

The sense of an ending

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Abstract

This article was written to fit with the COSAC 2013 theme of '*Faith, Hope and Quarks: Scientific and Theological Perspectives on the Future*'. With that eschatological theme in mind it seeks to examine the prognosis for humanity in the light of the exponential growth and influence of technology in human life. It is especially concerned with the increasing adaptations of the human body through technology.

These developments have raised fears for some and excited vision for others as they contemplate what it means to be human and what it means to be god-like. It examines particularly the notion of theosis or divinization as presented by some of the early church fathers and the present day Eastern Orthodox Church.

It calls upon the church to take note of these developments and their influence on believers and to prepare suitable pastoral programs to help Christians in this complex moral maze.

Key words

Orthodoxy, eschatology, transhumanism, theosis, Christian perfection, ousia, image of God, emerging church

The theme of a book by Frank Kermode, one of the most distinguished critics of English literature, entitled *The sense of an ending* (Kermode 2000), sees the notion of an 'ending' as something that gives a story a unity and gathers all the themes together. The expected ending will show that all the chaos of events that have happened are, in fact, linked and all will be revealed at the end and thus sense will be made of it all. This 'ending', however, is not just an exact repetition of where things began but rather it is better, greater, far beyond anything that could have been imagined at the beginning.

Scripture also has this movement from beginning to end. It recounts the equilibrium of Eden which is then disturbed by tension but finds resolution through the coming of the prophets and ultimately in Jesus Christ. At its literary end the Bible speaks of an ending which it calls 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Revelation 21:1), which will be a much

better, richer, dynamic 'home' than Eden could ever have been but which could only be achieved through the dramatic tensions and resolutions through which the whole spectrum of the drama of the Scriptures takes us.

Any sense of an ending implies notions of time, movement, fulfilment and climax which are, after all the very stuff of life itself: being born, living, dying and then eternity itself in which all these things are subsumed in the all encompassing presence of God.

Eschatology, that is the discerning of this movement and where we are at any moment within its progress, towards that coming climax or 'eschaton', has had a very chequered history. This is neither the place nor the time to go through a history of its extravagances. Suffice it to say that the more extreme, fundamentalist, pre-millennial or even post-millennial views have brought this science into disrepute. Happily this does not seem to have filtered through to the ordinary man or woman on the street who, if they know about these things at all, consign such views to the same library shelf as gothic horror or even fairy tales.

Indeed, the truth is that the average person, when asked about their vision of the world of the future, will, almost without fail, describe it in terms of the development of technology. This is generally expressed as the emergence of super-computers, advances in science and medicine that enable human life to be sustained beyond anything we can imagine at the moment. Some even anticipate the up-loading of the contents of our minds into machines making our finite human bodies redundant and holding out the possibility of immortality albeit as a machine rather than as a flesh and blood being. Such a machine, using the contents of a human mind, would be able to 'think' a million times faster than an organic human brain (Yudkowsky 2006).

This concept is more revolutionary than most people realize. Combining the development of computers that vastly exceed the capabilities of the human brain, making it possible even to recreate human emotion, together with humans themselves becoming more like machines with, as Kurzweil foresees,

biological bodies and brains enhanced with billions of 'nanobots',
swarms of microscopic robots transporting us in and out of virtual
reality

Kurzweil 2001

will be no less important than the evolution of human intelligence itself some thousands of generations ago. Kurzweil regards the freeing of the human mind from its severe physical limitations as a necessary next step in evolution which is in itself, in his view, the purpose of life.

Like many who espouse this view he believes that humankind will, through technological evolution, move closer and closer to becoming god-like. The ultimate result will be a merging of the biological technology creating beings with the very technology they created. Such

a view is no longer simply the creation of the science fiction writer's mind. Indeed, such a merger has already begun when we consider the sheer breadth of available man-made technological equipment which is now being placed within or around human beings. Pacemakers, bionic limbs, cochlea implants, heart or kidney machines are just a few examples.

