

MSC 2020

International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY. COMMUNICATION»

DIGITAL RELIGION OF FUTURE FOR TRANSHUMAN SOCIETY

Yulia Khvastunova (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) Gorno-Altai State University, Gorno-Altai, Russian Federation, Hvastunovoy@mail.ru

Abstract

The article considers the religious component of the teaching of transhumanism on the example of the activities of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (IEET) and its senior researcher W. Bainbridge. He develops the theory of digital religion for transhumans, an original alternative to digital ancestor cult. In the Institute various projects are developed, including the CyborgBuddha project, however, private projects and programs focus on one general conception – a universal cosmic religion of the future based on a new digital ethics. The purpose of the article is to analyze the religious component of transhumanism as an alternative to existing religious traditions, as well as the form of its manifestation as a proposed digital technological religion of transhumans, and later – posthumans. W. Bainbridge proposes a kind of digital occultism and digital cult of ancestors in the form of “resurrection” of people who actually lived by the way of uploading (collecting and recording various data about them) into the network to the maximum, and further reconstruction as a digital “immortal” improved copy, or an “avatar”. This aspect according, to W. Bainbridge, can become an element of universal cosmic religion of the future in Singularity era (combination of old ideas and new technologies).

2357-1330 © 2021 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Digital religion, new ethic, transhumanism, transhumans



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

One of the arguments in favor of the importance of religious and ethical issues in modern transhumanism is the creation of a special institute “The Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies” (IEET), on the basis of which the information mouthpiece, The Journal of Evolution and Technology (JET), operates. Transhumanist ideologists have long recognized the necessity, along with the development and a stake on high technologies, to develop, or more correctly, transform, in order to replace existing religious and cultural “high-hum” attitudes with a “new ethics” or, as W. Bainbridge states it, a universal galactic religion.

What concerns a creed, transhumanism in IEET is presented mainly by Buddhism (some prominent collaborators of IEET are former and current practicing Buddhists), what explains the interest in Buddhist concepts and names, for example, the CyborgBuddha project (FTP025: CyborgBuddha, 2016). As for the organization level, in IEET Council of Directors at least three out of six members, George Dvorsky (a practicing Buddhist), Mike La Torra (a practicing Buddhist), David Wood, follow Buddhism. All Council members unanimously, including Giulio Prisco (Turing Church project) and Mark Walker, are writing works within the Digital Religion of the Future project.

Today, we can distinguish the following directions of “religious” transhumanism: 1. Pro-Buddhism transhumanists, e.g., the core scholars at IEET; 2. Mormon Transhumanist Association; 3. A large group of transhumanists, followers of teachings of libertarians, atheists, and occultists; 4. New Age transhumanists, ufologic and ecologic spiritual groups, e.g., Raelites, Second Life spiritual community and other network groups – transcendental transhumanism; 5. Christian Transhumanist Association; 6. The group of supporters of Digital Cosmic Religion of the Future. It combines all above directions in different ways. W. Bainbridge develops the theory of digital gaming religion, digital cult of ancestors, in the form of computer game characters, avatars (he transferred eleven of his relatives into avatars with their real names and some traits of character in his own understanding).

2. Problem Statement

According to the stated topic, the following problems should be considered:

2.1. Isolate a religious component of transhumanism in the teaching and projects in general, as well as in works of Bainbridge (2009, 2013, 2014).

2.2. Analyze the understanding of religion and spirituality through the works and projects of IEET, particularly, the understanding of the religion of the future and its individual components: digital immortality-uploading, contacts with alien beings, digital cult of ancestors in the works of W. Bainbridge.

2.3. Analyze the specifics of the “digital religion of the future”, possible prospects for its implementation and transformation in a real society of humans, then in that of transhumans (some transhumanists refer themselves to this category), and further in that of posthumans where the achievement of digital and even physical immortality (immortology of transhumanism) is declared as a final goal.

3. Research Questions

Transhumanists use religious terms, concepts, methods, but in what meaning and for what purpose? The question arises, what is it? Either here, according to the postmodernism tradition, a certain metaphor develops further, and a certain linguistic game is played to apply religious concepts in a symbolic and artistic sense, decorating the scientific technologic basis of transhumanism model with its technicism, digitalization and big data, or here technologies are associated with a serious spiritual (religious) basis.

