



## Transcending the Animal: How Transhumanism and Religion Are and Are Not Alike

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### Abstract

In this paper I lay out a basic framework for relating religion and transhumanism. I argue that both religion and transhumanism begin conceptually as reactions to a particular deflationary description of the human condition, termed the “animal account.” While some people (especially secular humanists) are satisfied with this account, others are dissatisfied and actively hope and work to transcend animal limitations (including theists and transhumanists). In this sense, religion and transhumanism are very similar. They share a desire for transcendence and in important ways, have more to do with each other than with secular humanism. This does not mean that transhumanism is itself a religion; in fact, it is *not* best understood as such. However, transhumanism can be *religious*, in the sense that people can incorporate transhumanist methods and ideals into their religious aims. Where religion and transhumanism can easily antagonize, however, is over the method of transcendence pursued, and the overall attitude toward given nature that motivates the pursuit. Practically speaking, the real battleground between religion and transhumanism will be in the debate over which specific technological moves are consistent with a religious view of the ultimate good, a debate depending greatly on doctrinal specifics.<sup>1</sup>

### The Human Condition

In deciding how to think about the relationship of religion and transhumanism, I want to begin by looking at the reaction to a particular way of thinking about what it means to be human. This view of the human condition, or human nature, is not specifically drawn from any one source, but is instead an amalgam of views that might collectively be understood as a “minimalist” or “deflationary” account of human nature, informed by biological reductionism and secular humanism. This view essentially represents humans as moderately smart, moderately conscious, moderately creative, physically weak, emotional, social, and mortal animals participating in an ongoing evolutionary process absent any grand purpose or design. We are born, live, eat, excrete, think, feel, create, emote, organize, rank, compete, cooperate, and die. Although we are certainly more

intelligent, and probably more conscious and much more self-conscious than other animals, we are essentially the same as animals, differing only in degree and not kind, and not differing as much as we typically think. We are not metaphysically unique; we do not rank between angels and beasts; we are not embodied souls.

For shorthand, I will refer to this as the “animal account” of being human, using “animal” in the colloquial sense of a purely biological, earthbound, “nothing more than” existence.<sup>2</sup> I realize that many people do not hold this view in such stark fashion. However, many people do attribute this view to a secular, scientific outlook and thus, regardless of whether many hold it, many respond to it. The “animal account” is thus a kind of pure antithesis to more metaphysically expansive views of humanity. It is the Other view to how so many view their Self.

So what sort of responses are there, or could there be, to this deflationary animal account of humanity and how does this help us frame the relationship between religion and transhumanism?

### **Satisfaction and Desire for Transcendence**

One response could simply be satisfaction. There is nothing wrong or even disappointing about being the sort of creature described by the animal account. There is no reason to lament life as a smart mortal animal or think it inferior or undesirable. Our goal in life should simply be to live out our limited time well, being happy, satisfied, experiencing the richness of the world in such a way as to produce rewarding biological, emotional, social, and mental experiences. When we die, we are through, our part of the wide organic web is ended, and the next generation moves on.

In this response, there is no (or it is thought that there should be no) desire to transcend the animal state. What I mean by “transcend” here is nothing technically precise. I simply use the term generally and minimally to indicate a state of existence which would surpass the limits that the animal account describes—surpassing animal knowledge, consciousness, mortality, and control. Someone truly satisfied with the animal account of humanity would see very little value to be gained by existing in some other way and would often view the desire for transcendence not only as misdirected, but detrimental. Such a desire, with its attendant focus on otherworldly matters, distracts us from the here and now real problems and possibilities of life and is therefore both socially and psychologically harmful.

Of course, this response is by far the minority response. It attracts few adherents, either currently or historically, and is manifested by neither religionists nor, interestingly, by transhumanists.

### **Dissatisfaction and Desire for Transcendence**

The other response to the animal account is obviously dissatisfaction. There is something wrong, disappointing, frustrating, about being the sort of creature that is “nothing more than” a smart animal. If true, it would be lamentable, inferior to our ideals, undesirable. We want to be more than this sort of thing. We want not to be limited in this way.<sup>3</sup>

So if the response to the animal account is dissatisfaction, what sorts of reactions to that dissatisfaction are there? In general, I would say there are three.

*Coping*

One reaction is to accept sorrowfully this disappointing account of what we are, while acknowledging our wish that there were more to us. Part of the human condition is precisely existing in a psychological tension between what we are and what we wish we were. That is the only way in which we are truly different from other animals. That is our existential hole to fill. Though disappointing, depressing, even existentially horrifying, we are essentially smart, conflicted animals with overblown metaphysical hopes and delusions of grandeur. Sometimes these delusions produce glorious aspects of human culture—religion, art, poetry; sometimes they produce inglorious aspects of human culture—religion, art, poetry.

