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Academia, the Sabbath, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution



Note: This article is slightly adapted from a presentation at the Seventh International Scholars Conference (7ISC) in Bandung, Indonesia, in October 2019. The conference was organized by Universitas Advent Indonesia [Indonesian Adventist University] (UNAI), Universitas Klabat [Klabat Adventist University] (Unklab), Adventist University of the Philippines (AUP), and Asia-Pacific International University (AIU) under the theme “Knowledge Creation In 4.0 Industrial Age.” Taking place pre-COVID-19 and OpenAI’s release of ChatGPT, the perspective shared reminds Adventist educators of the central purpose of Adventist education amidst changing economic, philosophical, social, and political tides.

A preliminary exploration of the implications of the theology of the Sabbath in the rapidly changing world impacted by the Fourth Industrial Revolution is essential for Adventist education in Southeast Asia. This region, like many parts of the world, has gone through a significant philosophical, cultural, linguistic, economic, and political transformation during the colonial era of the 19th century and its subsequent development. Major changes initiated during this period have left deep imprints in our collective psyche. The worldview of the industrial world has transformed our everyday lives via our educational system.

As we look forward to the world of digital revolution, the world that moves at unprecedented speed, the theology of the Sabbath invites us to pause and reflect on what it means to be human, created in God’s

image, in the world where our identity and values are measured through numeric quantification. How can we, as Christian educators, resist the dominant discourse that sees humans as *homo economicus* [economic person]? How can we assist those within our demographics with knowledge and skills to live through these rapidly changing times rooted in digital cosmology so that we can live meaningfully, realigning humanity with the image of God in this new Industrial Age?

Questions

The biblical narrative in Genesis 1 describes God’s magnificent creation from the void to the beautiful ecological system with humans as guardians of the earth. Genesis 1:31 says: “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed *it was very good*” (NKJV).¹ In Genesis 2, God rested and beheld the beauty of His creation. In my mind’s eye, I imagine this scenario: After a few thousand years passed and while beholding His creation, God exclaimed: “Who stole My cloud?” I imagine the angels replied, “Google did.”

“And how come people are not talking to one another?” God asked. And the angels replied: “They text and chat through Facebook and Line² and WhatsApp, Lord.”

“And why is it that humans no longer till the land for food and nourishment?” The angels replied, “Jeff Bezos of Amazon.com uses drones for delivery, or they call Grab Food instead, Lord.”

And, I imagine God could no longer rest on the Sab-

bath, grieving the loss of His creation because humans are now living not in created reality but in virtual reality. They are no longer in touch with God's creation. The scenario might seem light and humorous; however, it speaks to the times we find ourselves living in Asia and many other parts of the world.

The Initial Impact of the Industrial Revolution

On April 18–25, 1955, the first large-scale Asian-African Conference was held in Bandung, Indonesia.³ The delegates to the conference represented 54 percent of the world's population. The question they were addressing was how to find a post-colonial method to move forward as nations. However, the Thai delegate to the Bandung Conference, Prince Wan, under the leadership of Prime Minister Pibul Songgram, had a different concern: national security.⁴

Caught within the geopolitics of two political ideologies post-World War II, Thailand was designated a buffer country by the United States to prevent the speculated domino effect as Communism spread across Southeast Asia. Industrial development was the preventive strategy. In the early 1960s, Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat (a Thai general) welcomed a massive amount of monetary foreign aid, knowledge, policies, and other scientific interventions in the name of national and regional security.

The vast geographical landscape and its people were transformed. However, the impressive increase in gross domestic product (GDP) cannot account for significant changes in the lives of the vast majority—from subsistence living to monetary dependency. In his book *The Growth Delusion*, David Pilling writes:

“Economic growth has become a fetish, a proxy for everything we are supposed to care about and an altar on which we are prepared to sacrifice all. In pursuit of growth, we are told, we may have to work longer hours, slash public services, accept greater inequality, give up our privacy, and let ‘wealth-creating’ bankers have free rein.”⁵ Pilling continues, “Only in economics is endless expansion seen as a virtue. In biology it is called cancer.”⁶