4. Purpose of the Study

It is necessary to find out whether transhumanists have any religion at all, in the real sense of the word, and what is the purpose of creating a universal religion of the future (as it is called by W. Bainbridge, J. Hughes)? What is the purpose of apology and creation of mechanisms for “translating” religious practices, spirituality into a digital format, e.g., the format of computer games with avatars created on the base of a set of data about people who once lived, followed by the creation of a digital analogue of ancestors’ cult? A kind of version of W. Bainbridge is his vision of possible achievement of digital immortality.

5. Research Methods

When writing the article, the works of the following ideologists of the movement expressing the opinion about religion of the future, spirituality were analysed: Kurzweil (2020), Bostrom (2016), Bainbridge (2014), Pearce (2018), More (2010), J. Hughes (FTP025: CyborgBuddha, 2016).

A critical analysis of transhumanism is presented in the writings of Fukuyama (2002), J. Habermas (as cited in Haker, 2019), and domestic researchers Kuttyrev (2015), Lektorsky (2015).

Transhumanists predominantly defend the understanding of religion, and hence the need for its further modernization from the standpoint of controlled evolution, continuing exponential progress (for which it is required to master “Exponential Thinking” (Kurzweil, 2020) both of science and the human and the whole society, followed by inevitable transition into the Singularity Era. Only transhumans and posthumans with a new ethics and universal digital religion will be able to survive in the Singularity Era. However, the problem is that even the very concept of posthuman no longer presupposes a human as such. Similarly, a digital “immortal” avatar of a dead person, in fact, has nothing in common with a person who really once lived. Digital immortality is not immortality in a strict sense of the word, since it is impossible to describe someone who did not live, was not born and did not die, using the categories of life.

6. Findings

Transhumanists have created The Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies (IEET) which publishes the Journal of Evolution and Technology (JET). The terms “technology”, “ethics” and “evolution” are constantly repeated in the names. The term “evolution” is understood as one of key principles of describing the «enhancement» development, hence the argumentation of the positive view at any innovations – “neophilia”. Here controlled evolution is meant. This is a specific information and organization artificial modification, intervention into a natural environment through programs and projects,

e.g., a series of programs of convergence of NBIC-technologies. In the new world the ordinary person, an “outdated model”, will not be viable. There is one more aspect. This is a persistent simplification and equalization of different biosystems: animals, humans, plants, and even unanimate systems of “modified life forms”. The following concept is “ethics”. It is in these ethical constructions, e.g., in bioethics that many religious aspects emerge. Transhumanism has its own commandments, e.g., in “Hedonistic imperative” by D. Peirce.

Galactic religion. Being engaged in psychology and programming, and integrating these sciences, W. Bainbridge implemented the idea of fixing personal data “Personality Capture” through extensive surveys and transferring data to a computer program, thus, the idea of preparing “uploading” was polished. Spiritual ideas began arising in parallel with the improved technology of data collection. W. Bainbridge is confident that transhumanism will create a new universal techno-religion that will replace traditional beliefs. In the past century, science fiction helped advance the ideas of transhumanism and, in turn, inspired modern ideologists to create a galactic religion.

Let us return to the problem of transferring and storing information about a person. He writes that there are a number of fairly well developed technologies for storing information about people that can be used to imitate them after their death to some degree of realism (Bainbridge, 2014). His Survey Research program, 1989, included a questionnaire (40 000 questions implemented in 10 questionnaire administration programs for Windows operating systems) where the respondent entered answers, and the program processed them. In his book he suggests various examples of computerized personality capture, as well as some examples of how the emulation of a dead person can be implemented using information technologies. It is interesting that W. Bainbridge selected the term “emulation” instead of “modeling”. In this case, it is emphasized that in the future, it will be possible to achieve the technology reproducing the original prototype very closely, or even creating the prototype itself in the digital format. However, there is a question left: how much are such a product, as well as a program in general, similar to the original, how will they perceive the reality, “think”? (Kosilova, 2019). Emulation is used in the meaning of precise copying of a person based on the maximum volume of collected data. But in this case a classical version of simplification is present, hence there is fallacy of the methodology in general, since: 1. A person is not an algorithm or a program, that has the same structure as other programs used to perform emulation (the law of property similarity does not work); 2. A copy is a certain simplified version of memories or a desired image of the deceased in the programmer’s mind, i.e., in fact, creating on the network someone who never existed, even if they look similarly; 3. To call the product of software creativity, and for majority in the future, someone else’s software creativity, as a certain analogue of a living or departed world and deceased relatives, - genuine or even more truly religious, hence identical to spiritual experience, is self-deception, a dangerous illusion. It is proposed to live in a reality set by a digital code of someone’s fantasy, perhaps by AI (Bainbridge, 2014).

