Christian Transhumanism and Transhumanist Christianity

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Abstract. What might a Christian Transhumanism or, better, a Transhumanist Christianity, look like? Might conscientious Christians today absorb transhumanist zeal and enhancement technology into holy goals of enriching the individual soul and transforming the social fabric? As stewards of human creativity, public theologians and cybertheologians are provided an opportunity by their transhumanist friends to contribute to wider human flourishing and global wellbeing. Yet, realism regarding original sin heightens the challenge to discern what is good while avoiding the pitfalls of messianic hubris.

Keywords: transhumanism, religious transhumanism, Christian transhumanism, Transhuman Christianity, theology of technology, transcendence, *imago Dei*, transhumanism and eschatology, creativity, created co-creator.

Introduction

A magniloquent Christian Transhumanism has arrived on the scene and rightfully drawn disciples along with public attention. "The most significant conversations impacting our future—*like Artificial Intelligence, Space Exploration, Genetic Engineering*--should involve people of faith," is the clarion call of The Christian Transhumanist Association (CTA) (Christian

Transhumanist Association 2022). Yes, indeed, any public theologian – especially a cybertheologian -- will concur that people of faith should shoulder some responsibility for the social impact of new technologies.[1]

The loquacious prophet and apologist of CTA, Micah Redding, defines the parameters.

> Christian Transhumanism is a conversation between Christianity and the leading edges of scientific and technological thought. This conversation leads to an emerging theology of technology, which may reframe technology as an outworking of the *Imago Dei* and an imitation of the creative process of God; may bring new considerations to the role of technology in God's redemptive purposes and may see indications of technology's profound significance in God's eschatological future. This conversation allows Christians to advocate for positive, relational values within the transhumanist movement, and invites Christians to reevaluate and revitalize their own religious vision. (Redding, Why Christian Transhumanism? 2022)

Note that for CTA a conversation takes place between two complex cultural forces, Christianity and transhumanism (also known as Humanity Plus or H+). It is a conversation. It is a dialogue. It is not a simple absorption of one into the other. Even so, some of us are ready to sew a CH+ or Christian Humanity Plus insignia on to our denim jacket.

It is the responsibility of the Christian, says Redding, to develop a theology of technology which may reframe doctrinal understandings of the *imago Dei* and creation. This reframing, in turn, will allow Christians to advocate for a positive relationship with the transhumanist movement. In sum, a modification in Christian doctrinal understanding will allow an alliance to emerge with the otherwise secular H+ movement. This alliance will strive to make our world a better place for human flourishing.

The CTA agenda maps a healthy path forward for the public theologian, in my judgment. In what follows, however, I would like to offer

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[1] "Dialogue about God takes place in new forms as a form of cyber theology," declares cyberhteologian Sonny Zaluchu (Zaluchu, 2024). For Zaluchu, the traffic flows from digital AI toward the church, toward theological doctrine. For the public theologian engaging in cybertheology, the traffic flows back from the church toward the wider world for the sake of the common good.

some elucidations, clarifications, and even some corrections. I would like to distinguish between a Christian Transhumanism, which suggests a change from the secular to the religious among the transhumanists, from a Transhumanist Christianity which suggests a change in Christian understanding and mission. *En route* I would like to identify various forms of religious transhumanism and evaluate the complaints made by critics of religious transhumanism.

Christian Transhumanism versus Transhumanist Christianity

I am a little concerned about adjectives and nouns. When "religious" is the adjective and "transhumanism" is the noun, then transhumanism bears the weight. To date, the artificers of H+ have been secular, in many cases belligerently anti-religious. „Transhumanism is a philosophy, a worldview and a movement," proclaims Natasha Vita-More (Vita-More 2018, 5). Does this make it its own religion already?

It is not uncommon for a transhumanist to claim that science and technology replace religion in the pursuit of the equivalent of salvation. "Religion promises but science delivers," allegedly (Braxton 2021, 4). This leads to hubris. And hubris leads to colossal mistakes in anthropology. The most portentous of these mistakes is the underestimation of the perduring power of original sin.

