

# RECONCILING *IMAGO DEI* WITH TRANSHUMANISM? A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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**Abstract:** *Transhumanism is fast gaining prominence within the interdisciplinary study of science, religion, philosophy, and ethics because of its attempts at redefining the nature and future of humanity by leveraging myriads of current and projected future technological developments. The traditional position within Christian theology upholds the age-long doctrine of the Imago Dei as an integral concept for defining humanity. This paper discusses the inherent contentions in reconciling the two views, especially as the realities of the transhumanist agenda permeates every aspect of human life. Peter's prolepsis and created co-creator models of the Imago Dei were employed as the theological framework for the discussion. While the theological response to transhumanism is torn between optimism, pessimism, caution or a mix of all, the moral enhancement proposition of the genetic virtue project has been presented as one probable ground for reconciling the Imago Dei and Transhumanism, although its theological adequacy remains an ongoing debate.*

**Key Words:** Christian Theology, Future of Humanity, *Imago Dei*, Moral Enhancement, Transhumanism.

## Background

A current subject of discussion amongst scholars of science and religion is transhumanism and the future of humanity.<sup>1</sup> Transhumanism aims to recreate humanity by leveraging

current and projected future technological development within information technology, computer science and engineering, cognitive science and the neurosciences, neural-computer interface research, materials science, artificial intelligence, the array of sciences and technologies involved in regenerative medicine and life extension, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology.<sup>2</sup>

Transhumanism is of immense interest to the science and religion discipline because of its boisterous propositions to redefine humanity in an attempt to transcend human limitations. While variations of its ideas and propositions have been around for more than fifty years, the

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<sup>1</sup> The article is based on the author's term paper for the *Cell, Cosmos and Creator* course submitted to The University of Edinburgh, UK.

<sup>2</sup> Max More, "The Philosophy of Transhumanism," in *The Transhumanist Reader: Classical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, ed. Max More and Natasha Vita-More (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 4-5.

imminence of its position is closer than it was some years ago, mainly driven by rapid advancements in science and related technologies.

This essay will discuss the theological concept of the *Imago Dei* on the nature of humanity vis-a-vis transhumanism. The theological route has been employed in this paper for several reasons.

First, the theological understanding of ‘person’ drawn from the *Imago Dei* is favoured for its historical precedence in Christian theology, as seen in the literal reading of Genesis account (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). The concept of the *Imago Dei* has been an integral part of Christian beliefs and theology since the patristic and early modern era prior to the organisation of modern sciences.

Secondly, while no universal definition of the *Imago Dei* entails unequivocally, most theologians agree on three broad approaches or categories: the substantive, functional, and relational approaches. These three approaches provide robust coverage for how the human being is understood across multiple disciplines and a significant precursor to the concept of human dignity used in contemporary times, both with secular and theological contexts.<sup>3</sup> Arguably present normative position is intricately woven into how other fields of study have come to understand humanity.

Herzfeld presents a compelling correlation between the *Imago Dei* and Artificial Intelligence, which is directly relevant to the transhumanist propositions. She argues for the substantive, functional and relational approaches to the *Imago Dei*, also known as the ‘to be,’ ‘to do,’ ‘to encounter’ respectively.<sup>4</sup> The substantive or *to-be* approach defines the inherent quality of reason and intelligence in humanity, reflecting the nature of God. St. Thomas Aquinas believes that this quality is what defines the *Imago Dei*, “Since man is said to be in the image of God by reason of his intellectual nature.”<sup>5</sup> The functional or *to-do* approach is the most criticised of the models, especially by ecologists and environmentalists. This is because of the rising concerns of environmental degradation and climatic changes recognised as the

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<sup>3</sup> Maureen Junker-Kenny, “Human Dignity or Social Contract as Normative Frameworks in Applied Ethics?” *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6, no 1 (2020), 75.

<sup>4</sup> Noreen Herzfeld, “Creating in Our Own Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Image of God,” *Zygon* 2 (2004), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a, q. 93, art. 4. 7.

effects of human activities within nature, calling to question the functionality and responsibility of humans towards nature. In recent times, this criticism has been framed as the overtly anthropocentric perspective of humanity over and against the rest of creation. In certain parlances, this has been advanced as one of the precursors for the transhumanist movement. That humans are 'uniquely' unique within creation has been the subject of debate for centuries; the magnitude and effects of these views on how humans are perceived within cosmology is an ongoing conversation. Critiques of the functional view call for more responsibility of humans for the ecosystem and take cognisance of non-human life within creation.