Our fundamental choice, once we have matured into scientific knowledge beyond our original myths, is either to wallow in existential misery, ignore the problem, adopt another belief, or realize that our desire for transcendence is unhealthy and try to rid ourselves of it. Given the difficulty of ignoring a problem we have already addressed or in consciously adopting a new belief, the general strategy is to learn to cope. We can cope unhealthily, through hedonism and distraction, or cope healthily, with honesty and inner strength, perhaps with the aid of certain nontheistic forms of existentialism, positive psychology, desire-eliminating Buddhism, tension-accepting postmodernism, or fatalistic Judaism.<sup>4</sup>

Typically, however, this is a very difficult place to be and generates too much cognitive dissonance to make a psychic home here. An existential crisis would appear to lurk all the time, making both the accepting secular humanist and the committed religious believer envious.

*Hoping*

Another response could be drawn from such sources as epistemological skepticism, the vagaries of unconvincing but still intriguing “mystical” experience, and reluctance to accept fully the animal account—the position of hope.<sup>5</sup> We might hope that there is more to life than just the animal account (perhaps even for animals).

Such hope could range from little more than possessing the vague passive wish for “more” to a real anchoring life attitude. Whatever its role in one’s life, it would be characterized by a lack of certainty (in both the animal account and the metaphysically grand accounts). The desire for transcendence is real, but no *actual certain* belief in transcendence forms one’s central orienting worldview. While hope may be strong, the hope is essentially a comfort and inspiration.

While this position is generally more psychologically sustaining than the coping reaction, it is still complicated, seeing as it holds in tension both genuine doubt and the genuine possibility of transcendence. Not surprisingly, this has also been an historically minority view. It is possible, however, that growing religious pluralism (knowledge of many different and ancient ways of looking at God and human nature) and increased scientific and technological knowledge (making physicalist sense of claims that at one time seemed impossible, such as immortality) may make the hoping position more appealing. Given the rise in fundamentalist religious fervor though, this may be overly optimistic.

*Working*

For many people, perhaps most people, there is no accommodation with the animal account. It may either be rejected or never seriously considered, but is always viewed as

unappealing at best and completely miserable and contemptible at worst. The desire to transcend the animal is thus central and fundamental.

This can work out in two ways. First, we might think that the animal account is simply factually wrong. We already are, or will be, transcending the animal, and the important thing is how and where our transcendence will get played out. For example, the standard Christian belief is that all humans already are immortal and our decisions in this life determine how our eternal existence will be spent.<sup>6</sup>

Second, we might basically accept the animal account as correctly describing what we currently are and how we got here, yet not be content to accept such a state as inevitable (and so cope), nor seriously regard religious claims of transcendence as likely to be true (and so hope). Our goal instead would be to spend “this life” trying to develop the tools needed to change into another life, to create our own transcendence.

In both cases, living at the level of the mere animal is undesirable and the desire to transcend the animal is central and motivating. Neither coping nor hoping, both positions actively work toward transcendence.

There are several ways that people in this working group try to achieve or fulfill transcendence.

### **Faith Commitments**

There is what we might think of as the typical (but not exclusively) Western religious stance—to accept certain beliefs, doctrines, and moral practices. Generally the purpose of taking on these faith commitments is not to ensure that transcendence occurs (in Christianity and Islam and forms of Hinduism it will be automatic), but to ensure that transcendence follows a certain path (heaven or hell, for example) and so in general to ensure that our innate transcendence is properly recognized and taken care of. It is thus important not to live like animals but to live like embodied eternal souls.<sup>7</sup>

The conventional religious move here then is to effect a certain trajectory of one’s innate transcendence. This could require believing certain propositions, following certain social and moral codes, developing the right relationship with God, or achieving the correct religious attitude, all to ensure salvation.

Now, as a matter of doctrine, some religious believers will object to my use of the term “working” to describe this group, as they may argue that salvation cannot be worked towards but can only be accepted as a gift from God. I use the term “work,” however, not to suggest that salvation is one’s own achievement, but to emphasize that while nothing may need to be accomplished to pass beyond mortal existence, something must be accomplished in order to pass one’s immortal existence in a particular way. Except for the relatively rare occasions where people have believed in universal salvation (regardless of belief, will, action, or attitude) or have believed in complete predestination, there is always something one must do to gain salvation, even if it is as apparently minimal as accepting the free gift—which may be more complicated than at first seems.<sup>8</sup>

### Spiritual Practices

Another related way to work toward transcendence is spiritual practice, which would include procedures such as meditation or contemplative prayer. Not focusing on beliefs or moral codes as acts of obedience but instead trying to train ourselves to experience existence differently, the goal is to reshape the mind to become aware of some greater reality or connection with reality. The aim is to shed our attachments with the merely animal existence, and to achieve a higher state of awareness and truth.

