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# "Too Much Faith in Progress": Alexander Campbell and the Transhumanist Movement

JENNIFER THWEATT-BATES

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If you're reading *Leaven*, you know who Alexander Campbell is. You may not, however, know what the "transhumanist movement" is. But, if you happened to catch the Barbara Walters special on anti-aging technologies, which aired in April 2008, you know something about it—though Barbara never used the word "transhumanist" in her show. Walters interviewed scientists, medical doctors, centenarians and others, and highlighted resveratrol, calorie restriction and cryonics as cutting-edge life-extension technologies.<sup>1</sup>

"Better Than Well" is the slogan heading the World Transhumanist Association's website.<sup>2</sup> The slogan captures the basic conviction of the transhumanist movement, that human beings should use technology to transcend the current limitations of the human body and brain. This general goal is expressed through the pursuit of the elimination of aging, disease, pain and suffering, and even death itself. The human condition is seen as tragic; the response to the inherent tragedy of human life is to become posthuman, that is, achieve a state of existence no longer defined by the tragic necessities of aging and death. Thus the term "transhuman": humans in transition toward the posthuman. Transhumanists enthusiastically embrace a number of various technologies, including biotechnologies (such as germline engineering and somatic therapy), nanotechnologies and AI (artificial intelligence). Some transhumanists, such as Dr. Aubrey de Grey, focus on life-extension, through genetic and other means; others, such as Ray Kurzweil, anticipate replacing or leaving behind the biological body through transferring the human consciousness to an artificial body or into a virtual existence.

It sounds like science fiction, but then, so does the recent finding of water on Mars, and evidence of the existence of planets outside our solar system. While some transhumanist visions may seem implausible for one reason or another, remember that many of the technologies and scientific achievements we now take for granted seemed equally implausible to past generations.

The crucial question for Christians and Christian theologians is not simply "How do we react to these new technologies and the possibilities they represent?" Transhumanism is more than simply an enthusiasm for the wonders of current and near-future technologies; transhumanists describe their movement as a "total life philosophy."<sup>3</sup> This has led some critics, such as Reformed theologian Brent Waters, to characterize transhumanism as a sort of religion itself.<sup>4</sup>

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1. "Live to be 150 . . . Can You Do It?" aired on ABC April 1, 2008, 10 p.m. EST. For a short article summarizing the special, see also <http://www.abcnews.go.com/Health/Longevity/story?id=4544003&page=1> (accessed March 25, 2009).

2. <http://www.transhumanism.org/index.php/WTA/index/> (accessed March 25, 2009).

3. Nick Bostrom, "The Transhumanist FAQ: A General Introduction," The World Transhumanist Association, 2003, <http://transhumanism.org/index.php/WTA/faq/> (accessed April 6, 2009). Simon Young, *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006).

4. Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World*, eds. Roger Trigg and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen (Ashgate Science and Religion Series; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 80.



Transhumanists typically dislike this characterization of their movement as religious, and dispute it with varying degrees of annoyance. Most transhumanists identify as secular atheists. Beyond that, built into the transhumanist philosophy is the presumption of a stark difference between Reason and Faith. Transhumanists argue that their views are based on facts provable through scientific knowledge, whereas religious faith relies on an acceptance of divine revelation in some form as the source of knowledge. Nick Bostrom admits that transhumanism, as a worldview or philosophy, may fill some of the functions of religious belief, but adds, "Unlike most religious believers, however, transhumanists seek to make their dreams come true in *this* world, by relying not on supernatural powers or divine intervention but on rational thinking and empiricism, through continued scientific, technological, economic, and human development."<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of whether one characterizes transhumanism as religious or not, it is true that transhumanists themselves often frame their philosophy as being in direct opposition to religious worldviews, arguing that religions function to create resignation to the biological limitations they seek to transcend: suffering, aging and death. Simon Young, for instance, writes, "Just as the invention of heaven eased the painful knowledge of impending death, so the invention of suffering as a virtue makes a virtue out of a necessity. So long as death is held to be unavoidable, human beings will continue to seek religions which make suffering a virtue, and immortality its imaginary reward."<sup>6</sup>