So, a term such as "Christian Transhumanism" refers to something that currently does not exist. Nor could it exist, because some defining elements of H+ might turn out to be irreconcilable with Christian anthropology and soteriology. Therefore, the term, "Christian Transhumanism," might appear to some to be an oxymoron.

Perhaps the term, "Transhumanist Christianity," might better fit what Micah Redding and his CTA followers have in mind. Under this banner, the public Christian theologian would engage the secular transhumanist in conversation, learning about the potential advances in AI (Artificial Intelligence), IA (Intelligence Amplification), ML (Machine Learning), Superintelligence, the Singularity, and visions of a posthuman future. Like feeling the avocados on the supermarket shelf, the public theologian

could then purchase or discard H+ produce for the Christian mission. It would be the Christian mission, not the H+ mission, that would provide the criterion.

1. Toward a Theology of Technology

We should expect the public theologian or the cybertheologian to articulate a theology of technology, to be sure. But such a theology of technology just may be incompatible with the current H+ view. Why? Because the public theologian would insist on three distinctive insights. First, the public theologian would thank God for creating the human race to be creative. We thank God for making the human race the created co-creator, as Philip Hefner avers (Hefner 2022). This includes thanking today's techie whiz kids who invent amazing gadgets and life-saving medical machinery every year.

Thanking God has a flip side, namely, it undermines hubris and idolatry. The public theologian would point out that transhumanists overestimate the power of science and technology to perform, and this overestimation amounts to Promethean hubris. After the singularity, "an entirely new species of gods will exist," brags Donald Braxton (Braxton 2021, 8). The public theologian turned cybertheologian will warn us of the dangers of misplaced messianism and digital idolatry.

Second, the public theologian would insist that technology, no matter how dramatic, is a tool. Only a tool. Technology is a means to an end. The end is determined by something supra-technological, not by technology itself. An end, purpose, or goal such as human flourishing or global well-being is set by human subjectivity, pressing technology into its service. „We need not totally reject such technology," writes Oxford theologian Celia Deane-Drummond, "but appreciate its proper limits according to particular goals that express the common good" (Deane-Drummond 2009, 285).

Also at Oxford, transhumanist futurist Nick Bostrom inadvertently admits that AI cannot on its own produce the end or goal or ultimate value. That value must derive from human subjectivity. "In the Hail Mary

approach, we would try to give the AI a goal that would make the AI want to follow the lead of other hypothetical AIs that might exist in the multiverse [...] an outcome might then be obtained that is greatly superior to one in which our AI completely wastes humanity's cosmic endowment" (Bostrom, Hail Mary, Value Porosity, and Utility Diversification 2014, 2). Note: "we would try to give..." The "Hail Mary" emphasizes the overall or comprehensive scope of the value Bostrom has in mind, a *summum bonum* that would rank and orient other subordinate values. In short, regardless of how super future superintelligence gets, we will still need something akin to a religious commitment to set that *summum bonum.* And that will be a religious act. The Christian cybertheologian will nominate God's promised eschatological kingdom.

Third, the public theologian should remind us repeatedly that technology lacks the power of salvation. The advent of superintelligence or passing through the Singularity cannot on its own deliver world peace, utopia, or salvation. Even RLE (Radical Life Extension) or Cybernetic Immortality only extend original sin indefinitely; they do not accomplish what resurrection of the dead accomplishes, namely, eternal life with God.

Hans Moravec, for example, offers a rival secular salvation in the form of cybernetic immortality. When our minds have been uploaded into the computer cloud, says Moravec, we will approach a liberated posthuman disembodied state. "Our thinking procedures might be totally liberated from any traces of our original body. But the bodiless mind that results, wonderful though it may be in its clarity of thought and breadth of understanding, would be hardly human: it will have become an AI" (Moravec 1997). Similar to Cartesian substance dualism, cybernetic immortality will produce a disembodied state of everlastingness.[2] As long as we pay our electric bill, of course.[3]

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[2] The dualism I see here is due to the distinction between embodied and disembodied consciousness. Others, such as Alfredo Marcos and Moisés Pérez Marcos see a dualism in Transhumanism in the form of radical naturalism and existentialist nihilism (Marcos and Marcos 2019).