These facilitate not only an increasing number of, but also increasingly far-reaching interventions and manipulations in humans, so that the perspective of a gradual 'technologization' of his physical constitution can no longer be regarded as merely utopian. The recent development of bio-printing (a process which utilises a three dimensional printer that, like an ink-jet printer, sprays out not ink but cellular material layer upon layer to build up a three dimensional replica of a bodily organ made of living cells) is surely evidence of this.

To many we are already on the road to creating 'cybernetic organisms' or cyborgs for short. Donna Haraway defines cyborgs as:

creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted.

Haraway 1991, p.149

This merging of the human and the mechanical, once thought unthinkable has convinced many writers that this most disturbing development, can only be halted when a moral or spiritual value is (once again) ascribed to human nature. This question of the moral and spiritual status of human nature is today being posed above all under the influence of these medical and biotechnological aspects.

Many are speculating whether we are almost reaching that point some futurists have called 'The Singularity'. 'The Singularity' is defined as that hypothetical future moment when human beings create machines of amazing super-intelligence capable of performing tasks far beyond anything possible for human beings. When this happens technology will advance beyond human ability to control its outcomes or foresee where it might lead. Such super-intelligent machines will transform not only the world in which human beings live but human beings themselves.

Other Futurists are asking whether the Singularity has already happened. The 20th century saw change and advancement develop rapidly. The 21st century is moving exponentially faster, and change is coming much more swiftly. It is possible that we have already passed that point which we call 'The Singularity'.

Travis James Leland believes that, with the advent of the smartphone and tablet,

the case can be made that the Singularity happened not as one moment, but the combination of numerous factors coming together. I believe that the internet itself is just the medium, not the Singularity itself. But the omnipresent access we have to the internet seems to

have exploded recently. With our smartphones, we have all the information in the world literally at our fingertips and we can integrate it into our lives. We already have an augmented lifestyle, don't we?

Leland 2012

For some this 'augmentation' of humanity is known as 'Transhumanism'. John Passmore sees the question of enhancing or indeed of perfecting humanity as nearly a human universal question, pursued by philosophers and religious thinkers for thousands of years (Passmore 1970). It is to that religious thinking we now turn.

I have always been moved by the lines given to the demons by Cardinal John Henry Newman in his poem 'The dream of Gerontius' as they shout and deride the redeemed soul of Gerontius, who cannot see them, as he passes from earth to heaven.

Low born clods of brute earth,
they aspire to become Gods by a new birth
and an extra grace and a score of merits,
as if aught could stand in place of the high thought,
and the glance of fire of the great spirits,
the powers blest, the Lords by right,
the primal owners of the proud dwelling.

Newman 2007

It could indeed be argued that in transhumanism humans are, in fact, aspiring to become gods. The Roman Catholic Church makes its point of view absolutely clear about this sort of human genetic engineering.

Changing the genetic identity of man as a human person through the production of an infra-human being is radically immoral

Vatican Commission 2002

It strongly denies that 'man has full right of disposal over his own biological nature' (Vatican Commission 2002). The Roman Catholic Church also argues that the creation of a superhuman or spiritually superior being is 'unthinkable', since true improvement can come only through religious experience and 'realizing more fully the image of God' (Mitchell & Kilner, 2003).

Theologians from across the denominations are divided about transhumanism. There are those who believe that the eternal life promised to Christians, enjoyed both in this life and through to the next, will include all that transhumanism offers. In fact they see transhumanism as,

just another representative of the long line of utopian movements which seek to 'immanentize' the eschaton, i.e. try to create 'heaven on earth'.

Barratt 2006

On the other hand, there are Christian transhumanists who see this technological development as simply part of the 'divine evolution' process through which the goal or *telos* of creation and, through Christ, our salvation wholeness is reached. The word *telos* is used in the Bible for the ultimate goal of 'being made perfect'. However, that biblical sense does not simply mean without flaw but it carries more the sense of becoming all that we are created to be.