This appears in virtually all religious traditions and is strongly centered on moving beyond the apparent or physical world to something deeper, higher, better. Though perhaps most often associated with Buddhism and Hinduism, there are many such practices pursued in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as having strong historical expression in Neoplatonism and Gnosticism.

### Physical Practices

Finally, one way to work toward transcendence is through physical practices. Though most physical practices have been conjoined with or been in the service of the other two avenues toward transcendence, they have sometimes played a pivotal and even independent role. Such practices include martial arts, yoga, dance, athletics, singing and chanting, and various sorts of charismatic practices from holy laughter to speaking in tongues. While often connected to meditation or faith, these practices focus much more on the body, although in many ways, the attention to the body is usually only present because of how it might affect the mind or soul.

But there is a new physical practice that focuses on the body, which is both a powerful extension of, and perhaps a significant break with, more traditional procedures—technological practices.

This approach, which is obviously championed by transhumanists, attempts to change our very nature by altering our bodies, by restructuring our very embodiment. In this approach, we would use technology to alter our physical and cognitive limitations. Instead of reshaping the mind or soul as an immaterial substance, we would reshape our brains, which in a typically transhumanist physicalist worldview would have much the same effect on “mind” and “soul.” We would move beyond animal nature, mortal nature, by taking control of the constraints of that nature.

And here it becomes obvious where I am locating transhumanism in its relationship to religion and perhaps to human culture in general. I see transhumanism as a reaction to the minimalist animal account of human nature (though this account is one that most transhumanists would accept as a basically correct scientific description), and an unhappiness with the idea that the animal might be all that we can be. I see transhumanism as a reaction to the perceived oppressive and disappointing limitations of given human nature. Like religion—but unlike accepting or coping secular humanism—transhumanists want strongly to transcend the animal and actively work toward doing so. Unlike merely hoping that transcendence can occur, transhumanists aggressively pursue the physical practices, the technologies, that could make transcendence a reality.

## Religion and Transhumanism

This approach to understanding both religion and transhumanism as reactions to an unsatisfying and deflationary account of human nature and human limitation needs several caveats.

First, a caveat about the nature of this approach. It is psychological. It does not deal with revelation, or any divine action which might demonstrate the existence of a deity or a transcendent realm. This does not mean, however, that I am treating religion merely as a kind of psycho-sociological phenomenon to be explained away. Whether it is true or not that God has directly contacted certain individuals or authorized certain practices and doctrines, we are left with the common view that relatively few people have been touched so directly and empirically. A psychological approach then deals with why those not possessed of direct phenomenal evidence of God's will and existence might be drawn to a revelation (like a scripture) in the first place and why they might be interested in pursuing transcendence through religious beliefs and practices. It also addresses why many religious believers think that their basic worldview, true or false, is superior and more optimistic than a secular humanist vision. As I heard a famous minister and author once say in an interview, when asked the question of why he believed in God, "the alternative is too horrible to imagine." This sort of statement is something that many secular humanists would sneer at, but which even a secular transhumanist would understand, agreeing that mere metabolism and mortality is a disappointing limit to human life.

Second, a caveat about the nature of the reaction to the animal account. Like the "state of nature" Hobbes, Locke, and other social contract theorists use in their explanations of ethics and politics, I do not assume that the reaction to the animal account is an actual confrontation in time and space. I am not assuming that someone actually meets head-on the animal account in some sort of primal, socially unmediated moment. Obviously, religious belief is already socially present when children are born and becomes part of the given environment in which they are raised. All I mean by referring to this reaction is that whether one actually comes to religion by rejecting the austerity of the animal account (a rare occurrence), or whether one just favorably compares their inherited religious beliefs to the animal account, there is still often a sense of weighing these alternatives and finding the animal account lacking.

Third, a caveat about the nature of transcendence. I am deliberately leaving this term rather open. In general, of course, it refers to a state of being that is "beyond" the ordinary mundane realm, but in religious terms, tends to imply some kind of "higher" ontological order, usually some sort of supernatural domain. This idea of another order of being in turn is associated with substance dualism and anti-materialism. From this supernaturalist perspective, one can easily imagine religious believers thinking that transhumanism is a weak and pathetic imitation of genuine transcendence, seeing as how transhumanists seek "only" to reorder material reality. Merely being smarter and living longer, even radically so, would hardly compare to meeting God face to face. But there is quite a bit more going on here than this paper has room for. Does true transcendence require supernaturalism, or is supernaturalism a superfluous concept for what is essentially a phenomenal condition? Notice that this sort of debate over supernaturalism would already concede what I am arguing for—that religion and transhumanism are both transcendence-seeking reactions to the mundane. If that conclusion is conceded, then we could move on to discuss the issue of ontology and transcendence and the natural/supernatural divide—a topic for another paper.