[3] At least, you have eternity as long as you go on paying your "utility bills" (Pohl 1993, 72).

The technical problem here is twofold. First, is disembodied human existence feasible? Second, is disembodied human existence desirable? Computer scientist and theologian Noreen Herzfeld would say "no" to both (Herzfeld 2022a).

The distinctively theological problem here is that H+ immortality would be an unredeemed immortality. It would consist of making everlasting our fallen state and estranged relationship to God. One of the most obvious yet important contributions of the public theologian to public discussion of Humanity Plus is the constant reminder: humanity is semper sinful. Every advance in technology brings with it a potential for cruelty, evil, and destruction. This means, among other things, that a human-initiated pursuit of salvation is doomed to failure. H+ transformation simply cannot without divine grace achieve any soteriological goals.

"The biggest existential risk to humanity is humanity itself, unless human beings learn to coexist peacefully and help one another willingly," Christian transhumanist Newton Lee warns us (Lee 2019, 26). Carmen Fowler LaBerge provides a healthy dose of this kind of Christian realism.

> The Christian cosmology of the redemptive Gospel cannot be reconciled with a metaphysical and philosophical system reliant upon endless evolutionary complexification. The Christian must ask (and be prepared to explain) what it means to the transhumanist to be human and we must also be prepared to expose the sin-side of their plans. For while there may be much good in longer life, sin remains and sin is prone to ruin good things and the good life so many pursue. We have to face the fact that people – even highly evolved people – have done, are doing and will continue to do horrible things" (LaBerge 2019, 775).

This realism regarding sin leads to the decisive observation regarding a theology of technology, namely, every technological advance is morally ambiguous. „From a Christian worldview, technology is not inherently good nor evil. Technology is morally benign, but we are not. Human beings who develop and use technology are moral agents who stand responsible before God who defines the boundaries of good and evil. So, part of what Christians bring to the transhumanist conversation is the question of *should*" (LaBerge 2019, 774).

As we develop a Transhumanist denomination within Christianity, these three doctrinal insights—(1) gratitude to God for our creativity; (2) viewing technology as only a means oriented toward religious ends; and (3) realism about sin combined with reliance on divine grace for salvation—must remain firm.

2. Transforming Human Nature?

The "trans" in "transhumanism" anticipates a radical future change in human nature. Where do the transhumanists go for their anthropology? To evolution. Transhumanist ethics moves from what *is* in evolution to what we *ought* to do. Here is the *is*: our world is in "a process of evolutionary complexification toward ever more structures." Further, we human beings have a "will to evolve." From here we move to the *ought*: "we should seek to foster our innate will to evolve […] by acting in harmony with the essential nature of the evolutionary process" (Young 2006, 19, 202). The technological imperative kicks in at this point, where Simon Young anticipates replacing "Darwinian Evolution with Designer Evolution—from slavery to the selfish genes to conscious self-rule by the human mind" (Young 2006, 207).

Transhumanist anthropology worships mind, intelligence, knowledge. Singularity cheer leader Ray Kurzweil wants "to connect the upper ranges of our neocortices to the cloud, which will directly extend our thinking. In this way, rather than AI being a competitor, it will become an extension of ourselves. By the time this happens, the nonbiological portions of our minds will provide thousands of times more cognitive capacity than the biological parts" (Kurzweil 2024, 9-10). There is no human roadblock that postbiological intelligence cannot hurdle.

Might this transformation lead to a new species, to a posthuman species? Is this a plan for the extinction of *Homo sapiens* as we have come to know ourselves? If so, should a Christian theologian greet the transhumanist proposal with glee? A qualified "no" is exclaimed by Benedikt Paul Göcke at Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany. On the one hand, Christians should certainly embrace positive enhancements science and tech-

nology offer our descendants. But, on the other hand, Christians must stop short of radical replacement of the human with the posthuman. And, of course, we must protect human moral autonomy.

