

다가오는 초인간 시대의 종교: 기초 작업

Religion in the Coming Transhuman Age: A Framework

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주요한 사상적 열개들이, 그 위에 새로운 종교를 탄생시킬 수 있을 만큼의 충분한 기반을 제공하고 있다는 것을 의미한다.

이 연구는 초인간주의를 그 자체로서 하나의 종교라기보다는 하나의 사회 운동으로 이해할 때 가장 유용하다고 주장한다. 초인간주의 내의 주요 주제들은 인공지능, 재생, 고도화, 그리고 기술-지상주의 간의 융합이다.

현존하는 초인간주의적 종교 집단들은 이미 인체냉동보존술, 고도화 혹은 인공지능의 미래로의 전환 등에 초점을 맞추고 있다. 본 논문에서는 특히 닉 보스트롬 (Nick Bostrom)의 초인류적 미래 개념에 대해 논의한다. 보스트롬의 미래개념에서는 인간의 예상 수명이 십년 단위가 아닌 백 년 단위로 측정되고, 개인들이 상상을 초월하는 지적 및 육체적 고도화를 즐기며, 인류는 고통을 느끼지 않는 모습으로 그려진다. 본 논문에서는 이데올로기로서 초인간주의 운동의 종교적 성격을 고찰하기 위한 기초 작업의 일부로서 보스트롬의 초인류적 미래 개념을 설명하고자 한다.

*핵심단어 : 초인본주의, 신 종교, 고도화, 기술-지상주의(낙원주의)

국문요약

인간의 형태이든 초인간적인 형태이든, 어떠한 형태의 종교성이 미래의 어느 시점에 존재할 것이라고 가정해보자. 이 때, 선택사항 중 하나는 초인본주의적 종교이다. 초인본주의는 기술과 밀접하게 연관되어 있다. 기술 혁신이 가진 힘과 필연성에 대한 믿음은 널리 퍼져있다. 초인간주의자들은 (기술혁신을 통해) 일반적인 인간의 조건들을 능가할 수 있다는 것, 그리고 인류의 경험과 삶이 지금까지 인류가 상상해왔고 인지할 수 있었던 것들을 초월하게 될 것이라는 근본적인 믿음을 가지고 있다. 이러한 믿음은 수용주의에서 기술가이아주의를 아우르는 초인간주의 내의

Abstract

Assuming some form of religiosity will be present in any future, human or transhuman. Transhumanist religion is one of the options on the table.

Transhumanism is tied closely to technology. The power and inevitability of technological transformation is a widespread belief. The essential promise of Transhumanist

is that the ordinary human condition can be transcended, that experience and life will outstrip what humanity has assumed and can recognize. The premise explored here is that each of the major ideological threads within Transhumanism, from extropianism to technogaianism, is sufficient foundation upon which to build a new religion.

The study concludes that Transhumanist is most usefully seen not as a religion in itself, but a social movement. Major themes within this movement include convergence with AI, regeneration, enhancement, and techno-utopianism.

Existing transhumanist religious groups already focus on cryonics, enhancement, or the transition to an AI future. The paper also discusses Nick Bostrom's concept of a posthuman future, one in which life expectancy is measured in centuries, not decades, in which individuals will enjoy unimaginable intellectual and physical enhancements, and one in which human suffering is eliminated. The goal is to develop a framework for considering the religious implications of this powerful contemporary ideology, the Transhumanist movement.

This paper will focus on the study of religion in the future. I assume some form of religiosity will be present, whether we are human or transhuman. Transhumanist religion is one of the options on the table, although it is not the only possibility. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, in *The Religion of the Future*, calls for a religion shorn of the supernatural, a teaching capable of providing “deep freedom” to connect and empower.¹⁾ His is a vision based on political innovation, not technology. Transhumanism, in contrast, is joined at the hip to technology. What Unger shares with transhumanism is a vision of a future “free of the existential limitations of being human...”

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The paper poses the question of how we as scholars will study a future transhumanist religion. Is there a framework that will help us understand a transhumanist religion we

can barely imagine? To answer this I first describe the contemporary movement we label transhumanism.

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The Transhumanist Vision

So what is transhumanism? Transhumanism is here seen as a broad category that encompasses the posthuman, hybrid possibilities, as well as the un-enhanced. What is always true in the transhumanist future is that people will be free from diseases and physical ailments. Life will be better.

Transhumanism strikes many as a form of techno-utopianism. The philosopher Nick Bostrom identifies F.M. Estandiary (1930-2000) as the first techno-utopian, and perhaps the true father of transhumanism.

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Estandiary taught at the New School for Social Research in the 1970s, where he formed the Up-Wingers. Membership was defined as “anyone whose goals go far beyond the most radical ideologies of the Old Order.”²⁾ Transhumanism received a big boost with the advent of the internet in the mid-1990s. Bostrom notes that some of the irrational exuberance of the dot-com era has found its way into transhumanism.³⁾

At its core transhumanism contends that we as a species should take control of our evolution. This line of argument was first put forward by Julian Huxley.

