



Spiritual Transcendence in Transhumanism

V.R. Manoj, Research Scholar
CES, Anna University
Intern, Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies
Email : vrmmail@yahoo.com

Journal of Evolution and Technology - Vol. 17 Issue 1 – March 2008 - pgs 36-44
<http://jetpress.org/v17/manoj.html>

ABSTRACT

The evolution of science and technology to the next several levels must include a harmonious symbiosis between science and religion. Human civilization has so far shown a stereotyped conflict between either. Both science and religion must be regarded as equally important methods for spiritual transcendence in transhumanism. This paper discusses how religion can complement the ideals of transhumanism if looked from a new perspective. The paper draws primarily on Eastern religious thought, particularly Hinduism, to explain why it is important for transhumanists and progressive futurists of science and technology to find common ground with religion in order to evolve. It is important for transhumanism to extract the transcendent messages from different religions. It also becomes important for religious thinkers to draw from the ideals of transhumanist philosophies in order to allow the survival of progressive religious thought into the undefined future.

A wise monk inserts a plug into his forehead, that connects his frontal lobe to a global network of inter faith monks around the globe for a meditative session that aims to foster world peace.

In the time that the above sentence is written, it might be argued that such a venture should not be pursued. Its implied embrace between science and religion remains open to intense debate across human philosophies. In a rapidly evolving world, and with the imminence of a technological Singularity, how should the human species reconcile differences, find meaning from religion's ancient dictates, and interpret them for the new age? Is such an effort of interpretation even necessary?

Over the ages, several positions been taken on the relationship between science and religion, among them the claim that they are inevitably and perpetually opposed (the conflict thesis) and Stephen Jay Gould's NOMA principle (standing for "non-overlapping magisteria"), which denies that they can be in conflict, since they play different roles or concern different realms (Gould, 1999). We are very quickly arriving at a stage where both religious indulgence and scientific achievement are being hyper-saturated. If indeed such a stage of human development as the Singularity could be realised, then what would our questions be?

I believe that we would still wonder about the most basic question of all, or rather a fusion of two questions: Why are we here, and where are we going? In its basic form, science disregards religion because religious concepts, such as Enlightenment, Heaven, and Hell, cannot yet be experimentally confirmed. While religion seeks to accept death as an inevitable finality, science endeavours to understand and conquer such finalities. Religion, on the other hand, is wary of science because of its relentless quest to question religious claims. Religion, though glorious and numerous in its ideals and following, is still marred by very stringent codes that make human freedom and choice difficult and restrained. The concepts of sin and karma have led to elaborate measures by various religious organizations to restrict the supposedly wandering nature of our minds. On the other hand, science's trivialization of human virtues, such as altruism, as nothing more than evolutionary adaptations for community behavior, irritates religious people. Yet it is not easy to argue against either the wholesome morality professed by true religions or the perfect logic professed by science.

In reality, science has helped and continues to help biologically-composed life forms to interact better, more safely and in more productive ways with this planet - and now, the universe. We now have theories and reasons to explain natural phenomena, such as gravity and weather, which we once feared. We have increased our capacity to reach across geographical distances and planetary realms and have begun to explore outside our planet and galaxy. We are closer than ever before to designing our own evolutionary direction. This could not have been possible without science. Plainly, we cannot always argue against scientific progress, because we have been embracing science for the betterment of our lives at every available opportunity. In that context, religious leaders are mistaken when they argue against such progress, since they use the very tools of science to argue against it. An evangelist who is born from the consequences of modern reproductive and neonatal technology should not be complaining against the advancement of reproductive technology using satellite television. It just does not make sense!

Religion, for its part, is not entirely at fault for blocking scientific progress. In Yoga, which is one of the most important methods followed by Hinduism, there is a Sanskrit prayer for enlightenment which reads:

Asatoma Sadgamaya
 Thamaso Maa Jyothir Gamaya
 Mrithyor Maa Amrutham Gamaya
 Aum Shanti Shanti Shantihi

This translates: "Lead me from the unreal to the real. Lead me from darkness to light. Lead me from death to immortality. May there be peace everywhere."

Verses such as this can be found in several other religious texts. Every single religion, whether it be Islam, Christianity, Hinduism or any other, is a discipline to achieve a state of perfection in everyday life. All religions teach peace, wellbeing and respect for the dignity of oneself and of others, including nature itself. But such teachings are lost in most cases, and replaced by rigid

dictates imposed by custodians of religions, the clergy, who have utilized the power of these teachings to gather vast followings for personal glorification. In several societies, the luxury of education and the freedom of expression and experience are not available. Under such conditions, an ignorant populace depends on the interpretations of complex phrases from religious texts by the holy men on the ways to glorify the conduct of their lives. This places a great deal of influential power with such clergy. Therefore, it may be entirely possible to influence societies with misinterpreted notions of religion, offered to a populace which would not try to acknowledge their own understanding of the religious text which they read.