Some theologians like Rad believe that the *Imago Dei* is not a characteristic or quality but a function; "...a role or place we are called into...man is placed upon the earth in God's image, as God's sovereign emblem. He is really only God's representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God's claim to dominion over the earth."<sup>6</sup> In the relational or *to-encounter* approach, emphasis is placed on the relationship humans have with God and other creatures in the universe. Barth is known to be the most influential proponent of this approach. He opines that "the image of God is not a quality, nor is it held by each human being as an individual. It exists first in our relationship to God and secondarily in our relationships with each other."<sup>7</sup> Herzfeld also leans towards this relational dimension of the *Imago Dei*, especially in discussing parallels between humans and artificial intelligence. According to Herzfeld,

interpretations of the image of God in humanity and the image of humanity we would like to pass on to computers have passed through similar trajectories.... in contemplating which actions matter the most, both theologians and artificial intelligence researchers have settled on being 'in-relationship.'<sup>8</sup>

Peters' first of the five models of the *Imago Dei* is *rationality* – capacity for intelligence, thinking and reasoning, which is consistent

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<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics. The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. J. W. Edwards (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), II: 220-221.

<sup>8</sup> Noreen Herzfeld, "In Whose Image? Artificial Intelligence and the *Imago Dei*," in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, ed. Alan G. Padgett and J. B. Stump (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 507.

with the conception of God as an Intelligent Being. Humanity is said to “partake of this highest grade of being.”<sup>9</sup> The second model involves *morality*, the intrinsic ability to discern good from evil. According to Petrussek, the *Imago Dei*’s moral dimension stems from the “foundational principle and validity of human dignity as a moral concept.”<sup>10</sup> Arguably, strands of the moral aspect of the *Imago Dei* has shaped the ethics of most, if not all, human disciplines. The Third dimension is *relationality* which describes humanity’s relationship with God, fellow humans, and the universe.

The last two of Peters’ five models – prolepsis and created co-creator – are the most relevant approaches to this essay. *Prolepsis* describes the ability to anticipate or predict the future. According to Peters, “humanity today anticipates - partially and fragmentarily, what humanity will become in the eschatological future.”<sup>11</sup> In discussing the future of humanity, prolepsis can be applied via two models: theologically in terms of eschatology and the *Parousia*, and scientifically or technologically as advanced by transhumanism. The final model is humanity as created co-creators. The research of Hefner popularised the theology of the created co-creator. Advanced in three forms, this theology describes the notion that God created humans to continue with creation through our inherent capabilities. It further discusses the freedom inherent in the conception of humans as created co-creator extensively and underscores our role in fulfilling God’s purposes for the future;

Human beings are God’s created co-creators whose purpose is to be the agency, acting in freedom to birth the future that is most wholesome for the nature that has birthed us – the nature that is not only our own genetic heritage but also the entire human community and the evolutionary and ecological reality in which and to which we belong. Exercising this agency is said to be God’s will for humans.<sup>12</sup>

The subject of the future of humanity is a crucial context that brings theology and science together in this discussion.

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae* 1a, Q. 93, art. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Petrussek, “The Image of God and Moral Action: Challenging the Practicality of the *Imago Dei*,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30, no. 1 (2017), 74-75.

<sup>11</sup> Ted Peters, “*Imago Dei*, DNA, and the Transhuman Way,” *Theology and Science* 16, no 3 (2018), 356.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 27.