Christian theological responses to transhumanism thus far, though perhaps unintentionally, reinforce this transhumanist view of passive, resigned, other-worldly Christian faith. Brent Waters argues that the task for Christians is to provide a compelling and persuasive counter-discourse to transhumanism. Waters sees Christianity as fundamentally opposed to transhumanism. Waters therefore offers a Christian narrative of a created natural order, in which humans as creatures occupy a divinely ordered place, with a specific purpose and ordained limits, as a direct contradiction to transhumanism's desire to transcend biological limitation. Transhumanism, Waters argues, represents not just a mistaken or naive, but sinful, attempt to transcend those ordained limits: "The issue at stake is not that in pursuing the postmodern or posthuman projects humans may cease to be human, but that they will cease to be creatures bearing the *imago dei* in effectively rejecting their election."<sup>7</sup> In Waters' view, for human beings to reject their limits is to disrespect God's choice of finite humanity as God's image, and to reject our relationship with God.

Lutheran theologian Ted Peters argues that the anthropological starting point of the transhumanist vision is one that rejects "the realism regarding human nature given us by the Reformation," in which "a sinner in need of divine grace was the starting point."<sup>8</sup> Thus the core worry of the Christian theologian, as Peters sees it, is the "techno-optimism" consciously adopted by the transhumanist movement, which Peters sees as "confidence in the good that progress can bring while denying the potential growth of evil."<sup>9</sup>

Waters and Peters are representative of current Christian theological responses to transhumanism, and it is not insignificant that both theological critiques are argued from highly pessimistic views of human nature. For Waters, seeking transcendence from human limitations *is* sin; for Peters, sin compromises the results of every human endeavor, including the transhumanist project and the technologies it depends upon. The theological anthropology at work in both critiques results in a suspicion of the techno-optimism and

5. Bostrom, "The Transhumanist FAQ," 46.

6. Young, *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto*, 53.

7. Waters, *From Human to Posthuman*, 144.

8. Ted Peters, "Transhumanism and the Posthuman Future: Will Technological Progress Get Us There?" *The Global Spiral* (2008), Metanexus Institute, <http://www.metanexus.net/magazine/tabid/68/id/10546/Default.aspx> (accessed April 6, 2009).

9. *Ibid.* "Techno-optimism" is James Hughes' phrase; see James Hughes, *Citizen Cyborg: Why Democratic Societies Must Respond to the Redesigned Human of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2004).



confidence in human agency<sup>10</sup> so fundamental to the transhumanist movement. Conversely, the optimism at work in transhumanism results in an unwillingness to take seriously this theological critique of transhumanist thought. Christian theologians view the transhumanists as (at best) hopelessly naive, and transhumanists view Christian theologians as helplessly passive. In a sense, then, the conversation partners are engaged in talking past one another.

But what about a Christian theological response from a tradition with its own optimistic anthropology and history of faith in progress? I am, of course, referring to Alexander Campbell, and the optimism and faith in progress woven into his postmillennial eschatology. In 1858, Campbell wrote, "it was but yesterday that the mariner's compass was discovered, that printing was shown to be practicable, that steam power was laughed at as an absurdity, and the electric telegraph ridiculed as the hobby of a vagarian's brain . . . We have too much faith in progress . . . to subscribe to the doctrines of these theological gentlemen who hint the last days are at hand."<sup>11</sup> One can only assume that Campbell would be equally impressed with e-mail, personal GPS locators and the airplane.

Richard Hughes writes, "Campbell's postmillennial expectations . . . were progressive . . . When he described the means that would introduce the final, golden age, Campbell increasingly spoke not only of primitive Christianity but also of science, technology, education, and republican institutions."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in a series of articles on the millennium in *The Millennial Harbinger*, Campbell identified the "great changes in the world" he anticipated, which included peace, prosperity, good health, clement weather and abundant crops, in addition to the triumph and unity of Christianity worldwide.<sup>13</sup>

Compare Campbell's stated millennial expectations to the transhumanist expectations described below:

Improvements in medical care will extend healthy, active lifespan—"healthspan"—and research into healthspan extension is likely to benefit ordinary care . . . Better communications would facilitate trade and understanding between people . . . A world order characterized by peace, international cooperation, and respect for human rights would much improve the odds that the potentially dangerous applications of some future technologies can be controlled and would also free up resources currently spent on military armaments, some of which could then hopefully be diverted to improving the condition of the poor. Nanotechnological manufacturing promises to be both economically profitable and environmentally sound . . . An argument can be made that the most efficient way of contributing to making the world better is by participating in the transhumanist project.<sup>14</sup>

As an heir to the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, then, I find myself responding to transhumanism from a different location within the Christian tradition than Waters or Peters, one which is historically much more amenable to notions of progress and redeemed human agency. It seems clear that a theological response to transhumanism from this location will take a different form than the Reformed and Lutheran critiques, and perhaps be one which transhumanism is better able to hear.

