

Podcast Episode 4: Is transhumanism a religion?

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Episode overview

In my new episode I will discuss if transhumanism is a religion. This is a tricky question, which is why I have decided to give you the spoiler first. And that would be the following:

Transhumanism has the beliefs and the rituality which could be called religious. However, most transhumanists are lacking the religious mood expressed as spiritual feelings, meditation or prayer. That is why I don't call transhumanism a religion yet.

I suggest you to continue listening to the rest of this short podcast because discussing transhumanism in the context of religion and magic tells us a lot about society. That's the part which I personally find the most interesting. It will also explain why transhumanism, although not being a religion yet, still has the potential to become one in the future.

Rituality

There are aspects of transhumanism which appear religious with clear equivalents in the Christian-Judeo belief system. For example, daily supplement pills taken by believers could be interpreted as a sort of holy communion with god. Cryonic suspension is a resurrection ritual, radical life extension a prophecy. Then there is the belief that mind, separated from body, can be uploaded or resurrected after physical death. Even conversion stories, an important hallmark of religious experience, are being told by a few leading transhumanists (O'Connell 2017:39).

Vision, worldview, beliefs

While humanism as worldview already appears outdated in contrast to contemporary emphasis on ecological thinking, system sustainability, diversity and equality, transhumanism projects traditional humanist beliefs towards a cosmic future, when humanity will transcend its own limitations and build the universal Anthropocene. Beliefs in science, knowledge, and self-directed betterment are at the core of both humanism and transhumanism. But due to exponentially increasing speed of technological progress humanity is expected to experience a millennial technological singularity, which would be the end of humanity as we know it and would lead to its rebirth in machine form. From then on mind would be taken over by A.I. from its biological platform, and will penetrate the universe as god-like super-intelligence. Therefore, transhumanists see the human condition within a cosmic order, where super-intelligent, god-like humans will colonize the universe. Such cosmic visions have been thought up by various transhumanists, partly inspired by science-fiction writers like Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke.

Divine human mind finally liberated from matter is actually a core gnostic belief, which has been suppressed as heresy by the Catholic church since antiquity. Transhumanist belief in brain-uploading is a

reflection of this old human imagination. Gnosis is also the idea that man can access salvation by knowing the divine. This includes the possibility of man becoming divine himself.

Most transhumanists call themselves atheists or agnostics. Instead of believing in god, they firmly believe in scientific progress and technology. From their own point of view, many transhumanists may not believe the religious narrative at all and rather prefer to focus their immediate attention on their personal life-extension. Not a few thinkers and leaders in the movement, however, are proposing that a new religion could be quite useful to accelerate the transhumanist agenda. After all, massively increased investment in scientific research and technological improvement requires mobilizing people and funds.

Engineers making god, making religion, making paradise

We should ask why most people in contemporary Western cultures have lost their religious beliefs. There are two main answers: First the displacement of magic into the fringes of our worldview, and second that traditional imaginations of the divine have lost relevance. Who would still believe in a friendly grandfather with a white beard, or a stern and revengeful overlord demanding obeisance. Evangelists have chosen to believe in a personal god, someone with whom one enters into casual everyday conversations like about which color to choose for repainting the kitchen table. That sort of belief certainly reflects hyper-individualist society and psychological needs.

On the other hand, what type of god would an agnostic or atheist person be able to imagine today? Well, how about a data programmer? An impersonal entity or system, which has coded the universe, and which is observing what happens like in a laboratory. But even the act of divine observation of the good works would be far from certain of course. Now, transhumanists have perhaps done exactly that: they imagined a modernized version of the divine and infused that version with humanist, techno-scientific, and gnostic elements.

In some ways transhumanists appear like engineers who have decided that the world needs a new religion and got themselves busy in making religion, making god, and making paradise. They have turned religious mythology upside down: instead of having originated by divine action in a mystical past, humans themselves will engineer a mystical future. They seem to rewrite the Christian master narrative according to which humans were born in and consequently driven out from paradise. Instead, they have chosen to become gods and build a cosmic paradise themselves. Perhaps the idea of creating paradise through super-intelligence is a bit naïve, just another effort of escaping from conflicted everyday life. Or the story will go serial with sufficiently advanced humans building a simulated happy world, whose inhabitants will build another simulated world when they are sufficiently advanced themselves, and so on – Matrix in a matrix, like Russian Matryoshka dolls.

Spiritual mood

What makes transhumanism not a religion, is that the spiritual mood is missing. Believers during religious gatherings of any faith are usually emanating a certain spiritual atmosphere, which participants and observers can feel. That is absolutely not the case with transhumanists. In contrast to any possible

prayer room atmosphere, the mood during transhumanist gatherings resembles that of hopeful investors in a corporate shareholders meeting.

Science as religion

There is an ongoing discussion in philosophy and social sciences if science could be considered a new religion. This idea is controversial, because science with its focus on rationality came about as a critique of religion and magical thinking. Humanists since the enlightenment worked hard to establish scientific thinking against a worldview of superstition. But at least since physicists have discovered the strange world of quantum mechanics, a few maintain that science may have its own magical properties.

The 3rd law by Arthur C. Clarke is frequently quoted by transhumanists: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”. In transhumanist thinking this sentence is the hinge between science and religion. Once technology becomes sufficiently advanced, our world could become magical again, making immortal, super-intelligent humans in virtual or robotic forms a possibility.

Where science could fill the religious void is actually in its fringy corners. Fringe science projects like mind-uploading or medical treatments to live forever are defined within the rules of science and need to be evaluated by science before they could be falsified. Although possible within the scientific paradigm, they are also utopian and as such just perfect to motivate group building and social action. Fringe science is fluid and malleable as no definite expert answers are available. This provides space to the amateur and the believer. Established science on the other hand is subject to evaluation by established experts only, who are part of our social institutions. Outsiders of that circle would have a hard time to make use of established science for their religious or utopian projects. This replaces the question if science is the new religion. Science develops its religious qualities only in fringe science. Utopian science projects serve to generate magical and potentially religious perceptions within the uncontested framework of science.

Transhumanist beliefs are based on a number of utopian projects. They carry the coat of scientific research but are magical at core. Science and religion are two different ways to look at reality. But while science and religion as social institutions mostly provide mediated experiences to the believer, that means through scientists and priests, magical elements in both domains serve to let the believer participate in the universe in an active and direct way. By the way, utopian and magical does not mean that such projects are impossible. But nobody really understands their complexity yet and how long it would take to realize them.

7. Conclusion

As a conclusion I think that all elements of a modern religion are already present in transhumanism, except the spiritual mood of the prayer room. There are many more people than those who call themselves transhumanists, who are engaged in life extension practices, like exercise, nutritional supplements, regenerative medicine etc. Their visions are just not as radical as those of the transhumanists. But there is certainly a lot of alignment between transhumanists and urban middle

classes all over the world. What is the future of transhumanism? Either mainstream society will absorb their ideas in its institutions of scientific research and healthcare, or the movement could choose to radicalize further by becoming a religious sect.

Bibliography

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