Historically, the people tilled the soil and produced

food for nourishment. Development stepped in and said, “You did it all wrong.” Polyculture must be replaced by monoculture.⁷ Instead of producing crops for consumption, you need to produce food in massive amounts through our scientifically proven fertilizer, our superior pesticides, and our genetically modified seeds. Sell them in exchange for money and buy food. The people said, but we already have food from our labor. The dominant discourse responded with imperative disapproval. You must produce food and sell your food so that you can buy your food. And the policies were put in place to support the industrialization of the nation. Soon, we were a part of the Asian Economic Tigers. But the

people lost their land with incurred debt. Massive migration occurred among young men and women, leaving children and older adults in rural villages. Families started falling apart in the name of progress and modernization. People flocked toward money to survive, resulting in over-saturated urbanization.⁸ For example, in 2017, the accumulated farmers' debt stood at 2.8 trillion baht.⁹

Our educational curriculum is designed for an industrial world under the domination of scientific cosmology and technology. Jon Jandai, a Thai advocate for an agrarian lifestyle, once said, “When I saw a child walking into a school, I saw that child entering a factory.”¹⁰ Our educational system is not designed for sustainable agrarian living. David Pilling noted that for thousands of years, there was

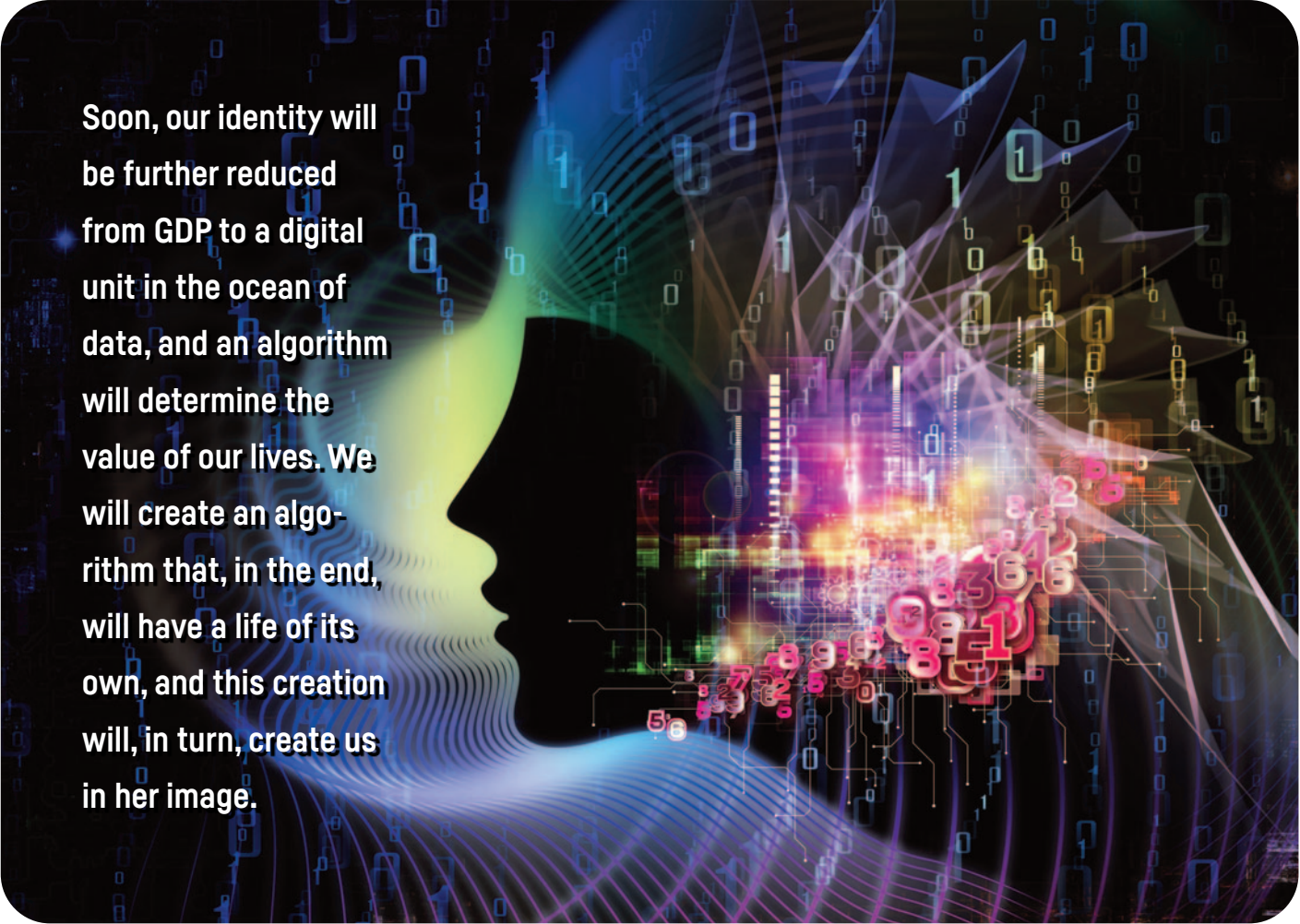
no push for high yield and high productivity from within the agriculture economies. The Industrial Revolution changed everything.¹¹

The Impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

But that was our history, as the people on the margin have negotiated the industrial revolution in Thailand since the early 1960s. What will the Fourth Industrial Revolution bring?

We know the world is changing very rapidly. But how it will transpire in the future world is left to speculation. We know that big data will direct the market, and Big Brother is watching our every step, tracking the movements that we have left through our digital footprint. We know artificial intelligence (AI) will replace various forms of labor, and knowledge will be

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made readily available through technology. We also know that because GDP has come to define success, education has been forced to serve the labor market for her existence. It comes down to food on the table, but the route is via convoluted virtual reality that we must navigate.

Soon, our identity will be further reduced from GDP to a digital unit in the ocean of data, and an algorithm will determine the value of our lives. We will create an algorithm that, in the end, will have a life of its own, and this creation will, in turn, create us in her image.¹² Yuval Harari projected that in the future, we will even ask algorithms who we should marry: John or Paul? And Google will respond: “Well, I know you from the day you were born. I have read all your e-mails, recorded all your phone calls, and know your favorite films, your DNA, and the entire biometric history of your heart. I have exact data about each date you went on, and I can show you second-by-second graphs of your heart rate, blood pressure, and sugar

levels whenever you went on a date with John or Paul. And, naturally enough, I know them as well as I know you. Based on all this information, on my superb algorithms, and on decades’ worth of statistics about millions of relationships—I advise you to go with John, with an 87 percent probability of being more satisfied with him in the long run.”¹³

Concluding his book *Homo Deus*, Harari asks, “What is more valuable, intelligence or consciousness? What will happen to society, politics, and daily life when non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves?”¹⁴

The answer is in the famous Socratic quote, “Know thyself.” Harari argues: “In the end, it’s a simple empirical question. As long as you have greater insight and self-knowledge than the algorithms, your choices will still be superior and you will keep at least some authority in your hands. If the algorithms nevertheless seem poised to take over, it is mainly because most human beings hardly know themselves at all.”¹⁵

The Sabbath and Seventh-day Adventist Educational System

We all remember Mr. Anderson (Neo) in *The Matrix* because of his bullet-dodging skills like no other. But that was because he had the code that enabled him to see the Matrix. While Neo had the red pill and a heavily wired machine to help him uncode the Matrix, we have the Sabbath. As Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions, while we prepare students to be competent for the future world of technology, we return again and again to God's creation. We return every week. Weekly, we are reminded of our creatureliness, our finiteness. Weekly, we are reminded of the created reality versus virtual reality. Weekly, we are reminded repeatedly of the difference between virtual reality and created reality and the values implied in both systems.

While the advancement of technology in the world of dataism¹⁶ and algorithms defines our value through production and contributions to GDP, the Sabbath reminds us that our worthiness depends on the fact that we are God's handiwork. I believe this is a vital role for us as Adventist educational institutions. While we prepare students to be competent in the coming technologically advanced reality, we offer another reality with a fresh set of values and a value system rested in the uniqueness of our individual selves as God's creatures. And in our everyday interactions, we keep reminding others that they are not a unit of measurement but a created reality in God's hand. In the world of dataism, we assert individualism. In the world of algorithms, we assert creationism. We become the new Kierkegardian theological revolution in the world of modern Hegelian absolutism. This becomes the emerging role of Adventist education—the dispensing of knowledge through incarnated interactions that remind others of the true measure of the self. The Sabbath helps us see through the Matrix. Through this lens, we resist treating students as numbers, but we keep validating them through the eyes of God. The Sabbath, as a constant reminder of Creation, is also a symbol of resistance toward the dominant discourse. Walter Brueggeman, in *Sabbath as Resistance*, wrote: “In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods.”¹⁷

And through the Sabbath, we rediscover the cloud, and human relationship, and we till the land for sustainability while writing algorithms and analyzing data so as to be that light in the world of virtual reality. ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, Copyright © 1982 Thomas Nelson. All rights reserved.