> According to the moderate transhumanist agenda, it is morally valuable to enhance the human nature of individual subjects, externally and internally, and where it is possible permanently, through the use of applied science, in order to increase their range of human physical and mental capacities with respect to an objective scale of measurement of physical and mental abilities that are judged to be good for human subjects to have. Transhumanism has to respect and ensure that no enhancement, whether internal or external, whether permanent or temporary, conflicts with the character of human beings as free and autonomous moral agents. (Göcke 2017, 352)

With enhancement as a premise, Göcke pleads for a "moderate" transhumanism that is consistent with Christian beliefs. "There is no theological reason why, in the context of moderate transhumanism, we should not quantitatively enhance features that belong to human nature thus understood" (Göcke 2017, 357). I largely endorse Göcke's proposal.

Even so, there is something important I find missing in both secular transhumanism and Göcke's moderate variant. What is missing is sufficient attention given to moral ambiguity in human nature. We humans break things. We destroy things. We cause all life to suffer. We may even destroy the capacity of our planet to sustain our livelihood. Advanced science and technology will increase our ability to wage war and diminish Earth's fecundity.

We call this "sin." What we break due to our sinning cannot be mended by scientific or technological enhancement. In the hands of malevolent actors, advances in artificial intelligence or human capabilties only enhance the amount of destruction and suffering that can be inflicted. The moral ambiguity is this: technological progress provides us with perils as well as promises.

The dark spot of human sinfulness cannot be blotted out with higher intelligence. To believe that expanded knowledge cures human ills commits the gnostic fallacy. Noesis does not cure sin. A better future world

will be contingent on good decisions made by free will, not by enhanced knowledge.

When the Christian theologian describes our inherited human nature, the Christian looks to the cross. On the cross we see how a fallen humanity elects scapegoating, violence, and death. When the Christian theologian describes our future human nature, the Christian looks to the Easter Christ. Healed of his wounds, the Easter Christ provides us with an image of our forgiving God's goal for human history. Christ defines both the image of God and the image of the New Adam. This eschatological promise wrought by divine grace is not on the transhumanist agenda. Nor could it be. In short, then, the Christian theologian will demand realism about sin combined with reliance on divine grace for salvation.

With this theological anthropology in mind, how should we approach the merger of transhumanism with religion?

3. Religious Transhumanism and Its Critics

Nearly a decade ago, I along with Arvin Gouw (Gouw, Epilogue: Introducing a New Transhumanist Theology 2022b) and Brian Patrick Green (Green 2022) began our project, "Theologians Testing Transhumanism". This led along a tortuous path to the publication of our edited volume, *Religious Transhumanism and Its Critics* (Lexington 2022). We asked this question: why would anyone want to construct a religious transhumanism?

On the one hand, H+ choirs sing heavenly melodies of utopian future (Bostrom, Letter from Utopia 2008). On the other hand, H+ voices hit sour notes of dystopian cancelations of humanity as we know it. H+ is ambiguous. This should be obvious to religious ears.

Those celestial strains imagine posthuman existence as our highest vocation and ultimate human fulfillment. The siren call is to hope through technology to transform present reality into an eschatological Eden. Through science along with technology, these technosapiens promise that we can create a god-like artificial intelligence or even become the equivalent of gods ourselves. As techno-deities we will create new universes inside computer simulations, probing the edges of cosmic

reality, conquering death, and creating the equivalent of heaven itself. Our forbearers in Western civilization presumed only God could accomplish such things. But, if the transhumanist vision becomes actualized, through science and technology the intelligent human race will accomplish all this on its own. H+ seems to offer a doable even if Promethean shortcut to salvation.

But, one would expect the public theologian with prophetic sensibility to ask: do not such thoughts constitute pride run amok? unbridled hubris? even self-idolatry?

Bioconservative critics see transhumanism as the strongest attempt yet to seize the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and, as the serpent said when telling Eve a lie, become "like gods." As technology allows us to translate more and more effectively between languages, thus undoing the curse of Babel, technosapiens proceed to build our emerging computerized towers towards the heavens. But to what end? Critics worry, because the same technologies which may allow us to storm Heaven – genetics, nanotechnology, robotics, etc. – may also be used to create a roboticized tyranny on Earth if not extinction of our species. Is such dystopian fear warranted? (Gouw and Brian Patrick Green and Ted Peters 2022).