## The Future of Humanity – Transhumanism

In recent times, transhumanist ideologies are becoming clearly articulated and audaciously presented with a gait of certainty that characterises it as a force to be reckoned with by its propagators, who are enthusiastic about this future. According to Forbes, human-centred technological advancements range from body augmentation capabilities involving wearable and implantable brain-machine interfaces (BMIs) with brain microchips and neural lace to a mind-controlled prosthesis and subdermal RFID chips that allow users to perform actions such as unlocking doors or computer passwords with the wave of a hand; advances in IVF technology that may allow us to select the most intelligent embryos, with high-level CRISPR gene-editing technology which may one day give humanity the ability to eliminate all heritable diseases and extension of human life also known as Radical Life Extension.<sup>13</sup>

Transhumanist technologies and ideologies have gained the attention of futurists, tech enthusiasts, businesses, and leading figures in today's world, who are ready and willing to commit to exploring these possibilities. Huxley introduced transhumanism as a concept in his 1927, 'Religion without Revelation.'<sup>14</sup> At this stage, Huxley's idea of transhumanism is closely associated with the idea of self-transcendence as an inherent capability in human nature.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, More defines transhumanism as "philosophies of life (such as extropian perspectives) that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations utilising science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values."<sup>16</sup>

A core aspect of transhumanist propositions is the attempt to beat death, ageing and diseases that limit human life through Radical Life Extension projects (RLE). Arguably, advancements in human

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<sup>13</sup> Singh Sarwant, "Transhumanism and the Future of Humanity: 7 Ways the World Will Change by 2030," *Forbes online*, 30 November 2020, Accessed 10 February 2021; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarwantsingh/2017/11/20/transhumanism-and-the-future-of-humanity-seven-ways-the-world-will-change-by-2030/?sh=17e4f277d79e>

<sup>14</sup> Nick Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14 (2005), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Fisher, "More Human Than Human? Toward a Transhumanist Christian Theological Anthropology," in *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement*, ed. Calvin Mercer and Tracy Trothen (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 23.

<sup>16</sup> More, "The Philosophy of Transhumanism," 4.

biology, medicine, nutrition, public health and wellness over the last 200 years have contributed to rapid increase concerns about life span in modern-day societies, but like *Oliver Twist*, humans want more – more life, more time and are putting their full weight on researching how to live forever, if possible – “whether through stem cell research or cryobiological preservation or cloning (again and again) or some other life-prolonging miracle measure, microbiological ‘immortalists’ (sic) believe it is possible to conquer disease, cure ageing and eliminate death.”<sup>17</sup>

The theological implication of RLE is bold and constitutes an intellectual challenge for theologians; that God is the ultimate giver of life and breathe is under attack by RLE because death (other human limitations) is “no longer regarded as an act of God or a sacred metaphysical mystery or the source of life’s meaning but a technical problem’ that transhumanism can and should solve.”<sup>18</sup> A question arises; will humans be designed to exist in perpetuity in the transhumanist project, and what is the transhumanist conception of the end of the world? Can human existence be infinite?

Transhumanism is said to present hope – hope in a future where humans become limitless and transcend all limitations with technology as the enabler; a future where humans progressively attain perfection and a state of godlikeness which human limitations and “greatly enhance the healthy life span of persons, increase intelligence, and make humans happier and more virtuous.”<sup>19</sup> By implication, can transhumanism be perceived as a religion or religious ideology? – seeing that it presents all the affordances of a religion.

The year 2045 is predicted to be the year when the reality of this future would begin. According to Kurzweil, this will be “the culmination of the merger of our biological thinking and existence with our

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson Herbert, “Forever is Always Finite: Reflections on Radical Life Extension,” *Theology and Science* 17, no. 2 (2019), 223.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert, “Forever is Always Finite,” 224.

<sup>19</sup> Ted Peters, “Can we enhance the *Imago Dei*?,” in *Human Identity at the Intersection of Science, Technology and Religion*, ed. Nancy Murphy and Christopher Knight (London: Routledge, 2010), 216.

technology, resulting in a world that is still human but transcends our biological roots.”<sup>20</sup>

### **The Future of Humanity – Theology**

The traditional account of the fall is often highlighted as the origin of the moral problem of evil and the beginning of human limitations. Before the fall, Gen. 2:26 records humanity's creation in the *Imago Dei*. Subsequently, some scholars hold that humanity lost certain inherent capabilities present at creation, hence its current fallen state. Theologically, the ‘big picture’ encompasses the incarnation of God to save and redeem humanity back to its original glory with the promise of future, total redemption by the second coming of Christ, followed by the end of the world. This process to the promised future is interpreted within several contexts in Christianity. According to the International Theological Commission, “Indeed, to become the image of God requires an active participation on man's part in his ‘transformation’ according to the pattern of the image of the Son who manifests his identity by the historical movement from his incarnation to his glory.”<sup>21</sup>