Campbell represents a sort of midpoint between the pessimistic anthropology of Reformed and Lutheran traditions and the optimistic anthropology of the transhumanists. Campbell's theological anthropology

10. By human agency, I mean simply to refer to the capacity for human action, both good and bad, and the nature of human beings as agents or actors within the world. In many Christian traditions, including Lutheran and Reformed traditions, the agency of human beings is regarded as so compromised by the fall that humans are incapable of doing anything morally good unaided. Within the context of human technology, the theological assertion that human actions are inevitably sinful implies a pronounced suspicion of notions of progress.

11. Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 30.

12. *Ibid.*, 29.

13. Leroy Garrett, "Alexander Campbell," in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, eds. Douglas A. Foster, Anthony L. Dunnavant, Paul M. Blowers and D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 124.

14. Bostrom, "The Transhumanist FAQ," 28–9.



begins with an acknowledgment of humanity's fallen state, but states firmly that human beings are capable of regeneration: "A Christian is, indeed, one whose views are enlightened, whose heart is renewed, whose relations to God and the moral universe are changed, and whose manner of life is according to righteousness and true holiness."<sup>15</sup> For Campbell, redemption is unquestionably needed, but God's redemption has real, on-the-ground results. Human beings therefore have a responsibility to act out their redemption in ways that go beyond simply waiting for God to act.

We might label this Campbellite perspective a notion of redeemed human agency, the restoration of humankind's capability to do good in the world. Unlike the transhumanists' optimism, there is recognition that human beings alone and unaided will fall. Yet, unlike Waters and Peters, the theological emphasis falls on the good that redeemed human beings can do, rather than on the sinfulness that compromises all our actions.

From a Campbellite perspective, then, the crucial theological question is not whether a better future will be the result of human action or God's action, but rather what kind of future we are indeed working to build. Does the Christian eschaton, even in Campbell's postmillennial version, bear any resemblance to the future anticipated by transhumanists? Peters writes, "a Christian theologian is likely to contend that the extension of the present form of human life for the indefinite future offered in the transhumanist scenario simply does not correspond to the biblical vision of resurrection from the dead. Our redemption through resurrection into the new creation does not correspond to cybernetic immortality." But, he continues, "that is another matter, and not one I want to make central [here]."<sup>16</sup> It does, however, become the central critique from a Campbellite point of view which allows, even mandates, a role for human agency in bringing about the eschaton through the betterment of the human condition through scientific and technological progress. With an agreement that human beings do indeed have a role to play in bringing about the eschatological future, the question of exactly what kind of future that is becomes paramount.

The transhumanist vision is a tempting one; everyone desires better health, longer life, more productivity. Yet it remains at its core an individualistic vision. Life-extension technologies and other cutting-edge medical interventions will only benefit those individuals who receive them; their promise is not universal, but conditional. In contrast, even in Campbell's postmillennial version, the Christian eschaton is universal. The benefits of technology that Campbell anticipated were to be enjoyed by everyone, a foretaste of a divine promise that is indeed for everyone. As we work toward that future, then, as these technologies develop, the most important question to be addressed is not that of divinely ordained limits and their transgression. The most important question is, for whose good? For mine, or yours, or ours alone? Or for all?

Building the future is a collective enterprise in which we all participate. It is a task which, to their credit, the transhumanists take seriously, and which they challenge us as Christians to take seriously as well. For our part, to return to Campbell once more, perhaps the best reminder Christians can offer to transhumanism would be this: "There is a fullness of joy, a fullness of glory, and a fullness of blessedness, of which no living [hu]man, however enlightened, however enlarged, however gifted, ever formed or entertained one adequate conception."<sup>17</sup>

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15. Alexander Campbell, "Regeneration, Conversion," *The Christian System*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1839, <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/tcs2/TCS218.HTM> (accessed March 25, 2009).

16. Peters, "Transhumanism and the Posthuman Future: Will Technological Progress Get Us There?"

17. Garrett, "Alexander Campbell," 134.