Sometimes computers act as if they are possessed--does that mean they may have souls? Probably not right now, but Anne Foerst explores the possibility of soulful robots.

Do robots have souls? Probably not--at least not the ones that have so far been built. But what of the future?

The aim of those of us who do research in artificial intelligence (AI) is to construct a machine with humanlike intelligence. We dream of Commander Data, the fictional hero of the Starship Enterprise. What a piece of engineering! How wonderful to build a robot like that. Should that prove feasible, I for one would regard him (or it) as having the attributes of personhood and dignity just like ourselves. He would be a child of God.

In one of the episodes of Star Trek, the Enterprise crew decides that Data is so useful to them that it is desirable to have more of the same. They decide to disassemble him to find out how he works, then rebuild him and produce copies. Data is at first intrigued by the idea, but then realizes that the procedure is less than safe. Fearing for his own existence, he decides to resign from the Enterprise command. Here the question of Data's personhood comes up: Can he even resign? Does he have the right to choose, or is he merely a machine without any rights--the property of Star Fleet?

The arguments go back and forth. The discussion boils down to the question of whether or not Data has a soul. Indeed, do we ourselves have "souls"? The final decision is that Data has as much right as we do to search for his own soul. Data participates in the human community; he has friends and a sexual relationship; he is loved as a person and is not regarded by most crew members as a mere machine. Any robot which is like us, and is accepted by humans as one of us, is a person.

Much has been written about the anthropomorphization of tools such as cars and stereos. Today, electronic gadgets like Tamagotchies or Furbies continue this trend. People in Western societies are quite willing to treat as living beings certain machines displaying social behaviors like Tamagotchie's hunger or Furbie's "learning" of language. Because of this trend, AI researchers, most of them fans of Star Trek anyway, usually
agree with the judgment that Data is a person. They base this on the way people accept technologies into their lives and are willing to create a society in which technology and humans play interdependent and mutually benefiting roles.

At the same time, the researchers see themselves as a safeguard against too much projection. Since they understand and repair the machines and know exactly how they function, they are much less likely to treat them as more than they actually are. They warn against too much anthropomorphization and define the borders between gadgets and persons. They are those most likely to know when a machine oversteps the boundary and becomes something "more than a machine."

But what could this mythical "more than" be? In the Jewish and Christian tradition, human specialness is symbolized in the metaphor that humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26, 27). The majority of Jewish and Christian theologians have attempted to identify the divine part of humankind with particular empirical features: our creativity; our use of language, logic, and reason; the human ability to think in an abstract way; even our humor, or just the way we look.

But I see it differently. Theology today often concentrates on the biblical testimony that the concept of God should incorporate aspects of both man and woman. This metaphor illustrates that we are images of God only within gender relationships, or to put it more generally, within functioning and beneficial communications. This process of continuing communication, of relationship and interaction, is what makes us images of God. God's promise to start and maintain a relationship with us by creating us in God's image enables us to create community and to live wholesome relationships.

In this metaphorical and communicative interpretation of the creation of humans, God's promise marks the beginning of the relationship between God and humans and between man and woman. It is God's promise, and not some empirical feature, which makes us special and gives us a specific role within creation. It is God's creation of us that assigns value and personhood to each individual.

In the light of this understanding of human specialness, I would have a hard time not to assign personhood to a creature possessing the appropriate degree of complexity. If a being is understood as a partner and friend, it seems hard to take this attribute of value, assigned to it by its friends, away. Instead of insisting on a qualitative difference between us and the machines AI will create, it seems more reasonable to turn the question around. Not reflections on "why a machine never can become like us," but instead the question of what might be the conditions under which God would accept such a creature as God's child. Then we will recognize the arrogance some people display when denying dignity to other creatures.

God's promise to creation is universal--this is the biblical tradition. It is not our place to exclude people from the community, be it because of their race, their gender, their capabilities, or their worldviews. The reflections about Commander Data as a child of God might help us to
remember in humility that each and every person's value is grounded not in his or her abilities but in God's promise and in that alone. The fictional Data might thus serve as a thinking tool to prepare us for the AI machines to come.