

The Orthodox Church and the Transhumanist Ideas on Overcoming Death

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Abstract

For mankind, death is a great mystery. Throughout history, numerous opinions about death have been issued, in search of its cause, and many ways and means to defeat it have been attempted. Recent scientific developments have not stayed back from the challenge of studying biological life and attempting technological solutions to help people reach an advanced age that is not subject to decrepitude, and perhaps even to achieve immortality. This idea is also present in the transhumanist movement that aims to change human nature through technology and supports the possibility of obtaining a lifespan capable of far exceed the current one. In this text, we attempt to give a possible answer to this transhumanist challenge from an orthodox Christian point of view.

Keywords: transhumanism, Orthodox Christianity, immortality, death, life prolongation.

TO MANKIND, DEATH IS A great mystery. Throughout history, numerous opinions about death have been issued, in search of its cause, and many ways and means to defeat it have been attempted. Religion opens a door to this reality by generally supporting the idea of an immortal spirit. The multitudes of religions represent as many answers as possible to the question of death and to what happens to human beings after their passing. There are also legends that speak about the quest for eternal youth. Nevertheless, things did not remain strictly at the level of myth, but, in each epoch, proposals were made to succeed in prolonging life, or at least to allow humans to reach old age in good health. Recent scientific developments have not stayed back from the challenge of studying biological life and attempting technological solutions to help people reach an advanced age that is not

subject to decrepitude, and perhaps even to achieve immortality. This idea is also present in the transhumanist movement that aims to change human nature through technology and supports the possibility of obtaining a lifespan capable to far exceed the current one. It practically supports the idea of accomplishing an evolution controlled by man and not by nature:

Transhumanism is a way of thinking about the future that is based on the premise that the human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase.¹

In order to fulfill this desideratum, scientific fields such as biotechnology, medicine, nanotechnologies, and informatics are used. Adherents of Transhumanism propose the use of the aforementioned fields both to improve the quality of life and to prolong it. However, some of them support the transition beyond the biological level and propose the transfer of consciousness to a computer.

In this context, the Church has a duty to analyze this way of thinking, in order to see what is acceptable from the point of view of the Revelation in these hypotheses proposed by various thinkers, especially since many are often mere illusions sold to people. These are dangerous because people pin their hopes of attaining immortality on science, often distorted, or even on pseudo-science, and not on Christ, who truly overcame the power of death.

In order to attempt a possible answer to this challenge, we will begin our approach from the Christian perspective on death and we will dwell on the possible ways proposed by the followers of Transhumanism for the “killing of death.”

Death: A Christian Orthodox Point of View

According to the teachings of faith, man was created by God in His image and given the possibility to become immortal. As a result of the ancestral sin, man subjected himself to suffering and death: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). As a result of disobeying our forefathers, wickedness and death made their way into the world, a sign of man’s removal from God:

That is why neither corruption nor death are a punishment from God, but the consequence of our alienation from the source of life. They are not meant to last forever, but God turns their purpose into a means of healing the evil.²

¹ Nick Bostrom, *The transhumanist FAQ – A General introduction – Version 2.1.* (2003), accessed January 26, 2021, <https://nickbostrom.com/views/transhumanist.pdf>, 4.

² Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă* [*Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*], Vol. 1, (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1978), 487.

God did not abandon His creation and upon the “fullness of time”, the second Person of the Holy Trinity took human form for the deliverance of man from the bondage of sin and death. This was accomplished by our Savior Jesus Christ through His incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension to Heaven. The central point of Christianity is the Resurrection of Christ, the foundation of our own resurrection: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (I Corinthians 15:22). Man is called to resurrection and the world to transfiguration and union with God. At the same time, the teachings of faith show us that man has an immortal soul. Thus, even though everyone’s life has a beginning, it has no end, a truth revealed in the parable of the ruthless rich man and beggar Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Another fundamental aspect of Christian anthropology is that life is a gift from God. For this reason, killing is more than forbidden, Christians having an obligation to protect the lives of people regardless of age, gender or state of health. A long life is seen as a divine blessing: “He asked life of you; you gave it to him, length of days forever and ever.” (Psalm 21:4); “With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation” (Psalm 91:16). At the same time, however, the Holy Scripture often confronts us with the fragility of human life: “As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.” (Psalm 103:15-16).