For Eastern Orthodox Christianity, this concept is otherwise known as deification or *Theosis*. However, for systematic theologians and reformed protestants, this future glorification or unity of humanity with Christ is the work of God, and it imbues in humanity an anticipatory response to transformation “towards a divinely appointed end or goal.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Transhumanism, Theology, and the *Imago Dei*.**

Theologians are divided on the appropriate response to transhumanism. While some theologians outrightly disapprove of the goal of the movement “since Transhumanists say humanity will make itself into God,” others are more optimistic.<sup>23</sup> The mildly optimistic see areas of similarities between transhumanism and Christianity, although not

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<sup>20</sup> Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 9.

<sup>21</sup> International Theological Commission, “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God,” 2002, no. 12; [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040723\\_communion-stewardship\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html)

<sup>22</sup> Peters, “*Imago Dei*,” 360.

<sup>23</sup> Sebastian Seung, *Connectome: How the Brain's Wiring Makes us who we Are* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 273.

all-encompassing. For the extremely optimistic, Sandberg asserts that “transhumanism is sometimes described as a religion in that it overlaps with a religious quest for meaning.”<sup>24</sup>

Traditional theologians are cautious of transhumanist ideologies and with implications for belief in God and human life. In many instances, transhumanism can be presented to “share many metaphysical, soteriological and eschatological interests with religion,”<sup>25</sup> but the questions of rationale, implications and cost is engaged in many forms. Peters asserts that “even though the transformation projected in enhancement scenarios is dramatic, it is not the transformation for which Christian faith hopes and expects.”<sup>26</sup> Perhaps, a significant line of divide is the context for reference in the two purviews. For theologians, it is God and His purpose in creation, while for Scientists, it is humanity through technology, i.e., “recontextualising humanity in terms of technology,”<sup>27</sup> which may create an existential risk. Peters believes that “every dramatic technological transformation carries with it human fallenness, the potential for self-destruction right along with the potential for healing. Only God’s final act of redeeming grace will relieve us of such self-destruction.”<sup>28</sup> Amazingly, Peters’ still asserts that some aspects of enhancements can be good for humans.<sup>29</sup>

However, in focusing on the *Imago Dei* specifically, he asked a fundamental question on whether transhumanism will alter or “have any influence on the image of the divine bequeathed to us by God?”<sup>30</sup> His answer is negative, arguing that technological enhancement is currently incapable of enhancing our disposition to love and expanding our capacity to for relating with others.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Anders Sandberg, “Transhuman and the Meaning of Life,” in *Religion and Transhumanism*, Mercer and Trothen, 4.

<sup>25</sup> James Hughes, “The compatibility of Religious Transhumanist Views of Metaphysics, Suffering, Virtue and Transcendence in an Enhanced Future,” *Global Spiral* 8 (May 2007), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Peters, “*Imago Dei*,” 237.

<sup>27</sup> Peters, “*Imago Dei*,” 216.

<sup>28</sup> Peters, “*Imago Dei*,” 360.

<sup>29</sup> Peters, “*Imago Dei*,” 238.

<sup>30</sup> Peters, “*Imago Dei*,” 215.

<sup>31</sup> Peters, “*Imago Dei*,” 237.



Generally, theology does not jettison all aspects of human enhancement technology since “enhancements to our human nature is a feature of modern life.”<sup>32</sup>

### **Grounds for Reconciliation**

Perhaps, a recently introduced grounds for reconciliation between the theological concept of *Imago Dei* and transhumanism is the notion of moral enhancement as a solution to moral depravity, which has been a case in point for theological discussions sequel to the Genesis account of the ‘fall of man.’ According to Tomislav,

...humanity has attempted to improve on our moral sensibilities and behaviour mainly through moral education; but the time has come for theology to seriously engage the near-future prospect of improving our morality and cognition at its core by upgrading our mind-body abilities to think, experience and act morally.<sup>33</sup>

Theologians have viewed moral enhancement with criticisms; questions on the competency of technology to improve human moral sense, values, and virtue have been raised.