It is useful here though, in thinking about transcendence in general, to distinguish between two types of transhumanist ambitions, one more crude, which we might call superhumanism or low transhumanism, and one more lofty, which we might call high transhumanism.

Superhumanism, or low transhumanism, just takes as its goal the magnification of familiar human abilities—super strength, extended life, greater mental and physical power. This sort of vision is certainly interesting, but not radically so. It's a vision that is sharply limited in its scope and offers little more of an ideal than being a Greek god, or a superhero/supervillain, or a television show angel (tropes which ironically have always been ways of bringing essentially human fears, hopes, and insecurities into relief). In other contexts I've referred to this as a more Nietzschean style of transhumanism (Hopkins 2003).

High transhumanism, however, which is still very much in the process of being created and whose confines are necessarily limited by current cognitive constraints, would seek to move beyond merely exaggerated humanity and seek something more than mere superpower. While certainly it would include goals such as higher cognitive functioning, immortality, and increased power, it would do so with an eye toward something more than just exaggerated consumerism and power-over, something about seeking the Ultimate. This is what I've referred to in other contexts as a more Platonic style of transhumanism (Hopkins 2003).

While this Platonic style of transhumanism may be seen as more related to religion than the Nietzschean style, it is important to notice that we can also divide religion up into its low and high versions. Some religion seeks a more genuinely exalted, if vague and ill-defined, transcendent experience like Nirvana, or the Beatific Vision, or unity with the ultimate—all of which are indescribable in human language—while some religion seems to have little more to it than the desire to live forever in an idyllic city or garden, with streets of gold and endless amusements.

So having argued for this parallelism of transhumanism and religion, let me look more specifically at the ways in which these phenomena are and are not alike.

### Similarity

In general, the less crude versions of transhumanism and religion are more like each other in terms of their reaction to the deflationary account of human nature than either of them are like traditional secular humanism. This does not mean that transhumanism and religion would be likely to share a metaphysics, however. Transhumanists are more likely to share the basic physicalist worldview that secular humanists hold. However, since religions often disagree strongly on metaphysics and ontology as well, I think the social, cultural, moral, and psychological ground is the better place to look for similarities and dissimilarities.

Secular humanism of a certain disdainful stripe sees the search for transcendence in religion as stubborn and weakminded, a defense mechanism to avoid anxiety. Likewise, at least some secular humanists see transhumanism as merely an old psychopathological emperor in new clothes, motivated by the same unwillingness to accept who we are, resulting in the same escapist pie-in-the-sky fantasies. And there is a great deal of obvious resemblance in what both transhumanism and many religions express the desire

for—eternal happiness, immortality, omniscience, expanded existence, and so on. So perhaps the most straightforward question here is simply: Is transhumanism itself a religion?

The World Transhumanist Association says no: "Transhumanism is a philosophical and cultural movement, not a religion. Transhumanism does not offer answers about the ultimate purpose and nature of existence, merely a philosophical defense of humanity's right to control its own evolution" (People of Faith). Brian Alexander, however, in his journalistic history of biotech and transhumanism says yes: "The true believers deny their faith is a religion but it is and, like all religion, there are opponents who condemn it" (2003, 247).

It should go without saying that the answer to this question depends on the definition of religion—and there are many. Alexander gives no explicit definition of religion and seems to rely on the fact that transhumanists and other sorts of biotech enthusiasts passionately use terms like "immortality" and "transcendence" and have dreams of eternal life and disembodied existence as his evidence. But this assumes that these sorts of hopes, dreams, and phenomena have to be religious in nature. Undercutting his own pronouncement, Alexander quotes Gregory Benford saying "there was already an entire industry devoted to preaching about death...it was called religion....Ours is the first rational solution to death, the nontheological solution....we believe there is a true destiny up ahead. The techno rapture" (254). Thoroughly permeated by a religious culture, it is not surprising that nontheists use language typical of theists, particularly when talking about things previously only religions talked about, such as life after death and immortality. But just using such terminology is not sufficient to make a belief or movement a religion and we should take seriously claims about not being religious and not being theistic. People also talk about "high priests of rock and roll" or a movie star's "worshippers" or "preaching the gospel of low-carb eating" or being a "missionary for no-load mutual funds". None of this language means a religion is involved. It can mean that people feel passionately about something, and it can even mean this dominates their lives. But if such a purely psychological meaning to "religion" is all we have, then many things are religions. This seems rather too liberal and leaves us with no intelligent way to distinguish between being a Christian and being a Red Sox fan.<sup>9</sup>

If we take a more otherworldly and supernaturalist view of religion, as "the belief in an ever-living God, that is, in a divine Mind and Will ruling the universe and holding moral relations with mankind" transhumanism would certainly not count as a religion (Martineau 1888, 1). While individual transhumanists might be religious, there would be nothing in transhumanism itself that is necessarily theistic.