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He suggested that humans assume moral responsibility for natural selection, an imperative with clear eugenics implications.⁴⁾

The Technologies

I will pause to briefly ground the discussion in some of the technologies on which the transhumanist vision is based. While these are not the focus of my discussion, we wouldn't be discussing transhumanism unless the technologies weren't impacting us at every turn. And these are constantly in the news—I note for example the recent Wall Street Journal article by Adam Kirsch which discusses technologies of immortality, Silicon Valley, and COVID.⁵⁾

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- Regeneration and Cryonics: This is limbs regenerated biologically, and cryogenically bringing the dead back to life.
- Nano-technology: This is engineering at the level of the cell, and lower.
- Uploading: Thoughts, memories, mind, soul...everything will go into the cloud.
- Enhancement: Many technologies involving enhancing, going beyond what we have already, are with us already.⁶⁾ But they fall short of the radical enhancement that extends to total uploading the mind, resurrecting the body, or discarding the body altogether. What they share is: they are all technologies of the body: virtual reality; pre-implantation; genetic diagnosis; genetic engineering; pharmaceuticals that improve memory, concentration, wakefulness, and mood; performance-enhancing drugs; cosmetic surgery; sex change operations; prosthetics; anti-aging medicine; closer human-computer interfaces....
- Converging Technologies: These refer to a spectrum of research agendas that increasingly merge, often involving nanotechnology, biotechnology information technology and cognate science technologies (NBIC).⁷⁾

I now return to question of religion and transhumanism.

Does Transhumanism Oppose Religion?

Religions and transhumanism share “commonalities in fundamental human ambitions, desires, and longings.”⁸⁾

Is then Transhumanism a New Form of Religion?

Facile similarities may hide deeper divisions. Transhumanism is part of a broad trend to de-territorialize religion from a metaphysical position and subsume it under a rational-scientific perspective that valorizes technology. This will easily lead to the development of a new “regime of truth,” a techno-religion. Such a new religious discourse is guided not by a transcendent God, but by a “technological post-transcendence.”⁹⁾ Technology will assist humanity to achieve an “ontological transcendence of the human.” It probably doesn’t matter if transhumanism is seen as a religion or not.

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I expect to see a transhumanist family of religions.¹⁰⁾

My view: It’s a Movement

So is transhumanism a form of religion, or something diametrically opposed? Coming from the perspective of the study of new religious movements, I see transhumanism not as a religion, but as a movement. I agree that transhumanism is “a rhetorical strategy characterized by intertextuality.”¹¹⁾ A social movement implies a purposeful attempt to change individuals or institutions.¹²⁾ Movements have agendas.

The Problem with Transhumanism: Reactions and Risks

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Here I will go into detail on five specific concerns with transhumanism which have implications for religion.

1 The first involves immortality.

Most religions contain some idea of the possibility of transcendence, of resurrection, rebirth in other universes, or of release. The problem with transhumanist immortality appears to be that it is humanity which pulls the levers, not some extra-human entity or presence.

2 A second area of concern revolves around the privileging of technology. The socio-ethical implications of such support are not always benign. The scholar of emergent tech-

nologies M.G. Michael call this issue the “socio-ethics of inventions.”¹³⁾ Transhumanism, he contends, in particular perpetuates an attachment to a militarized future.¹⁴⁾ In the example of exoskeletons the technology is presented as an imaginary technofix that resolves current problems.¹⁵⁾

3 A third area of concern involves the implicit ideology of personal development. Transhumanism merges easily with self-improvement, since both ideologies promote an individually-based effort to self-develop.¹⁶⁾ This merging is seen most clearly in the technologies of intelligent devices which more and more are geared toward helping us develop personally.¹⁷⁾

The best-known thinker in the self-help movement, Abraham Maslow, was well aware of the transhumanist principle. He defined this as “...a psychology and a philosophy that transcends the human species itself.”¹⁸⁾ This implies that under conditions of transhumanism, self-development will eventually shift to self-transcendence.¹⁹⁾ And at all times this transcendence is made possible by technology.

4 A fourth area of concern is ethical disquiet. Bostrom has looked at existential risks of various transhumanist technologies, and found nanotechnology and superintelligence risks to be the highest.²⁰⁾ The ethicist Bill Joy has gone so far as to argue that development of nanotechnology and genetics should be stopped.²¹⁾

5 In addition to these concerns we may add the recent concerns about the effects of social media immersion on social cohesion and mental health, as well as deep discomfort with the looming surveillance society.

All these issues come back to the idea of salvation through technology. The discourse around AI and related topics certainly evokes a special kind of euphoria.²²⁾ In this discourse immortality is within our reach through the coming technologies of mindcloning, mindfiles, and mindware.²³⁾ Once evolutionary goals such as super-intelligence and immortality have been achieved by speeding up the process of evolution, conventional religion will, it is feared, be out of business.”²⁴⁾

Approaching the Postmodern

In reviewing what has been discussed so far two themes are striking: the importance of technology, and the question of the human. In this section I will discuss methodological approaches that deal with each of these.