Regardless of the length of one’s life, death is a reality from which we cannot escape and for which we must prepare because we will appear before the righteous Judge. Saint Ambrose of Milan speaks of three types of death:

One is the death due to sin, concerning which it was written: “The soul which sins shall itself die.” [...] Another death is the mystical, when someone dies to sin and lives to God [...]. The third is the death by which we complete our life-span with its functions – I mean the separation of soul and body.³

He regards the first type as fearful, the second as good and “the third stands midway, for it seems good to the just and fearful to most men; although it gives release to all, it gives pleasure to few.”⁴ The Church thus urges for the uprooting of sin within ourselves and the living of a life in Christ, the only way to attain communion with God. We can speak of a present “full of grace” because the believer “has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). We are called to a state of righteousness in order to be prepared to give a good answer to the “right and fearful judgment”.

³ Saint Ambrose al Milanului, “Death as a good”, in *Seven Exegetical Works*, translated by Michael P. McHugh, (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 71.

⁴ Saint Ambrose al Milanului, “Death as a good”, 71.

Transhumanism and Death

One of the fundamental ideas of this movement is to create a human being who has a long, above-average lifespan, and even to attain a form of immortality. It is claimed that this will be possible through technology. The issue is not merely theoretical, as there are certain companies that have made investments to fulfill this goal. Of course, this life is not intended as an extension of old age and suffering, but as a quality, active and healthy one:

The argument is not in favor of life-span extension *per se*. Adding extra years of sickness and debility at the end of life would be pointless. The argument is in favor of extending, as far as possible, the human *health-span*. By slowing or halting the aging process, the healthy human life span would be extended. Individuals would be able to remain healthy, vigorous, and productive at ages at which they would otherwise be dead.⁵

Basically, a form of “eternal youth” is pursued. For the time being however, from a technological point of view, this is not yet feasible, but there is hope that in the future this will be possible. Transhumanists propose several approaches, working hypotheses, starting from replacing aged organs to the transferring of the consciousness to a computer. The question is whether, from a Christian point of view, an extension of life through technology is compatible with the teachings of the faith. After all, isn’t this an idea synonymous with “playing God”?! Unlike Christianity, Transhumanism does not speak of the resurrection of the dead, nor of the existence of a life after death. But the idea of scanning the brain and transferring the result to a computer can be regarded as a secularized form of life after death. All hope of salvation from the tyranny of death is attributed to science and technology. Aging and death are considered defects:

I see in them a powerful symbol of our age – we have trivialized death to such an extent, making it into a fault which medicine will be able to repair, that we must address the issue of how desirable the opposite is: do we want to be immortal, or at least to live indefinitely?⁶

⁵ Nick Bostrom, “The Fable of Dragon-Tyrant”, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.nickbostrom.com/fable/dragon.pdf>, 11.

⁶ Laurent Alexandre, Jean-Michel Besnier, *Pot face roboții dragoste? 12 întrebări despre transumanism* [Do Robots make love? Understanding transhumanism in 12 questions], translation by Maria-Magdalena Coresciuc (București: Humanitas, 2019), 64.