Walker is an influential proponent of this view through his Genetic Virtue project (GVP), introduced in 2009, which underscores leveraging technology for moral enhancement. The GVP has been presented as an “interdisciplinary effort between philosophers, psychologists, and geneticists to discover and enhance human morality using biotechnology genetic correlates of virtuous behaviour,”<sup>34</sup> an ethical presupposition or variation of transhumanist objectives. The empirical plausibility that virtues have biological correlates is based on the claims that (a) virtues are a subset of personality; specifically, personality traits conceived of as ‘enduring behaviours,’ and (b) that there is ample evidence that personality traits have a genetic basis.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Joel Thompson, “Transhumanism: How Far Is Too Far?,” *The New Bioethics* 23, no 2. (2017), 167.

<sup>33</sup> Tomislav Miletic, “Human Becoming: Cognitive and Moral Enhancement Inside the *Imago Dei* Narrative,” *Theology and Science* 13, no. 4 (2015), 427.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Walker, “Enhancing Genetic Virtue: A Project for Twenty-first-century Humanity?” *Politics and the Life Sciences* 28, no. 2 (2009), 27.

<sup>35</sup> Walker, “Enhancing Genetic Virtue,” 27-28.

Walker argues that humanity can rapidly advance in its quest for the *Imago Dei* and godlikeness through DNA technology and genetic engineering.<sup>36</sup> The big question is whether moral enhancement through technology is possible and whether it would lead humanity to God. Assumedly, the line-up of stakeholders involved in the project has incorporated little or nothing from theological perspectives. In addition to this, one wonders how ethics, values and morality and the conception of the Divine can be successfully programmed into human genes – a literal importation of the immaterial to the material.

Miletić responds that

the answer we hope to achieve is a cautious yes... We believe that the project of human moral enhancement, under certain requirements, is not merely possible but should perhaps even be encouraged as a way through which we could upgrade some of the conditions of our frail human state and establish a growth in the *Imago Dei*.<sup>37</sup>

In favour of moral enhancement, the similarities in the perception of the ultimate future of humanity by both theologians and scientist are worthy of note. Perhaps, Christians and scientists want the same thing - a natural desire for transformation or future glorification consistent with the proleptic aspect of the concept of *Imago Dei*.

This similarity in perception can be particularly seen in Hefner's discussion of the created co-creator model of the *Imago Dei* and its bearings with aspects of transhumanism. Hefner clearly states that co-creator has no equality with the creator "...nevertheless, the very use of the word creator, even in a derivative sense, establishes a distinctive quality for humans: to be a kind of co-creator."<sup>38</sup> He then discusses the imperativeness of freedom, which he believes is instrumental in humanity bringing about the future intended by God

...the freedom that marks the created co-creator and its culture is an instrumentality of God for enabling the creation (consisting of the evolutionary past of genetic and cultural inheritance as well as the

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Walker, "Genetic Engineering, Virtue-First Enhancement, and Deification in Neo-Irenaean Theodicy," *Theology and Science* 16, no. 3 (2018), 252.

<sup>37</sup> Miletić, "Human Becoming," 426.

<sup>38</sup> Hefner, *The Human Factor*, 39.

contemporary ecosystem) to participate in the intentional fulfilment of God's purposes.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

The preceding discussion critically engaged the theological understanding of the nature and future of humanity as seen in the *Imago Dei* and the emergent developments in human biology, technology and the sciences proposed by transhumanism. In making sense of the presuppositions of the two fields, some level of reconciliation is inevitable. Amid the apparent contentions, the superficial similarities and the plausibility of moral enhancement through the genetic virtue project were presented as a proposed ground for unity. In attempting to answer the specific question posed by the title of the paper, the present or future prospect of reconciliation between transhumanism and the *Imago Dei* remains an ongoing conversation. Christian theologians who are less optimistic about the technological future have advanced that the rationale of the two fields cannot be unequivocally presented as advancing towards the same end-goal, at least not yet.

Although the emergent nature of transhumanism presents a challenge for scholarship, some questions remain germane to current and future research: Will humans be designed to exist in perpetuity? What is the transhumanist conception of the end of the world? If the goal of transhumanism is godlikeness in some sense, do we not already have this in the *Imago Dei*?

Perhaps, humanity is just chasing its tail in sheer curiosity or technological excitement.

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<sup>39</sup> Hefner, *The Human Factor*, 32