A Communications Framework

Scholars of technology and religion can take note of the efforts to study religious aspects of new media. In particular, mediatization, the process by which social interactions are increasingly dependent on media, is a useful example of how technology impacts can be theorized.²⁵⁾ The scholar of communication Knut Lundby outlines several relevant approaches centered on mediatization:

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1 Technological determinism states that the medium of expression determines the way the content is received. But the word determine is perhaps too strong. Contemporary media theorists are not deterministic. Instead they note tendencies inherent in certain technologies.²⁶⁾ This approach is useful when dealing with transhumanism, in which technology seems to overshadow everything. It could allow us to categorize different technologies by how they influence religious expression.

2 Mediatization of religion: In this theory all social interaction is increasingly mediated through technology. This is the extreme form of technological determinism, in that we cannot escape media technologies. Reality becomes more than the dream induced by the blue pill, reality becomes the Matrix itself.

3 Mediation of sacred forms: This theory, harking back to Durkheim, posits that sacred forms with specific content will inevitably surface. What communications theory contributes is the location of that surfacing, in representation. This suggests the sacred will be found in the intersection of representation and audience reception.²⁷⁾

4 Social shaping of technology: In this view technology does not determine belief. Instead, technology is actively shaped by religion. Specific choices made in the development of technologies are influenced by religious values, which can determine the future course of technology. This theory is a subset of the social construction of technology and actor-network theories, which privilege the role of human choice in technological decisions.²⁸⁾ So to study religion of the future, look for the influence of existing religious

practices on specific choices

A Meaning Systems Framework

Another viable framework is suggested by meaning systems theory.

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Meaning systems, developed in the field of psychology, posits a distinction between general meaning systems, such as religions, and situational meanings which interact in daily events. The religious studies scholar Ann Taves has proposed the extension of the meaning systems framework to all religious phenomena.²⁹⁾ This allows the researcher to escape from the (increasingly outdated) binary of religion/nonreligion. The meaning system concept thus serves as an overarching rubric that allows the disengaged comparison of all types of objects, religious and nonreligious. Recent work in meaning systems has extended analysis to animals. It is argued that the simplest of organisms, through their self-modelling capacities, "...enact implicit answers" to all the basic questions of existence invoked by meaning systems.³⁰⁾

The meaning systems approach, or another comparable over-arching scheme, would prepare us for forms of transhumanist religiosity that did not outwardly resemble historical religion.

Still, human thinking, human action and human awareness. But as transhumanists constantly reminds us, the future may not be human as we know it. We need a concept that includes posthuman beings.

The Religious Studies Perspective. I don't want to imply that the tools and experience of the discipline of religious studies will not be relevant for the study of transhumanism. Religious studies is already hard at work unpacking transhumanism. The religious studies approach, by nature multi-disciplinary and wide-ranging, will certainly remain relevant, even crucial. Instead of describing this discipline, with which most readers will be familiar, let me suggest a few ways topics within the discipline could grapple with transhumanism:

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Ritual: Is there a ritual component in a transhumanist future? Certainly the regular meetings of Humanity+ and other groups could be interpreted as rituals. What about the idea of non-human based rituals? Can AI have rituals? The writer⁹ John Watters, in a 2019 article, has already explored algorithms as moral agents.³¹⁾ Can we not imagine algorithms, with their repeated decision pathways, as rituals?

The Afterlife: The post-singularity reality may mean there is a superintelligence running at the speed of light while other entities, such as humans, continue to exist in some sort of slower metabolic state. While it will be vastly superior to current human intelligence, it will still be somehow enmeshed in physical reality, whether at the level of atoms or quarks. Even if it existed only as pure energy, it would be within the universe. Assuming it would engage in imaginative conjecture, such an intelligence may continue to generate versions of a reality beyond physical existence, a form of cosmological speculation that is characteristic of religious practice.

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Pilgrimage: Defined as a journey to a sacred place as an act of devotion, one wonders if sacred and devotional acts will be relevant in a posthuman future. Pilgrimage reflects a search for and commemoration of meaning. Would the search for meaning cease for nonhumans? I'm perhaps assuming that AI will seek meaning, just as we do, that meaning is something not held in the human heart, that it is a question posed by the universe by its very existence. I'm speculating that as long as meaning is present in some form, there will be such commemorative meaning-making practices as pilgrimage.

Meaning systems and new media approaches give clues to how we could position our

thinking before the transhuman springs forth fully formed. Clearly, these are new angles that can be applied to transhumanism, in tandem with existing religious studies categories.

NOTE

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- 7) Bostrom, "History," 13.
- 8) Jordan, "Apologia," 60. As examples of common human aspirations, he cites the desire to enter space and a common the desire for life extension and resurrection associated with Nikolai Fyodorovich Fyodorov's cosmism
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