolution suggests that its impact might not have been as revolutionary as claimed. Instead of fundamentally reshaping theological frameworks, it often involved superimposing relational language onto existing structures, adding concepts without subtracting any. In the context of this discussion, this means that while relational concepts were incorporated into theological discourse, the language of autonomy and individualism remained largely intact. Consequently, the significance of mediation in our understanding of

communal existence was diluted by the continued emphasis on autonomy (Fukuyama 2022:150).

Writers like Smith (2009) contribute to this discourse by challenging the notion of human rationality and autonomy. They argue that our formation as individuals and as a society is far less conscious and rational than commonly assumed. Smith (2009) illustrates this by highlighting the formative influence of institutions like the shopping mall in contemporary society. He writes,

Because our hearts are oriented primarily by desire, by what we love, and because those desires are shaped and moulded by the habit-forming practices in which we participate, it is the rituals and practices of the mall – the liturgies of mall and market – that shape our imaginations and how we orient ourselves to the world (Smith 2009:25).

With the increasing use of AI, we anticipate that Smith's (2009) observations will be amplified, particularly as the market exerts a greater formative influence on identity. The theological hope is that this phenomenon contributes to challenging and ultimately undermining the ideal of individualism. Whereas individualism places the individual above relationships, a trinitarian relational ontology views relationships as mediating personhood.

Gunton (1991:51) highlights the central role of the Augustinian-Cartesian connection. He critiques the Augustinian influence on Western theological development, arguing that it offers a less nuanced understanding of the Trinity and related ontology compared to the perspectives of Irenaeus and the Cappadocians. In essence, Gunton portrays Augustine as the architect of individualism.

Gunton's treatment of the Reformers is indeed a point of contention, as he tends to be lenient toward them. This is where scholars like Charles Taylor and Francis Fukuyama offer additional insights. Fukuyama asserts

Luther's significant role in shaping contemporary individualism, with a more assertive stance than Taylor.²

For those within the Reformed tradition, there is a risk of inadvertently perpetuating individualism while attempting to combat it using the same theological framework that contributed to its emergence. Embracing mediation as central to our relational ontology necessitates a more critical engagement with our Reformed heritage than Gunton might have been willing to undertake. It prompts us to re-evaluate cherished concepts that may not align with a relational ontology and may prove inadequate for confronting hyper-individualism.

Exploring potential research opportunities could involve conducting a critical review of mediation and autonomy in the Reformed tradition. Alternatively, researchers might examine the relationship between mediation and autonomy within various African theological frameworks, offering insights into cultural, social, and political dynamics within these contexts.

11. Conclusion

This article suggests framing the 4IR as a social revolution, emphasising the market's predominant influence and its utilisation of individualism to advance its agenda. Central to our response lies the Christian doctrine of identity, rooted in the image of God. However, despite the contributions of the trinitarian movement, the concept of mediation remains insufficiently integrated into our theology. The article suggests prioritising research in this area to develop a counter-revolutionary theology. Shifting towards a more mediated ontology necessitates challenging the ideals of autonomy and adopting a revisionist approach to Christian tradition. In this regard, the theology of the trinitarian revolution stands poised to offer significant insights and contributions.

2 “According to Luther, the essence of Christianity was faith alone, an inner state that may not be accessible even to the believer. It did not reside in the individual's conformity with the rituals and rules set by the Catholic Church. This laid the foundation for subsequent ideas about the existence of an occluded inner self that was distinct from the outer self-visible to the rest of society” (Fukuyama 2022:49).

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