4. Affirming Religious Transhumanism

Despite this H+ overreach, numerous religious thinkers have enthusiastically stepped up to the plate and swung for H+ fences. "The Church, given its history, philosophy, and prime mandate, has all the right reasons to thrive in a transhuman future," announces Alcibiades Malapi-Nelson at York University in Toronto. "After all, if humans ultimately flourish, the Church, physically conformed by the people of God, will do so as well. (Malapi-Nelson 2019, 393).[4]

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[4]   Roman Catholic bioethicist establishes a test which transhumanists must pass before partnership can be established. "Insofar as transhumanists seek to extend healthy human life and otherwise enhance our human capacities in ways that allow us to make a better world in which we can more fully pursue truth, beauty, and the common good,

For some, transhumanist transformation and religious transformation go together like baseballs and Louisville Sluggers. James J. Hughes, for example, proffers UU Transhumanism.

> Both traditions–Unitarian Universalism and Transhumanism–are shaped by Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism. So, both reject efforts to root transcendence in faith, dogma, ritual or church authority. But the UUs believe that individuals can find transcendence by engaging with the wisdom traditions of the world in an open-minded way, in a community that encourages spiritual individualism (Peters, Religious Transhumanist? Unitarian Universalist? Yes 2022h) (Hughes 2005).

How about a Buddhist Transhumanism? Yes, indeed. At least, according to Michael LaTorra. LaTorra believes that H+ can provide a foundation of contentment upon which higher spiritual practices can be erected.

> Transhumanists advocate the use science and technology to eliminate poverty, create super-abundant material wealth via high technology including acquiring the vast resources of outer space, and by directly removing the causes of bodily aging, decay, and debility, as well as delaying death indefinitely. Buddhist practice begins with meditation, study, and beneficent activities which all result in the consequent development of equanimity. That equanimity, or contentment, is foundational. The higher [Buddhist] practices are built upon it (Peters, Religious Transhumanism? Buddhist? Yes 2022g) (LaTorra, Pre-Original Buddhism and the Transhumanist Imperative 2022) (LaTorra, What is Buddhist Transhumanism? 2015).

How about a Mormon Transhumanism? Yes, indeed, according to Lincoln Cannon.

> Mormonism is already implicitly Transhumanist. With its embodied God, physicalist metaphysics, and practical emphasis on works and apotheosis, Mormonism advocates practical human transformation in ways that are, or at least can be, consistent with contemporary science and technological trends.

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and union with God, then we [Roman Catholics] can approve of their works and join with them" (Green 2022, 153).

It's not at all rare for Mormons, when encountering Transhumanism for the first time, to remark that they've always kind of looked at human potential that way (Peters, Religious Transhumanism? Mormon? Yes 2022e) (Cannon, What is Mormon Transhumanism? 2018) (Cannon, Mormon Transhumanism 2022).

I suspect that the original artificers of H+ are a tad surprised at the aftermarket religious accessories.

5. The Critics of Religious Transhumanism

Nick Bostrom divides conversants into two camps, transhumanists and bioconservatives. Bioconservatives, he complains, want to "implement global bans on swathes of promising human enhancement technologies to forestall a slide down a slippery slope towards an ultimately debased posthuman state" (Bostrom, In Defense of Posthuman Dignity 2005). Bostrom's defense fails to recognize a distinction between two different types of bioconservatives, naturalists and Christian theologians. Naturalists want to protect human nature from technological modification. Theologians affirm spiritual transformation yet are critical of H+ materialism.

Of the bioconservatives, perhaps Jewish theologian Hava Tirosh-Samuelson is the harshest. She objects that H+ works toward the extinction of the human race on behalf of a successor species, the posthuman. She objects that H+ plans for disembodied immortality fail to appreciate the embodied gift of life we have received from God (Peters, Religious Transhumanism? Jewish? No 2022f) (TiroshSamuelson 2022). This may look like naturalism, but it is a divinely graced naturalism.[5]

Wesley J. Smith gives voice to a specifically Christian bioconservatism. "The Impossibility of Christian Transhumanism" is the title of a re-