I had this experience very early in my own childhood. I was raised to practice Hinduism, though my parents encouraged me to visit other religious shrines. During a visit to a bible discussion in a church where people were encouraged to interpret their understanding of a particular biblical verse, I was shocked to find that the pastor did not appreciate any interpretation except his own. I have since found the same rigidity in many other religious teachers of various religions. In my article “What is our Body?” (Manoj, 2001), I had this to say about such experiences in the context of an explanation of my body:

One fine day, it so happened that I looked at my reflection in a mirror and was disappointed with what I saw. I had somehow developed a strange disappointment with my body. To sort it out and make peace, I consulted the religious help of a Hindu priest. I asked him why I felt a strange dissatisfaction with my own body? He immediately offered me the explanation that I was lucky to have been born with a human body which is the result of several rebirths and good deeds. He also said that if I don't behave myself, I stand a chance of being reborn as somebody's mascot. I felt strange after that cryptic answer and so I decided to visit a Buddhist I knew. He promptly sympathized with me and said that there is no pain like the body. He said that it is like an open wound. My visits to other religious priests gave me similar results, all of them saying that my dear planet Earth and my body were arenas of suffering, sin, and all the miseries put together. Now, to regain my confidence, I sought out the help of a philosopher whom I thought would give an optimistic answer. Behold! He said, Your body is “*inutilis caroet fluida, receptandis tantumcibus habilis*” (The flesh is useless and flaccid, so apt to be hungry and demanding). By now, I was stressed enough to force myself into a heavy exercise routine at the local Gymnasium. Just as I was happily comparing the dimensions of my biceps with those of legends, someone came up and told me, “Hey! You know what, this body of yours is a cultural body which you use for social mobility”. Now, I knew I was surely doomed. Surely, there must be some way I could outgrow my disappointment with my own body. Most of the social theories of the body have been very critical than constructive. Every joy of the human body has been criticized at some point as a sign of weakness. The body is seen as a zone of imperfection and as being inferior to an entity we call the soul. Every child is reared with the constant drumming that his body is to be ignored at all costs because it shall lead to temptations of the flesh. The primary importance has always been one of spiritual development rather than the development of the body wisdom.

However, I do not intend to say that all religious teachers are so rigid. I have come across several religious teachers who so deeply understood their own and other religions that they have a transcendent understanding of religion. It appears that the number of such teachers is so low that you may only bump into them through books, rather than in person, but it is such teachers with great wisdom that we really require in this day and age. At the heart of every religion is spirituality, a concept that seeks to understand the inner meaning of our nature. I have explained a

scenario of how spirituality may have come about in my article “The Loss of Mystery” (Manoj, as follows:

A long time ago, there were our very great grandparents who hunted and gathered in the virgin forests of this planet. They discovered new ways to live but were always confused when some among the tribe refused to move after an accident or illness. Thus, death was discovered which was very scary and mysterious. Sometimes, they put the dead in nice little boats onto the rivers with the belief that their loved ones would reach the other world which must exist somewhere beyond the horizon. Thus, belief and ritual was born. But, just as fear and death was discovered, the joy of birth was realized. The labour of love and the cry of a child took away the tears and brought in the ritual of celebration as did the occasions of plentiful harvest, rains and recovery which were celebrated with the new discoveries of art, music and dance. All these cycles seemed to go in perfect harmony until some among the tribe were not very satisfied. So, they ran back into the forests with their bag of questions and discovered spirituality.

So, simply put, I see religion as a method and spirituality as a goal. The objective of spirituality is to arrive at a state of complete understanding where there is no more confusion about the origin, or the intended direction, of our and nature’s existence. The word in the English language for such a state of spiritual understanding is “Enlightenment.” If this concept were to be accepted, then religion need not be the only method to gain such insight. Already, New Age movements that encourage individual eclectic propositions of spiritual exploration are sprouting worldwide and breaking away from the traditional rigidity of established religions. So, we are seeing an age of emerging religions, which usually draw selective inspiration from many different religious teachings. However, the New Age movements are not perfect. While most New Age religions such as Realism embrace scientific methods, many others do not embrace science but instead seek a regression to ancient ways of life. The only common ground is in seeking “Enlightenment,” which is nothing more than a state of greater understanding. I believe that such understanding can be gained from established religious systems, themselves, if they are properly interpreted. In India, for example, New Age movements have mostly been embraced by the members of affluent societies who seek relief from work-inflicted stress or the attainment of Enlightenment. However, for the thousands if not millions of others, it is the dictates of established religions that are embraced and seen as giving hope in face of the oddities thrown upon individual lives.