If we take it as essential to religion that it provides some sort of ultimate answer for the meaning of life, as the World Transhumanist Association seems to in its statement, then transhumanism still isn't a religion. Transhumanists argue for the right to attempt to surpass the current limitations of human biology. They do not argue that this is a goal in itself, only that it is a condition under which other goals and experiences might be even more widely, permanently, or expansively pursued. Without some other meaning, goal, or belief, even a posthuman could sit around bored, depressed, or awash in angst.

However, if we take a middling broad sense of religion as "human beings' relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual, or divine," then transhumanism could be seen as *religious*, if not a *religion* (Religion). That is to say, some people may see biotechnological manipulation as part of a path to achieve religious goals. For example,



theologians have often commented on how the human mind is not capable of understanding the divine. Changing our limited natures through technology, then, and thus changing our minds, might be a valuable and honorable way to seek greater understanding of ultimate reality, to seek the divine, to seek God. Though this will not appeal to some transhumanists (those who have no desire to seek a “divine”) and will not appeal to many religionists (those who think revelation has provided all they need to know), it will appeal to some religious seekers who are content with neither a completely irreligious view of the world nor with a satisfied dogmatic view of the world.

So, to summarize—religion and transhumanism possess some similar ideas, especially in their attitudes toward transcending the “animal” state, but transhumanism is not best understood as a religion. It is best understood as a cultural movement advocating the liberty to pursue biotechnological enhancement of ourselves. Some people may pursue enhancement as a religious endeavor. For them, technology may be a method used to seek God, in the way that prayer, meditation, singing, and other practices are religious techniques.

What then can we say about the *compatibility* of transhumanism and religion? After all, as we have seen from the historical observation that heretics are often treated worse than infidels, similarity does not imply compatibility. While transhumanism is certainly compatible with Religion (in the categorical sense), is it compatible with specific religions?

### Compatibility

The question of compatibility is not a simple one and will be answered differently in different strains of doctrinal thought. No one answer to the question will suffice for all specific religious schemes. What I will say here, though, is that the compatibility issue can initially be parsed in terms of types of transcendence and methods of transcendence.

### **Types of Transcendence**

While there are many different aspects of transcendence and no doubt many religious followers will think themselves short shrifted in the following summary, it is important to stay aware of the basic meaning of “transcendence.” It is about “moving beyond,” “rising above,” “surpassing” some other state. So what general sorts of states have been seen as transcending animal existence? Here are a few of the dominant ideas:

- A. Eternal Happiness/No Suffering
- B. Immortality
- C. Omniscience/Greater Knowledge
- D. Power
- E. Beatific Vision
- F. Unity with God/Ultimate
- G. Nirvana

In terms of their shared ideals, transhumanism and Christianity both want A, B, and C. Christians (depending on the sect) may want E, which transhumanists wouldn't necessarily make much sense of. But this is a matter of differing ideals—a common issue between religions. Similarly, Christians can't make much sense of Buddhists' Nirvana.

Christianity, Hinduism, and some strains of Buddhism like the idea of F, whereas the libertarian strain of transhumanism will not see this as a desirable goal. However, as science fiction has taught us, some people do fantasize about joining a kind of group mind where you may retain some individuality but are also subsumed, so there are appealing forms of unity even here.

Perhaps a general characterization one could make is that transhumanism tends to be more conceptually compatible with Christianity, in that Christian transcendence and salvation is by and large about the proper satisfaction of all desires (Boethius 1999, 53-56; Aquinas 1964, 39, *Summa, Part 2, Part 1, Question 3, Answer 8*), whereas Buddhism is more about extinguishing desires (Rahula 1974, 35-39). Transhumanism, at least in its early stages, is also about satisfaction, but unlike Christianity, is mute on whether such satisfaction requires a relationship with a deity. On the other hand, transhumanism tends to share with more orthodox Buddhism the sense that God is a projection of the human mind and it is clarity of mind that we must first seek. No doubt transhumanism will be flexible and will vary from culture to culture, shaping and being shaped by a culture's religious heritage.

### **Methods of Transcendence**

The greatest incompatibility for transhumanism and religion will lie in choosing the method of transcendence—which of course is the greatest incompatibility that lies between religions themselves. No doubt religious believers will deny that transhumanism, with its focus on technology and physicalism, can ever truly achieve anything approaching genuine transcendence. However, transhumanists can reply that religion's admitted inability to describe what the transcendent state of Nirvana or the Beatific Vision will be suggests that there is no clear way to compare these states. After all, some transhumanists have their own version of ineffable existence—the post-Singularity transhuman consciousness.<sup>10</sup> For both religious believers and transhumanists, the transcendent state may only be described negatively (not mortal, not limited, not suffering), and may be no more conceivable for us than a roach could conceive of what it is like to be Plato. So, having a specific and clear and materialist understanding of transcendence as opposed to an ineffable and mystical understanding of transcendence is not what separates religion and transhumanism. What separates them is the idea that physically restructuring our bodies can move us towards some worthwhile transcendent state.