In this idea we can observe a resemblance to Christian anthropology, namely that man was not created for suffering and death, but for eternal life. Of course, the means to overcome them are different. Transhumanism proposes human means and Christianity puts before us the work of God. The Orthodox Christian faith places great emphasis on man's dependence on God. The transhumanist movement sees man as an independent being and it does not take into account the relationship with the Creator. For this reason, man must also be in control of his own death. Thus, death is in contradiction with the creeds of this movement, which are individual freedom, freedom of choice and freedom of exceeding one's limits.⁷

These incompatibilities could lead us to think that the Church should oppose the means that would lead to a life longer than the usual one. The psalmist says that: "The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble" (Psalm 90:10-11). These are indeed the ages that man can reach nowadays. Of course, there are exceptions "that prove the rule". As a principle however, the Church should not oppose the idea of slowing down aging and physical degradation. Without a doubt, what must be investigated is whether or not the employed methods contradict Christian morality and can lead to the destruction of human lives. The consequences they will have on society must be analyzed. If the method involves the oppression or destruction of human lives, Christians cannot accept the use of such means. But the Church, in its struggle for the defense of life at every stage, must accept all that does not deviate from the revealed truth.

An important fact worth mentioning is that no matter how advanced technology becomes, it will never be able to achieve the immortality that some transhumanists envision. Accidents, an illness, a disaster can always lead to death. Death remains a permanent presence, even if the lifespan is longer. At the same time, discernment towards the transhumanist discourse is necessary. Listening to and reading the works of the promoters of this movement can create the impression that such technologies will appear very soon. These discourses often ignore the particularly difficult scientific problems that need to be solved in order to succeed in such an endeavor. After all, one must not forget how hard and how long it takes to develop treatments for various diseases. An interesting theory circulating among transhumanists is that of scanning the brain and transferring the consciousness to a computer. This would result in a sort of "virtual immortality":

A more challenging but also ultimately feasible scenario will be to scan someone's brain to map the locations, interconnections, and contents of the somas, axons, dendrites, presynaptic vesicles,

⁷ See Todd W. Daly, "Diagnosing death in the Transhumanism and Christian Traditions", in Calvin Mercer and Tacy J. T Rohen, *Religion and transhumanism. The unknown future of human enhancement*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015), 86.

cles, and other neural components. Its entire organization could then be recreated on a neural computer of sufficient capacity, including the contents of its memory.⁸

Beyond the obvious technological impediments, this “intriguing scenario” also raises a number of other problems. Can personal identity be reduced exclusively to the brain? Does the rest of the body not matter to the person? Through this process the desired immortality could not be achieved, because the scanning procedure can only create a copy. So, we speak of the digital replication of a human being. From a Christian point of view, there are objections to this idea. According to the teachings of faith, man is not solely reduced to his brain, but he is soul and body. As for the perspective of mind scanning, it is assumed that there is juxtaposition between the brain and the mind. The body is to some extent disregarded because it is important to copy the pattern of the brain which is then virtually recreated. A type of Gnosticism can be observed here, in which the virtual world takes precedence. In that digital environment, the copy will be able to carry on its “life”. In fact, such a perspective does not offer the much-desired immortality because the copy cannot be the original, and not even this copy that lives in the virtual world can be eternal. It will be confronted with the trials and risks associated with such an existence. A computer virus or hardware problems, for example, can lead to the destruction of that entity.

Conclusions

The search for immortality is a “continuous present” in human history. From the Christian point of view, Christ, the Son of God Incarnate, is the guarantor of eternal life. In today’s secularized world, the idea that science and technology will achieve endless life proliferated. The Church must heed these interpretations and give Christians answers to the questions posed by the supports of this school of thought. Nowadays, there is no technology able to contribute to a radical extension of life. If, however, such technological advancements ever appear, the Church will have to analyze the moral and spiritual implications of each of them. As a principle, there is no contradiction between Christianity and a long life. Nevertheless, biological life must not be idolized. There exist legitimate causes for man to give his life: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” (Mark 8:35). What is important is the manner in which life is lived, regardless of its duration. For this reason, there are contradictions between the transhumanist perspective, concerned strictly with our earthly existence, and that of the Church, which invites man to an eternity spent in the presence of God.

⁸ Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, (New York: Viking, 1999), 92.

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