Digital cult of ancestors. W. Bainbridge writes that in parallel with the research on “personality capture”, he investigated virtual worlds as media for the symbolic revival of dead people. His first attempt was launching an avatar based on his deceased uncle Max Ron, a bishop priest. The book “eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming” offers a more complete statement of the idea. He prepared a small book as a guide to reviving deceased loved ones with the help of avatars of the game world: a surrogate of

information technologies for religion: worship of a deceased family in online-games (Bainbridge, 2014). Uploading data of various levels, trusting AI and a single network, people from different countries and cultures seem to be under the power of the digital environment, losing their freedom, autonomy, acquiring dependence, becoming mediated (Leshkevich, 2019).

Universal religion of the future. In the opinion of W. Bainbridge, one of the conditions to gain immortality is space exploration and colonization of other planets, contacts with alien beings. The creation of a galactic civilization can depend on the appearance of a galactic religion. This religion would require its members to observe an emergency discipline, so it can be called the Cosmic Order (Bainbridge, 2009). In the future, the functions of religion will be retained in new cults. W. Bainbridge welcomes those cults that promote the use of new technologies, especially spacewalk. Since the late 1940s, various new religious movements, e.g. numerous cults of flying saucers (ufology), have intensified. Now they are insignificant, but in the future they will be able to become more prominent religious. We need some really aggressive cosmic religions expelling traditional religions from their places. Using information technologies and biotechnologies, the Cosmic Order will save your soul (Bainbridge, 2009). Here W. Bainbridge emphasized the role of NBIC-technologies in a simplified manner.

Program of actions. W. Bainbridge believes that in the nearest future it will be possible to achieve eternal life, using and promoting programs of convergence of NBIC-technologies. Methodology for registering and collecting data for the subsequent personality digitization consists of four stages. 1. Collecting all data (recording the maximum amount of information: memories, skills, physical parameters, and genetic inheritance); 2. Entering all data into the extensive single computerized database, i.e., into one powerful computer; 3. This database will be transferred to space on a computer robot in order to colonize stars; 4. All three stages have valuable secondary advantages, by the way at each stage the person will be “improved” irreversibly. So, no guarantee for preserving our identity is supposed, W. Bainbridge himself understands this very well, having included the 4th stage in the process (at once there is reworking, “enhancement” of the person). First, this is a genetic transformation, editing genes, e.g., in order to mutate a person for his adaptation on other planets. The second option is to register human activities in virtual online worlds. W. Bainbridge believes in the success of the second technology and calls everyone to register permanently on the network, take tests, write an autobiography, etc. A new religion will help carry out this process.

7. Conclusion

Returning to the problems posed at the beginning of the work:

7.1. Transhumanistic projects contain religious concepts, but frequently they lack classical theological interpretations as, for example, in the Cyborg Buddha project (the traditional understanding of nature of Buddha or Trinitarian dogma is absent). However, to declare that transhumanists’ religious terms are not more than artistic metaphors is not justified. It is true that many concepts are metaphors, or, more correctly, they are loaded with special meanings in a transhumanistic way with the predominance of technicism. At the same time there are purely religious ideas in the teachings. This is evidenced by the following: 1. Presence of religious terms, meanings, methods, spiritual practices in the theories of transhumanism; 2. Religious and confessional composition of transhumanists, among which 6 groups were

identified, the most structured group in IEET being a pro-Buddhist one, followers of libertarianism, new religious movements and spiritual practices.