There are roughly four ways to achieve transcendence, with transhumanism introducing the fourth as a real possibility.

1. Belief/Faith (accepting propositions, taking attitudes)
2. Obedience (to moral codes or rituals)
3. Practices (meditation, music, etc.)
4. Technology

Transhumanism and religion will often disagree on 1 (just as rival religions do). Even in this, however, there may be an exception—a physicalist co-creator theology, in which technology is understood as part of the ongoing process by which God perfects creation—an attractive but much in the minority point of view. As transhumanism becomes more widely known, and as improved technologies allows us to actually make real, fundamental changes in the world, this specifically religious transhumanism (sharing many elements of process theology) may become a genuine movement.

Currently speaking, however, when it comes to beliefs and metaphysics, transhumanists will think that 4 should be used precisely because they don't share the specifics of 1 with the religionists. This incompatibility won't be that much more radical than difference in faith claims between religions. What is much more fundamentally at odds, is a difference in attitudes rather than metaphysics.

Religious believers will often think that method 1 and 2 rule out method 4 because 4 is all about the sin of pride and self-aggrandizement. This is the moral of the common interpretation of the Tower of Babel story, and often, the Fall story (Hopkins 2002). Transhumanists will be seen as committing the worst possible sin in the Judeo-Christian tradition—hubris, trying to make themselves gods or equal to God. In seeking transcendence through their own creation, transhumanists will be viewed as recommitting the oldest sin in the Book (literally). Expect to see more and more references to Eve's hunger for knowledge and autonomy, the Tower of Babel, and Satan's fall.

There is also likely to be a marked incompatibility with Christianity in understanding the psychology of faith. In his most important work, "The Christian Faith," theologian Friederich Schleiermacher specified religious feeling as the "feeling of absolute dependence." He has certainly been criticized by many other theologians (often wrongly due to the perception that he was anti-reason), but to the extent he is right, this position will be at great odds with transhumanism, which strongly focuses on not feeling dependent on anybody (Ferre 1993, 30).<sup>11</sup>

Finally, when it comes to other traditions that focus more on practices than beliefs and attitudes, transhumanism will see 3 as a vain attempt to do what 4 can eventually do better and faster. This may be especially true with Buddhism. It is this sort of attitude, which will be viewed as selfish, impatient, and adolescent, that will strike many religious believers as an essential immaturity about transhumanism.

### Complementarity

When it comes to the question of whether transhumanism and religion can be complementary, the answer is that this will be the constant practical battlefield. When is technology permissible, when does it help achieve religious goals, and when has it gone "too far"?

The practical issue will be whether technology can be understood as in support of God, salvation, or enlightenment when it promotes significant changes in the heretofore normal range of phenomena and human nature. That is, when is technology just using our God-given intelligence to make morally and religiously appropriate changes in our lives, and when is technology overstepping some boundary into competition with religion?

This is more complicated than simply the issue of whether some technology is morally in sync with or counter to some religious teaching—such as whether anesthesia can be used in childbirth (does it contravene Eve's curse), whether in vitro fertilization can be used (does it contravene the natural purpose of sex), or whether embryos can be cloned to produce genetically autologous stem cell transplants (does this kill ensouled bodies). These debates are debates about moral doctrines in cases where technology permits some new activity. The kind of debate I am thinking about here is more fundamental to

religion because the technology involved concerns human nature and the very character of the spiritual impulse.

These sorts of debates are already nascently present in disputes over psychotropic medications, such as Prozac, where some argue that such drugs produce an inauthentic person and others argue that it allows us to approach all aspects of human experience, including spirituality, more healthily. We also see this sort of issue in an only mildly secular form in the increasing debate over cognitive and bodily enhancement—questions of what the limits to medicine are and to what extent we should be allowed to change human nature.

What will happen in all these debates is a focus on the concept of the “human” as a moral limit, with repeated concerns about authenticity (being genuinely or truly human) and crossing some boundary (going too far and endangering our humanity or our dignity). This sort of language, however, is mostly a veneer or a substitute for the actual religious framework of the issue, in which the references will be to intruding into God’s territory and trying to accomplish for ourselves something that only God should accomplish (Hopkins 2002). The issue will be how to draw the line between technology that assists us in living as God would want and technology that moves us away from God.