Douglas Wilson maintains that there is a clear link between:

the eschatological future promised by the prophet Isaiah, and the future that was shaped by industrial revolution, and will continue to be shaped by the digital revolution.

Wilson 2012

He claims that they are 'the same future'.

I don't believe in an invisible spiritual future, shaped by the Holy Spirit, full of sweetness and light, and an actual historical future shaped by the Devil, Halliburton, the Illuminati, and Murphy's Law. The world, this world, is presently going where Jesus is taking it. Be wise, but stop worrying.

Wilson 2012

The apostle Paul could certainly identify with some of the Transhumanists' concerns such as our earthly limitations, suffering and pain. His statements in 2 Corinthians 4 and 5 make this abundantly clear (2 Corinthians 4:7–12, 5:1–5 *NIV*). However, Mitchell and Kilner remind us that, unlike the Transhumanists, the apostle Paul's

hope is not in his own abilities to transcend his humanity, but in God's power to transform his humanity through redemption. He is confident that this mortality shall put on immortality that we have a dwelling place not made with human hands, but eternal and heavenly.

Mitchell & Kilner 2003

Christian theologian Ronald Cole-Turner, who is quite sympathetic to much of Transhumanistic thought, holds that the doctrine of 'co-creation' provides an obligation to use genetic engineering to improve human biology. He takes a very different view from Mitchell and Kilner. His special interest is in a specific religious claim made in some strands of Christianity to the effect that the goal of human life is actually 'to be made gods'. He is referring to the ancient and respected theological concept of theosis or 'divinization' and sees this as a fitting subject for inclusion in any eschatological discussion which must deal with the final or fully realised state of humanity. His method is to examine the teaching of three major historical Christian thinkers — Irenaeus of Lyon, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine of Hippo (Cole-Turner 1993).

For Irenaeus of Lyon (130–202) the concept of Adam and Eve in the beginning of Genesis was to be understood as:

including all humanity, and thus for Irenaeus the phrase 'image of God' refers not to an individual human or to our properties such as rationality but to our unity as a species.

Irenaeus taught that Christ, in his incarnation and the living out of a totally human life including death and resurrection, recapitulates the sinful life of Adam as the 'complete image of God', and brings the whole human race to its intended glorious destiny. That destiny is the ultimate sharing of the very nature of God as the Scriptures say,

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them **you may participate in the divine nature** and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

2 Peter 1:3–4 *NIV* [My emphasis]

Irenaeus used a phrase found later in Athanasius that was much repeated by other theologians and which has become a major emphasis in what is now the Eastern Orthodox Church — 'God made Himself man, that man might become God'. The descent of God in Christ opens to men a path of ascent, the unlimited vistas of the union of created beings with the Divinity.

Gregory of Nyssa (335–395), on the other hand, stresses the relational nature of human personhood. He taught that,

to be a person (hypostasis) is not to be a separate or independent nature or being (ousia) but rather to stand out as a relationship within a shared being (our common humanity) as an individuated or distinctive self. This is true of God (three hypostases in one shared divine ousia, otherwise known as the Trinity) and equally true of humanity. Strictly speaking we are not human beings (there being only one, which we share) but we are human persons or individuals each distinctly expressive of the one human being.

Cole-Turner 1993

Gregory's interpretation of the Adam and Eve story, especially the clothing of them with animal skins after the Fall, teaches that,

our vulnerabilities to nature (hunger, disease, aging) are "given" together with the means of mitigation by work and invention. This view, which was widely held by early Christian theologians, points specifically to human scientific and technical skills as gifts of God that are meant to allow humans to make their lives easier and safer. With the difficulties of the fall comes a means of some escape, and with the clouding of intelligence comes a disciplined method (science) by which a level of knowledge might be attained.

Cole-Turner 1993

Eastern Orthodox theology has always emphasised this aspect of *theosis* or divinization. Dumitru Staniloae, a Romanian theologian defines it as:

This greatest possible union with God wherein the fullness of God is stamped upon the human being, yet without the human being thereby being dissolved into God—this is the human being's deification.