There is dogma in both religion and science, one of conviction offered by experience and the other of surety offered by concordant experimentation. Neither approach has been particularly successful in answering questions about our presence, conduct, and purpose in this universe. So, we can foresee an opportunity for evolution on both fronts. Science must evolve to accommodate the difficult questions asked by religion about the moral consequences of its methods. Religion must, in turn, open its methods and dicta to scientific inquiry, which should be non-skeptical, though investigative. I am not asking for mere co-existence, but rather for a fusion along the lines of the neurally-connected monk that this essay began with. I also believe that such processes have already begun. Already new forms of religion - forms that seek to incorporate science and technology - are becoming prevalent (these include Scientology and Raelism, among others). Traditionally strong religions, such as Christianity and Hinduism, are using modern scientific technologies such as the internet and satellite communications to evangelize to a global audience. Science has simultaneously been able to find compatriots in religious teachings, such as the Kalama Sutta from Buddhism, which encourages a systematic investigation into the truth. Although much can be expected from both approaches, it can be stated, with daring, that both science and religion remain conservative and rigid.

As humanity sees new possibilities for upliftment of its current evolutionary state, arising from advances in genetics, robotics and computers, global movements have sprung up to address such futures. Amongst them, transhumanism is the most popular as a benchmark for how we must approach a radically different future. It is also the closest equivalent to a moral trendsetter for the ethics of future technologies. One of the principal points to be clarified is its stand on matters of religion, since transhumanism openly advocates the freedom to completely redesign one's body. Writing in a transhumanist vein, Stelarc, a celebrated Australian performance artist, notes that,

The body is neither a very efficient nor very durable structure. It malfunctions often and fatigues quickly; its performance is determined by its age. It is susceptible to disease and is doomed to a certain and early death. Its survival parameters are very slim - it can survive only weeks without food, days without water and minutes without oxygen.

This level of inadequacy for the human body is understood as a result of the advances of science, and it motivates the transhumanist desire to become posthuman and have a choice of several bodies with not just one single improved body. The "Primo Posthuman" concept, introduced by transhumanist artist Natasha Vita-More, is one such example of the aspiration for a radically enhanced body that can overcome the limitations Stelarc mentions. Transhumanists share a lot in common with other future-oriented groups including the Extropians, who are completely radical visionaries, the immortalists, who want to live indefinite lives, and the Singularatarians, who believe in a rapidly accelerating future. What sets apart so-called "democratic transhumanism" is its desire to make such improvements available to all. It also insists that such technologies be developed in an ethical manner. Transhumanism of this kind is possibly the closest thing we have, to date, to a philosophy that can survive our current aspirations for a radically different future and bring academic deliberations on these issues into mainstream society.

Given such important capabilities and the possibility of such a huge social responsibility, where does transhumanism stand on the complex relationships between science and religion?

The average religious person raised into a particular religion has a very distinct expectation of God. God, to such a person, is most importantly a creator and is the source of all powers manifested in the universe. In short, God already has everything that we do not, such as immortality, omnipresence and no physical limitations. If an average person were able to achieve godlike powers through technology, there are two immediate approaches that this person could take. One would be to embrace technology and thus reach the level expected of a god and the other would be to oppose such a development completely, saying that it is "against God's will." But I find this will ascribed to God rather strange. Although I am a deeply religious person, I do not believe that God wishes us to have limitations.

A friend once told me a story about a mirror maker who says that he knows his mirror is finished when he can see his own image. This can be understood in a religious sense if we replace the mirror maker with God and the mirror with ourselves. What people do not realize, thanks to the distorted views they possess of their respective religions, is that the fundamental aim of any religious method is to exalt humankind and all life forms to higher and higher levels. In fact, if we look closely into religious texts, we will find several instances where humankind is urged to climb higher. In the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a religious book revered by Hindus, the following verse is said by Lord Krishna to his friend Arjuna, when Krishna reveals to him his universal body (cited from the eleventh chapter of *Bhagavad-Gita As It Is*):

ihaiika-stham jagat krtsnam
 pasyadya sa-caracaram
 mama dehe gudakesa
 yac canyad drastum icchasi

(“Whatever you wish to see can be seen all at once in this body. This universal form can show you all that you now desire, as well as whatever you may desire in the future. Everything is here completely.”)