### Antagonism

It is here that we start to see a genuine practical enmity between religion and transhumanism. As transhumanism begins to achieve notoriety, many religious adherents will increasingly see it as a threat and make the following sorts of criticisms:

First, transhumanism is pointless and distracting: material technology will never accomplish what it seeks, so the pursuit of it simply wastes time, money, and energy. The transcendence that transhumanists may be seeking is only available through God, who will accomplish it infinitely more justly and effectively than we ever could—at least for the faithful—so why bother?

Second, transhumanism is sinful: motivated by pride, it seeks to usurp God or play God. Especially for Christianity, this is where the true antagonism will lie. Transhumanism will be seen as a movement that draws people away from God to “worship” at their own self-aggrandizing Tower of Babel (of diabolical origin for fundamentalists, of egoistic origin for liberals). As such, transhumanists will be seen as dangerous, selfish, self-idolaters.

Third, transhumanism is a false religion: while transhumanism will no doubt be criticized as something which is contrary to the very heart of the religious impulse (since it is allegedly selfish and materialistic and soulless), it will also be criticized as a kind of false religion (in the way that Marxism, atheism, and evolution have been criticized for “worshipping” something other than God). This is where transhumanism will have one of its biggest public relations difficulties. Most transhumanists would not consider their “ism” a religion since it has no scripture, doesn’t appeal to a God, doesn’t advocate specifically spiritual relationships with any transcendent realm, and doesn’t presume to answer any ultimate questions of purpose. However, unlike secular humanism, which can jettison a great number of religious concepts, transhumanism is rife with religion-analogs. In the Singularity it has an apocalypse or rapture or age of enlightenment; in cryonics it has life after death; in uploading it has a heaven; in bionanotechnology it has “putting on incorruptible bodies”;<sup>12</sup> in generous cyborgs it has bodhisattvas, and so on. It can’t help

but seem to long-standing religions as a pale and vacuous reflection of their own beliefs<sup>13</sup>; as a form of heresy<sup>14</sup>); as a cognitively dissonant threat to their beliefs; or even as a temptation to leave the true fold.

Ultimately, religious followers will be among the most vocal in calling for criminalizing biotechnological enhancements (as they are already the most vocal in resisting therapeutic cloning and genetic engineering).<sup>15</sup> To the extent that transhumanists gain publicity and further systematize their own goals and worldview, they will draw the ire of religious critics. This is already beginning to happen as various stripes of transhumanists form organizations whose goal is to protect the liberty to enhance.<sup>16</sup> Right now, such organizations are mostly under the radar, but when they become more noticeable, opposing organizations will target them as dangerous, radical, fringe groups. If the criminalization of enhancement takes off, eventually transhumanists will feel oppressed as transcending technologies are denied to them.<sup>17</sup> An underground market in enhancement technology will develop. In many ways, transhumanists may begin to function in structurally similar ways to oppressed religious groups (meeting secretly to advance their “doctrines” and their search for transcendence). Of course, none of this will be so simple as an us/them dichotomy. As technology advances and actual changes to such things like longevity are available, many people, religious or not, will want to take advantage of the new knowledge.

### Substitution

Finally, and most speculatively, there could be all sorts of transformed ideas and practices that interconnect religion and transhumanism. Following the path of complementarity, the religious impulse could make use of technologies that produce or magnify what have long been called “religious” or “mystical” experiences. The use of entheogenic drugs or cranial magnetic stimulation are just a couple of current possibilities that someone might use to achieve such experiences—which are perhaps merely extensions of age-old practices like using peyote or meditating (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998, 175).

Those who use transhumanizing technologies as part of their religious journey may develop new forms of religion that spin off in a variety of ways, from the idea that technology actually allows us to connect to the supernatural,<sup>18</sup> to the idea that God is a technologically observable physical phenomena that requires no belief in the supernatural—spiritual technology on the one hand, machine augmented naturalistic religion on the other.

There is also the possible line of thinking that religion has been factually wrong but ideologically correct and perhaps technology can eventually make religion’s hopes come true. Conceivably, technology could allow us to rework the world and ourselves into the shape of religious images—as science fiction writers have imagined—a “heaven” full of immortal beings. This might be as predictable as getting rid of disease, want, and mortality or include odd things such as genetically engineering lions that really would lie down with lambs or changing ourselves so radically that we exist as quasi-embodied consciousnesses in technogenerated states of bliss. Though completely and inspiringly full of danger, pretension, hope, and unrealistic dreaminess, such a view might be the final realization of Ludwig Feuerbach’s claim that theology is anthropology, by which he partly meant that God is the projection of the best and ideal parts of ourselves: “Thus do things change. What yesterday was still religion, is no longer such today; and what today is atheism, tomorrow will be religion” (1989, 32). An atheist like Feuerbach

lets even skeptics see religious ideals as truly worthy of realization. Technology lets us see religious ideals as *literally* realizable.