7.2. The aim of creating the mechanisms of transferring religious practices, spirituality into digital format is regarded as the desire to expand digital boundaries, place the content of reality into virtual reality, since transhumanists are confident that technologies will solve the problem of superabilities and immortality. In relation to humans, it is an implementation with the help of convergence of NBIC-technologies – Human Enhancement Technologies. So, digital alternatives to reality are actively supported, for example, there is a project of computer games with avatars created on the basis of a set of data from people who once lived, followed by the creation of a digital analogue of the cult of ancestors. One of the alternatives to religion is a superpowerful computer game, simulation instead of genuine reality, into which data will be uploaded, in the prospect, - people' consciousness. The version of cycled digital world will appear. The cult of the dead, according to W. Bainbridge, is a kind of digital necromancy, a desire to capture the souls of the dead / living and place them in an "ideal" but digital world. The latter, expressed through the Internet environment, becomes not only a means of searching for information and obtaining knowledge, but also, more importantly, an intermediary that is far from the role of a tactful invisible servant. He easily mimics a living system, gains trust and begins to actively influence and form the user's consciousness (Golubinskaya, 2019; Mironov & Sokuler, 2018). The whole depth of reality diversity here is simplified to one option - information, algorithm, data and Big Data methodology. A theory of utilitarian hedonistic digital ethics, free from moral responsibility in the traditional sense, is being created. Transhumans and even more so AI will have a special right to modernize all creatures by virtue of domination, "omniscience" and immersion in a new experience, which they themselves will form. The person will lose the right to make decisions, because a priori it is assumed that he is limited in comparison with AI (FTP025: Cyborg Buddha, 2016). The goal of creating a universal religion of the future is a matter of survival and, at the same time, the possibility of achieving a state of divinity, but for whom?

References

- Bainbridge, W. S. (2009). "Religion for a Galactic Civilization 2.0". *Ethical Technology*.
<https://ieet.org/index.php/IEET2/more/bainbridge20090820>
- Bainbridge, W. S. (2013). *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming*. Oxford University Press.
- Bainbridge, W. S. (2014). Unraveling Religion. *Ethical Technology*.
<https://ieet.org/index.php/IEET2/more/bainbridge20141108>
- Bostrom, N. (2016). *Iskusstvennyj intellekt. Etapy. Ugrozy. Strategii* [Artificial intelligence. Stages. Threats. Strategies], Mann, Ivanov and Ferber.
- Fukuyama, F. (2002). *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- FTP025: Cyborg Buddha. (2016). *IEET's James Hughes on Transhuman Enlightenment and Basic Income*.
<https://futurethinkers.org/cyborg-buddha-james-hughes-transhuman-enlightenment>
- Golubinskaya, A. V. (2019). Prinyatie znaniya rasshirennym soznaniem v usloviyah informacionnogo obshchestva [Knowledge Acceptance by an Extended Mind in the Information Society Conditions]. *Tomsk State University Journal*, 441, 75–79. <https://doi.org/10.17223/15617793/441/10>
- Haker, H. (2019). Habermas and the Question of Bioethics. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 11(4), 61–86. <https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v11i4.3037>

- Kosilova, E. V. (2019). Vyzovy komp'yuternoj kul'tury [Challengers of computer culture]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 7. Filosofiya* [Bulletin of Moscow University. Series 7: Philosophy], 3, 22–33.
- Kurzweil, R. (2020). *The law of accelerating returns*. <https://www.kurzweilai.net/kurzweils-law-aka-the-law-of-accelerating-returns>
- Kutyrev, V. A. (2015). *Poslednee celovanie. Chelovek kak tradiciya* [Last kiss. Man as a tradition]. Aleteia.
- Lektorsky, V. A. (2015, April, 3). «Esli prikhodit bessmertie. zhizn teryayet smysl». Interv'yu [“If Immortality Comes Life Lacks its Meaning”. Interview]. New Newspaper. <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/04/03/63668-akademik-lektorskiy-171-esli-prihodit-bessmertie-zhizn-teryayet-smysl-187>
- Leshkevich, T. G. (2019). Cifrovye transformacii epohi v proekcii ih vozdejstviya na sovremennogo cheloveka [Digital Transformations of the Era in the Projection of Their Impact on the Modern Man]. *Tomsk State University Journal*, 439, 103–109.: <https://doi.org/10.17223/15617793/439/12>
- Mironov, V., & Sokuler, Z. (2018). Toska po istinnomu bytiyu v digital'noj kul'ture [Longing for true being in digital culture]. *Vestnik Moskovskogo universiteta. Seriya 7. Filosofiya* [Bulletin of Moscow University. Series 7: Philosophy], 1. 3–22.
- More, M. (2010). The Overhuman in the Transhuman. *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 21.1, 1–4.
- Pearce, D. (2018). *The Hedonistic Imperative*. <https://www.hedweb.com/hedethic/tabconhi.htm>