Staniloae 1981

Theosis is not, however, merely an Eastern teaching; it is part of traditional Catholic belief although history has allowed its emphasis to be suppressed. The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, for example, quotes Ireneaus and Athanasius, as above, but also Aquinas when he says that:

[t]he only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods.

Aquinas 1963

Nevertheless, while Eastern thought continued to emphasise *theosis*, in the West, theologians took a different tack. The most influential of the Western Latin theologians, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), is described by Cole-Turner as promoting:

a process of self discovery and reunification of the fragmented self, a process achieved only by God's grace and completed only in the resurrection. It is a process of self-discovery but not one of self-help, for it can only be initiated and sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit working within.

Cole-Turner 1993

Augustine sees human beings as truly reflecting the likeness or 'image' of God when God becomes the main focus of their lives and they seek to live in holiness. This 'holiness', however, is seen both to be all of grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit within the believer's life, yet it is also a matter of personal submission to the will of God. This is the real differentiation between the Eastern and Western approach. In the West it is all about a moral transformation through repentance and the forgiveness of sins which brings about a reconciliation with the God who is holy. However, there can be no *theosis* in the Eastern sense until after death, resurrection and the entering into eternity.

The nearest Western equivalent thinking to the Eastern sense of being 'dissolved into God', as expressed by Dumitru Staniloae above, is probably the notion of 'Christian perfection' taught by John Wesley during the Methodist revival through his book *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, published in 1766. In it he expresses the view that the born-again Christian may attain a state of holiness in which believers are made free from original sin, or depravity, and where there is a total love for God and others brought about by the infilling or baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is, he says,

a restoration not only to the favor, but likewise to the image of God
... our being filled with the fullness of God.

Wesley 1872

Charles Wesley's hymns reflect the original Methodist position clearly. For example the original final verses he wrote for 'Hark the herald angels sing' which, sadly, are never printed in versions of the carol these days:

Now display thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to thine.

Adam's likeness, Lord, efface,
Stamp thy image in its place;
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.

Let us thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the life, the inner Man;
O, to all thyself impart,
Formed in each believing heart.

Wesley 1739

It is clear that the Fathers of the Eastern Church and of Augustine in the West or Wesley centuries later believed this sense of being 'god-like' can only find its completion or *telos* in eternity after life in this world is over. They had no sense of the *theosis* or becoming 'god-like' as envisaged by the Transhumanists through the merging of biological humanity with super intelligent machines. We can never know what they would have made of the technological advances of the centuries following their own and how they would have woven its significance into their own theologies.

In 1998 an international group of authors composed what they called '*The Transhumanist Declaration*'. This completely secular approach to this matter has been taken up by many other organisations with interests in this field. Some of its pronouncements are:

1. Humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future. We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.
2. We believe that humanity's potential is still mostly unrealized. There are possible scenarios that lead to wonderful and exceedingly worthwhile enhanced human conditions.
3. We recognize that humanity faces serious risks, especially from the misuse of new technologies. There are possible realistic scenarios that lead to the loss of most, or even all, of what we hold valuable. Some of these scenarios are drastic, others are subtle. Although all progress is change, not all change is progress.

4. We advocate the well-being of all sentience, including humans, non-human animals, and any future artificial intellects, modified life forms, or other intelligences to which technological and scientific advance may give rise.
5. We favour allowing individuals wide personal choice over how they enable their lives. This includes use of techniques that may be developed to assist memory, concentration, and mental energy; life extension therapies; reproductive choice technologies; cryonics procedures; and many other possible human modification and enhancement technologies.