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[5] Pierpaolo Donatt at Bologna is critical of this vision of the posthuman. He argues "that the idea of transcending the human through the digital technological matrix as envisaged by posthuman, transhumanist and cyborg ideologies that support a radical transformative change, leads to an increasing dehumanization" (Donati 2019, 172). Why? Because digitized consciousness forsakes essential relationality. "The person transcends herself, that is, she goes beyond herself, when she comes out of herself, that is, she transcends herself in the inter-human social relationship" (Donati 2019, 173).

cent Smith article in *First Things*. "The transhumanist worldview and the Christian faith are incompatible. One cannot be a "Christian transhumanist"—any more than one can be a Christian Buddhist or Christian Muslim" (Smith 3.24.2022). Why are Christian faith and H+ incompatible?

> Transhumanism is materialistic. Christianity is theistic. Transhumanism is utopian. Christianity sees the fallen world realistically. Transhumanism perceives immortality as something that can be achieved by men. Christianity identifies eternal salvation as the mercy of a loving God. Its eschatology focuses on God's promises, not upon advanced scientific applications. (Smith 3.24.2022)

Can the incompatibility of H+ and Christian faith be bridged? Yes, says Irenic Reformed theologian Ronald Cole-Turner who affirms CH+. Cole-Turner does not give up hope for constructing a viable Christian Transhumanism.

Cole-Turner applauds the work of CTA thus far. But he adds more supports for the bridge between Christian faith and H+. Specifically, Cole-Turner ramps up the theology of technology. He notes that Christian hope for the future is never limited to what creation generates on its own, whether by emergent or evolutionary processes or through the conscious agency of us human beings and our technology. But at the same time, the gracious and transforming presence of God in creation is always mediated through creation. Excessively dichotomous views of the relationship between nature and grace have led to an overly strong contrast between God's gracious offer for the future of creation and the emergence of novelty from creation itself, including from technology and its growing powers. In short, nature and grace are intertwined when technology leads to transformation (Cole-Turner 2022).

In sum, the original architects of transhumanism thought they were constructing a strictly secular—even anti-religious—worldview replete with technological transformation and materialist salvation.[6] Science

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[6] Anti-religious rhetoric is having an impact on cyberspace. Piotr Roszak of Poland and Sasa Horvat of Croatia ask for state protections on behalf of religious freedom. "Forms of hate speech include humiliation, as well as defamation, which involves false state-

and technology would accomplish what religion only promised yet failed to deliver. Unpredictably, some religious devotees joined the construction project, even baptizing the H+ promise of a transformed humanity with its utopian vision. Bioconservatives then reacted, declaring that the bridge between religion and H+ could not, and ought not, be built. Astute religious transhumanists, however, have retrieved doctrinal rebar in a theology of technology that provides reinforcement for that bridge between H+ and CH+.

Conclusion

In this article we have been asking: what might a Christian Transhumanism or, better, a Transhumanist Christianity, look like? If conscientious Christians today absorb transhumanist zeal and enhancement technology into holy goals of enriching the individual soul and transforming the social fabric, then what? When traveling this road, I have recommended we adopt the term, *Transhumanist Christianity*. This is *Christianity* with the adjective, *transhumanist,* which suggest an emphasis. Perhaps even a denominational moniker parallel to *Orthodox Christianity*.

Before soldering the jewels of transhumanism into our Christian bracelet, I believe we need to articulate a firm theology of technology. Three doctrinal insights should be incorporated: (1) gratitude to God for our creativity; (2) viewing technology as only a means oriented toward religious ends; and (3) realism about sin combined with reliance on divine grace for salvation.

With or without a robust Transhumanist Christianity, cybertheologians should partner with their transhumanist friends to contribute to wider human flourishing and the global common good. Yet, theological

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ments regarding a religious group and characteristically moves to action or reaction at an emotional level (provoking a kind of fight response). In order for such procedures to work, hate speech wants to take advantage of the moment before rational thinking, often using so-called 'cybercascades', which are created when an Internet user, based on contact with users (e.g., the religious), in influenced by certain false rumors or fake news" (Roszak and Horvat 2022).

realism regarding human sin heightens the challenge to discern what is good while avoiding the pitfalls of messianic hubris.

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