2. LINE is a popular messaging and social media platform in Japan and other parts of Asia: <https://www.digitalmarketingforasia.com/what-is-line-app/>.

3. The 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, was attended by 29 delegates from various countries who addressed issues emerging from the Cold War and its impact on developing nations, economic growth, post-colonial responses, and ways of garnering peace. For more, see <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/bandung-conf#:~:text=In%20April%2C%201955%2C%20representatives%20from,%2C%20economic%20development%2C%20and%20decolonization>.

4. See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya, *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of 1955 African-Asia Conference for International Order* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), 32.

5. David Pilling, *The Growth Delusion: Wealth, Poverty, and the Well-Being of Nations* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 13.

6. Tony Catalucci, “Agribusiness and the Cycle of Debt: Let Me Tell You About Thailand's Rice Farmers,” *Global Research* (March 2014): <https://www.globalresearch.ca/big-agri-and-the-cycle-of-debt-let-me-tell-you-about-thailands-rice-farmers/5373170>. Catalucci notes that “The ability to diversify economic activity away from dangerous monoculture practices, to recognize dangerous political schemes, and to find healthy and superior alternatives to the poison peddled by big-agri hinges on acquiring and leveraging knowledge. Either by design or through utter incompetence, or a tragic combination of the two, for the

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last decade while other nations' farmers adopted modern technology, techniques, and developed improved, local and independent marketing models to improve their lives, Thailand's farmers remained mired in hopeless dependence on antiquated and ultimately failing practices."

7. Ibid.

8. Imke Pente and Daniel Müller, "Mapping Agricultural Sector in Thailand: Holdings, Activities, and Trends," *German Asia-Pacific Business Association* (2013): https://www.oav.de/fileadmin/user_upload/5_Publikationen/5_Studien/OAV_Mapping_the_Agricultural_Sector_of_Thailand.pdf. The number of farmers dropped to approximately 40 percent of the total population.

9. Thailand's transition from agriculture to industry peaked in the mid-1980s, with the non-agricultural sector seeing major gains in the late 1990s. During this period, shares and exports of agricultural products fell (from 55 percent of the GDP in the mid-1970s to 17 percent in the 1990s). While Thailand remains one of the world's top producers of sugar, tropical fruits, and vegetables, employment demands in the industrial and manufacturing sectors continue to outstrip the agricultural sector. For more, see Apinya Wipatayotin, "Finding Ways to Beat Farm Debt," *Bangkok Post* (November 4, 2018): <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/1569802/finding-ways-to-beat-farm-debt>. In 2023, that would be the equivalent of US\$77,979,216,000; Nipon Poapongsakorn, Chaiyasit Anuchitworawong, and Sake Mathrsuraru, "The Decline and Recovery of Thai Agriculture: Causes, Responses, Prospects and Chal-

lenges," *Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations* (2006): <http://www.fao.org/3/ag089e/AG089E04.htm>.

10. Jon Jandai, "Life Is Easy, Why Do We Make It So Hard?" TEDxTalk: Suthep (August 3, 2011): <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=jon+jandai+ted+talk&view=detail&mid=20DAADA6E64321E0741B20DAADA6E64321E0741B&FORM=VIRE>.

11. Pilling, *The Growth Delusion*, 9.

12. Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Penguin, 2015). Harari opines that "The seed algorithm may initially be developed by humans, but as it grows, it follows its own path, going where no human has gone before—and where no human can follow," 393.

13. Yuval Noah Harari, "Big Data, Google and the End of Free Will," *Financial Time* (August 26, 2016): <https://www.ft.com/content/50bb4830-6a4c-11e6-ae5b-a7cc5dd5a28c>.

14. Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, 397.

15. _____, "Big Data, Google and the End of Free Will."

16. The term *dataism* is credited to David Brooks, who first used it in his *New York Times* article titled "The Philosophy of Data," in which he sought to examine how data had been used in the past and would be used in the future to shape our assumptions about the universe. For more, see <https://www.hult.edu/blog/the-rise-of-dataism/#:~:text=Dataists%20go%20further%2C%20and%20say,condition%E2%80%9D%20to%20find%20appropriate%20data>.

17. Walter Brueggeman, *Sabbath as Resistance: Say No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 90.

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