Tranhumanist Declaration 1998

Within this declaration are a number of issues with which the church will have to grapple as the 21st century moves forward. The problem is that the church has always considered itself to have time on its side when deliberating important matters. Unfortunately history teaches us that its renown for slowness of action is well earned as in the case of Copernicus and Galileo. Such a fiasco will not be tolerated again. Of course, for many this pace of decision making is a mark of deep spirituality. The difficulty is that the world will not wait before it makes major decisions on ethical and moral issues. If the church is to have any influence, however emasculated that influence may seem to have become in recent days, it will need to come to grips with these sorts of issues much more quickly or risk becoming more and more irrelevant.

The Emerging Church reminds us that theology today needs to emerge from the future rather than from the past. It is the risen Lord Jesus through the power of the Spirit who calls the church rather than the historical Jesus. There has to be a letting go of what the church has been in order to become what the church ought to be. Orthodoxy needs then to be redefined away from the fixed boundaries of propositional certainty, based on tired old mantras from previous generations. They had their own technological advances to deal with but had no experience of the exponential growth and speed of technological advances with which we have to deal. It seems to me that the church today must be taught to operate more happily within the more fuzzy boundaries that acknowledge that we have so much more to learn. In this context the church has to learn to be able to say farewell to its confident modernist self, secure and self-assured, believing in its own ability to create some new world order that will bring confidence and security and put the world right.

Of course, this 'fuzzy' approach is not scientific but it will free up the church to be able to get involved with scientists, technicians, visionaries and philosophers as they struggle in their own areas of research ethics and morals trying to sense which way they should develop their initiatives. After all we are dealing with the God of mystery. This God, who is the fount of all truth, has revealed something of himself but, because of the very nature of the one who gives it and that of those who receive it, this revelation can be only partial.

Speaking of mystery, the church needs to ask itself, for example, how these technological developments alter our theological understanding of what it means to be truly human. Does the phrase 'flesh and blood' have the same identification with what it is to be human today? Would we consider such technological advance a good thing or would it be seen as a real threat to the Christian faith? Arthur C Clarke noted that any sufficiently advanced technology would be indistinguishable from magic (Clarke 1984).

Mark Worthing reminds us that:

(the) theologian Philip Hefner coined the term 'created co-creators' some decades ago to describe our ability and propensity to reflect the image of God by ourselves creating marvellous things – including perhaps even AI. This does not make us God any more than it makes computers genuinely sentient – but it does say much about human beings made in God's image. We should neither fear for nor worship our own creations, but rather be in worshipful awe in the presence of the One who created beings capable of reflecting God's own creativity so powerfully.

Worthing 2013

How would the church seek to help people in the world for whom such radical changes to our understanding of human life and its development could have a very disturbing effect? Would the church be equipped to help people to cope? There are significant pastoral dimensions to these issues.

Despite all its progress our world is full of uncertainty, fear and horror. There is a deep longing for spirituality or religious expression which can take us above and beyond ordinary life experiences. There is a deep thirst for transcendence evidenced by the growth in 'spiritualities' of all kinds. The challenge to the church, committed as it is to proclaiming Jesus as Lord, is to influence the use of the unprecedented powers that science now makes available.

While eschewing the triumphalist propositional assertions that have dogged its most conservative elements it must have complete confidence in its unprecedented spiritual qualities embracing and emphasising as they do the principles of love, character, and a relational scientific-religious dialogue. The world desperately needs the moral guidance the church can bring to help the decision making processes involved in the search for scientific knowledge. When such a combination of science and religion is truly achieved it will be seen as vital for the spiritual and physical wholeness of humanity.

Perhaps what is needed now from both sides is the humility to confess our ignorance concerning the best way to move forward and, in that humility, to have the courage to be prepared to look at new and different ways of approaching our human problems. What is needed is a mutual acceptance of the value of each side of this debate linked to an emphasis on ethics and continued dialogue and collaboration. This would make the present moment a unique opportunity in the on-going

relationship between religion and science and their mutual seeking of the right direction towards that 'sense of an ending' — the goal or *telos* of creation. That, of all things, will be evidence of being 'god-like' for He is surely the source of both.

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