### Conclusion

Transhumanism is not a religion, but neither is it in any way necessarily anti-religious, and one can think of many ways in which it could be pro-religious or even just religious. There is a wide variety of ways the relationship between transhumanism and religion can work out and in general the friendliness or enmity between them will depend on even wider worldviews which can distinguish types of transhumanism and types of religion themselves. In large part, the difference between the broad worldviews will center on the attitude one has toward "nature." If one's attitude toward nature (the given world) is that nature as it is indicates what nature (and human nature) should be, then "tampering" with nature will be seen as sinful, improper, immoral, unwise, or illegitimate. This will be true whether the worldview is held by Roman Catholics, atheist environmentalists, or romantic humanists. If, however, the attitude toward nature is that it merely represents a current state, and not a culminating harmony, or final ideal, or eternally reflected fixed image, then altering it can improve it, a position more likely to be heard favorably by liberal protestants, Buddhists, and technopagans, among others. Understood this way, transhumanism is naturalistic but opposed to an ethics of natural law, an ideology that more emphatically than any other previous belief system looks at the world and looks at ourselves, and says "we can be better than this," whether that belief is motivated by a religious impulse, or whether it is not.

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## Notes

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- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the *Symposium on Faith, Transhumanism, and Hope*, University of Toronto, Toronto ON Canada (August 5, 2004). My thanks to the listeners at that conference for their comments.
- 2 I do not in any way assume here that animals are themselves actually lacking in consciousness, emotion, or value. My point in using the term "animal" here is not to assume a reductive anthropocentric stance, but to use "animal" as the quintessential "other" to humanity's claims of spiritual uniqueness. "Animal" stands here as a trope of the mechanistic, unthinking brute driven by instinct and lacking spiritual value—a position which I think grossly misrepresents the actual phenomenal lives of many nonhuman organisms.
- 3 Crudely put, some people say that we have to be more than simply eating and shitting machines (a phrase used by religionists sometimes as a description of what biologists say we are).
- 4 See Ecclesiastes 3: 18-22.
- 5 See Roman 8: 22-25.
- 6 Even existence in hell, though horrible, would transcend animal existence in terms of mortality.
- 7 Or "ensouled bodies" in some traditions. The soul is what makes you the individual you are in either case.
- 8 Even when believers frame salvation as a "free gift" or "unconditional gift" it still seems that there is some sort of condition for salvation. Many times they will say God won't save you against your will and so in this sense salvation is up to you to accept, but usually there is some indication of acceptance that is expected—belief, trusting attitude, something. The problem of how belief may be a condition of salvation is discussed in Pojman 1986.
- 9 And if the response here is that there is no difference, then this is likely meant as a joke. The fact of it being a joke means that we can make a distinction. If someone truly thinks fandom and Christianity are phenomena of the exact same type, then they would appear to be reducing religion merely to emotional involvement.
- 10 See <http://www.transhumanism.org/resources/Readings/Singularity.htm>
- 11 But, as Ferre's comments suggest, if we instead take Paul Tillich's standard of faith as our "ultimate concern" then we might think of transhumanism as quite religious.

12 Cf., I Corinthians 15:51-57 (KJV).

13 McCarthy writes of transcranial magnetic stimulation: "But the 'God' whom the patients in the book experience seems to have very little to do with the God of the Bible. Though their experiences are interpreted religiously, they seem to have a lot more to do with delusions of grandeur than examples of Christian humility. There is no moral ingredient; they resemble altered states certainly but it is not the same as Christian experience."

14 C. Christopher Hook writes: "Transhumanism is in some ways a new incarnation of gnosticism. It sees the body as simply the first prosthesis we all learn to manipulate. As Christians, we have long rejected the gnostic claims that the human body is evil. Embodiment is fundamental to our identity, designed by God, and sanctified by the Incarnation and bodily resurrection of our Lord."

15 Though not just religious people, by any means. Many environmentalist also make such calls, and I would argue that "Nature" in some environmentalist ideology functions similarly to "God" in some religious ideologies.

16 Including such organizations as <http://www.cognitiveliberty.org/>;  
<http://www.transhumanism.org/index.php/WTA/index/>; <http://www.imminst.org/>;  
<http://www.extropy.org/>; <http://crnano.org/>; <http://www.foresight.org/>;  
<http://www.betterhumans.com/>>

17 And I suspect that in this sort of politics, strange bedfellows will be formed by the alliance of religious groups, who will oppose enhancement for religious reasons and secular humanist groups, who will be frightened by the reality of enhancement they don't see in religion.

18 After all, since our physical sensory systems like eyes, ears, and skin are sometimes capable of detecting supernatural presences and emissions in revelatory moments according to most religious traditions (the voice of God, the Light of God) then why couldn't artificial sensory do likewise?