Immediately following this is another verse where Lord Krishna says:

na tu mam sakyase drastum
 anenaiva sva-caksusa
 divyam dadami te caksuh
 pasya me yogam aisvaram

(“But you cannot see Me with your present eyes. Therefore I give to you divine eyes by which you can behold My mystic opulence.”)

Here we see a clear example of God’s desire for a human being who is bogged down by self-doubt to see more clearly: to see that there are in fact, infinite possibilities that can be achieved. Now, with the advances in technology, it is not difficult to obtain a scientific understanding of the body that Krishna reveals to Arjuna. Krishna states that his body is whatever form Arjuna desires, i.e. whatever expectation Arjuna has of a body. In response, I assert that a posthuman body that is detached from all physical limitations, and exists as pure consciousness in the internet (that is as far as we can imagine at this time), is perfectly okay with Lord Krishna.

In the second verse, Krishna gives Arjuna divine eyes so as to be able to see him. This clearly shows that Arjuna, with his human body and mind, cannot possibly conceive of a superior intelligence and a body that holds so many dimensions together - just imagine being able to see everything at once. Such instances are described as a state of Enlightenment when you are able to realize everything in this world as one entity. I am sure that science will, in fact, give us Arjuna’s divine eyes to see many dimensions at once. Currently, a simple desktop spectrophotometer allows you to perceive many wavelengths of visible and ultraviolet light. An infrared monitor or even a simple x-ray machine allows us to see what our biological eyes cannot. So, we are definitely getting there. What is it that prevents us from seeing such possibilities? In answer, I present to you a beautiful verse written by Aurobindo, a spiritual guru from India who formulated the system of Integral Yoga. In his poetic book called *Savitri*, he writes:

(From *Savitri* by Aurobindo)

In a body obscuring the immortal spirit
 A nameless Resident vesting unseen powers
 With Matter’s shapes and motives beyond thought
 And the hazard of an unguessed consequence,
 An omnipotent indiscernible Influence,
 He sits, unfelt by the form in which he lives
 And veils his knowledge by the groping mind.

Aurobindo, followed by the Mother (Mirra Alfassa), has always professed that we must evolve and bring the supramental reality down to our level and manifest it within ourselves. This view can also be understood as bringing down and manifesting into ourselves the incredible possibilities of posthumanity. Technology will help us realize the dream of such mystics. It has to be realized now that religion and its foundation of spirituality have stressed to us to rise above and touch greater heights. This can be seen clearly in “The Progress of Man”, a poem about the development of the soul by the Sufi Mystic Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi:

“The Progress of Man”

First he appeared in the realm inanimate
 Thence came into the world of plants and lived
 The plant-life many a year, nor called to mind
 What he had been, then took the onward way
 To animal existence, and once more
 Remembers naught of the life vegetative,
 Save when he feels himself moved with desire
 Towards it in the season of sweet flowers,
 As babes that seek the breast and know not why.

Again the wise creator whom thou knowest
 Uplifted him from animality
 To Man’s estate; and so from realm to realm
 Advancing, he became intelligent,
 Cunning and keen of wit, as he is now.
 No memory of his past abides with him,
 And from his present soul he shall be changed.

Though he is fallen asleep, God will not leave him
 In this forgetfulness. Awakened, he
 Will laugh to think what troublous dreams he had,
 And wonder how his happy state of being
 He could forget and not perceive that all
 Those pains and sorrows were the effect of sleep
 And guile and vain illusion. So this world
 Seems lasting, though ‘tis but the sleeper’s dream;
 Who, when the appointed day shall dawn, escapes
 From dark imaginings that haunted him,
 And turns with laughter on his phantom griefs
 When he beholds his everlasting home.

What I am trying to explain is that futurists need not be wary of religion as a barrier to their progress. We must understand that religion has always held the progress of humankind and nature in the highest regard. In essence, religion is a method to understand greater realities and states of being. In this regard, all religions are essentially the same, but there are limitations to religion, too. Aurobindo in his *Essays on the Gita* expresses the imperfections of religions very clearly:

But the weakness of the kinetic and the emotional religions is that they are too much absorbed in some divine personality and in the divine values of the finite. And, even

when they have a conception of the infinite godhead, they do not give us the full satisfaction of knowledge because they do not follow it out into its most ultimate and supernal tendencies.

This then calls for an evolution in religious thought. Who better to introduce it than the transhumanist movement, which is the closest to interpreting and making available radical futuristic technology to all? There is much wisdom in religion that is yet to be realized. Even the concept of a Singularity is remotely described in Hindu philosophy as the 24,000-year cycle of *Yugas*, in which the world goes through four periods accelerating progressively towards divinity and then recycles again. We need such ancient systems of wisdom to help us understand what it feels like to overcome ourselves. Sadly, such comparisons and useful parallels are forgotten or overlooked for argument's sake.

Much religious wisdom was conceived in a time when superhuman possibilities could only be imagined. Now, we have come to an age when we can rapidly accelerate. As the concept of Singularity teaches us, we can realize the many wonders that we have imagined. Conversely, religions must realize their limitations. In his *Slate* article, "Buddhist Retreat: Why I gave up on finding my religion," (Horgan, 2002), John Horgan has this to say about the limitations of Buddhism:

All religions, including Buddhism, stem from our narcissistic wish to believe that the universe was created for our benefit, as a stage for our spiritual quests. In contrast, science tells us that we are incidental, accidental. Far from being the *raison d'être* of the universe, we appeared through sheer happenstance, and we could vanish in the same way. This is not a comforting viewpoint, but science, unlike religion, seeks truth regardless of how it makes us feel. Buddhism raises radical questions about our inner and outer reality, but it is finally not radical enough to accommodate science's disturbing perspective. The remaining question is whether any form of spirituality can.

At the end of everything, we are biological. We are organic life forms that, in the end, slowly decay to be stripped of independent conscious activity in this planet. In the midst of all this available time, we manage to form societies, generate cultures, art and many other things. Finally, it is time to go and we are inevitably led out of life. How would a mind contemplate such a thing? Do we have the faculties to contemplate such things? In the movie *Caligula*, Prince Caligula asks a dying Tiberius if he can see the Goddess Isis as he dies, to which Tiberius replies that he sees nothing. Perhaps this one situation completely reflects the hopes we humans lay on religion . . . that somehow at the end of all life's tribulations, we will finally find the gods and goddesses that we worshipped devoutfully all our lives and that they will answer all of our elemental questions. Science then teaches us to prepare for the other possibility, one of nothingness, and thus inspires us either to embrace it or to escape such finalities completely through technology.

Transhumanism must take off from where religion stops. It is by no means a religion, but only an axiom. Transhumanism should facilitate, rather than disintegrate, the deeper meanings of religion and spirituality. Soon, our advances in brain chemistry and understanding of neurotheology will help us all gain the insight that until now, only a few mystics have achieved. Therefore, science's role in the future should be to help people on their way to greater understanding through specific methods towards spiritual realization and then once they get there, religions can become entirely different. If we can achieve such incredible scientific perspectives with our biological brains, just imagine an age when we would all have greater spiritual understanding through the tools of technology. Perhaps then we will completely turn into a peaceful species that will spread all

around the multiverse. The age of fantasy where men and women talk and live with intelligent elves, hobbits and wise animals will come. New religions will be born. Let transhumanism lead the way starting with the monk who plugged his brain for world peace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I would like my parents who guided me to several of the passages in the Bhagavad-Gita. I thank Dr. N.Vasudevan, my Ph.D supervisor who has encouraged me to look at things from a direct angle. I also thank my bioethics mentor Dr. Jayapaul Azariah whose lessons on eastern and western philosophy within five minutes still influence my thoughts. I also thank Dr.Frank J.Leavitt, who exposed me to mysticism, Dr.Hilda Azariah, who gave me practical biblical insights, and Dr.Darryl Macer, who has given me the inspiration for a love of bioethics.

Bibliography

1. Aurobindo. *Savitri*. Pondicherry,India : Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 2001.
2. Aurobindo. *Essays on the gita*. Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 2001.
3. Aurobindo. *The life divine*. Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication, 2001.
4. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, A.C. *Bhagavad-Gita as it is*. Mumbai, India: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2001.
5. Bancroft, Anne. *Religions of the East*. London, Heinemann, 1974.
6. Gould, Stephen Jay. *Rocks of ages: Science and Religion in the fullness of life*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.
7. Horgan, John. Buddhist retreat: Why I gave up on finding my religion. *Slate*, February 12, 2003 <http://www.slate.com/id/2078486/> [accessed August 21,2006].
8. Manoj, V.R. What is our body? *EUBIOS Journal of Asian and International Bioethics*. July 2001: 111-113
9. Manoj, V.R. Loss of mystery. *EUBIOS Journal of Asian and International Bioethics*. May 2002: 107-108
10. Stelarc. Obsolete body <http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/obsolete/obsolete.html> [accessed August 21,2006].
11. Vita-More, N. Primo posthuman - The new human genre. <http://www.natasha.cc/primo.htm> [accessed August 21,2006].

