

## THE CHRISTIAN-ORTHODOX FAITH AND CHRISTIAN TRANSHUMANISM

CĂLIN EMILIAN CIRA\*

**ABSTRACT.** The Church has been confronted with various challenges in the recent period. One of these is the transhumanist movement that aims to create a new man by using the means of science and technology. In this context, the “Christian Transhumanist Association” was set up, an organization which proposes a dialogue with Transhumanism and even a way to find compatibilities between Christianity and this new trend. In this essay, having “The Christian Transhumanist Affirmation” as a starting point, we will try to offer a possible perspective from the point of view of Orthodox Christianity in relation to what this association claims.

**Keywords:** Transhumanism, Christian transhumanism, Eastern Orthodox Church, technology, science.

The recent period is characterized by an extraordinary evolution of technologies. This fact leads, on the one hand, to the improvement, to some extent, of people’s lives but at the same time triggers new problems and challenges of an ecological, economic and moral nature. Concomitantly with these technical and scientific changes, we can observe a process of dechristianization in Europe and in other areas around the globe where Christianity has been the predominant faith for a long time. In this context, some Christian denominations have tried to adapt their discourse and even their morals to the new tendencies of the world. As a result, in various branches of Protestantism, compromises were made by shortening religious services, recognizing same-sex marriages, and by ordaining women as priests and even bishops. By adapting the Christian teachings to the new world trends, it was believed that those who had left the faith would return. In general, this has not been the case. The Orthodox Church itself is under pressure to renounce certain teachings which today, for some people, seem outdated and even devoid of love.

---

\* *Phd. in History, “Lucian Blaga” Central University Library of Cluj-Napoca, Romania.*

Nowadays, Christianity and implicitly the Eastern Church are confronted with the questions brought about by these new trends. One of them is Transhumanism, which proposes the creation of a new man with the help of biotechnologies, genetic engineering and artificial intelligence: "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"<sup>1</sup>. From this perspective we can observe that the idea that man can control his evolution alone, or one could argue, even go beyond his own limits, is advocated for. In general, this trend is characterized by an indifference to religion and, sometimes, even by atheism: "Transhumanism emphasizes the philosophy's roots in Enlightenment humanism. From here comes the emphasis on progress (its possibility and desirability, not its inevitability), on taking personal charge of creating better futures rather than hoping or praying for them to be brought about by supernatural forces, on reason, technology, scientific method, and human creativity rather than faith"<sup>2</sup>. This perspective is present not only in the secular-humanist circles but also in the religious ones. Thus, the Orthodox bioethicist Jean Boboc claimed the following in an interview: "This ideology is not new, it finds its roots already in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which is anti-Christian, based on the knowledge of man, and at the same time based on scientism, more precisely the British one, on British biology. No wonder that the first modern transhumanists were the Anglo-Saxons. If we go back in history, however, we could say that Adam himself in a way opened up the era of Transhumanism, for he was part of a created humanity, but because of the original sin he fell into a state that needed to be restored."<sup>3</sup> Another Orthodox theologian, Brandon Gallagher, regards Transhumanism as demonic because it is a form through which man venerates himself: "Transhumanism is Satanic. When I write this I am not being provocative, let alone vaguely metaphorical. It is meant literally and with the strongest realism"<sup>4</sup>. From these two harsh statements we could extrapolate that there can be no form of dialogue between Orthodoxy and Transhumanism. The two seem to be in contradiction. Transhumanism aims to create a new man, more resistant to diseases, with

---

<sup>1</sup> Nick Bostrom, "The transhumanist FAQ - A General introduction- Version 2.1. (2003)", accessed March 2, 2020, <https://nickbostrom.com/views/transhumanist.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Max More, "The philosophy of transhumanism", in *The transhumanist Reader*, ed. Max More and Natasha Vita-More (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 4.

<sup>3</sup> "Nașterea lui Hristos și eugenia transumanismului" [The Birth of Christ and the Eugenics of Transhumanism], interview with father Jean Boboc, by pr. Ioan-Aurelian Marinescu in <https://ziarullumina.ro/interviu/nasterea-lui-hristos-si-eugenia-transumanismului-140196.html>, accessed on 28.03.2020.

<sup>4</sup> Brandon Gallagher, "Godmanhood vs. Mangodhood: An Eastern orthodox Response to transhumanism", *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2019): 200.

increased intellectual capacities and with a higher life expectancy, capable even to reach immortality. The means by which these aptitudes are to be achieved, are scientific knowledge and the use of biotechnologies, genetic engineering, computer science, artificial intelligence. The fundamental idea is to recreate the heavenly state without God. The Orthodox Church, of course, cannot adopt such an attitude. First of all, its purpose is the preaching of the Gospel to all nations and the salvation of man. The way in which it accomplishes all this is not strictly human, but theandric. The church was founded by Christ, the Son of God Incarnated for the salvation of the world and the universe. It is in fact “Christ extended in humanity”. God in the Trinity is the one working through the Church. Man is unable to become free from the “bondage of death” by himself or through any of his creations, no matter how efficient. The means offered to us by the Church to help us achieve immortality are the Holy Sacraments, prayer, fasting and moral improvement. From the point of view of Christian anthropology, it is considered that there is life after death (a fact not taken into account by Transhumanism) and that the world is heading towards an end that is not synonymous with the death of the universe but with its transfiguration. Thus, there are great differences between the Orthodox approach to existence and that of Transhumanism.

In the Protestant environment, however, it was hypothesized that these transhumanist ideas could be adopted by Christianity. As a result, in 2013, for example, the “Christian Transhumanist Association” was established in the United States. It believes that Transhumanism is a philosophy that advocates for the improvement of life on earth through the interchange of science and technology<sup>5</sup>. Thus a Christian dimension can be given to this movement and should not be confiscated exclusively by a secular-humanist vision. They see this compatibility by supporting the following ideas:

**“1. We believe that God’s mission involves the transformation and renewal of creation** including humanity, and that we are called by Christ to participate in that mission: working against illness, hunger, oppression, injustice, and death.

**2. We seek growth and progress along every dimension of our humanity:** spiritual, physical, emotional, mental—and at all levels: individual, community, society, world.

**3. We recognize science and technology as tangible expressions of our God-given impulse to explore and discover** and as a natural outgrowth of being created in the image of God.

---

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.christiantranshumanism.org/about>, accessed on 28.03.2020.

**4. We are guided by Jesus' greatest commands** to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength... and love your neighbor as yourself."

**5. We believe that the intentional use of technology, coupled with following Christ, will empower us to become more human** across the scope of what it means to be creatures in the image of God."<sup>6</sup>

These statements point to a Christian view on the importance of knowledge in solving some of humanity's problems. It is a Christian interpretation of Transhumanism. As a matter of fact, it is actually a redefinition of it, because the emphasis falls on the value of Man who is seen as created by God, in His own image. Man was given the gift of being a creator and a collaborator of the Divinity in improving the world. Science and technology are the means by which this work can be accomplished. It is a completely different perspective than the one with which we are accustomed and which places an emphasis strictly on human beings as solely responsible for their own evolution and in no need of the relationship and moral-spiritual guidance of the Holy Scripture and the Church. Technology is not seen as an end in itself that leads to the disappearance of man but is merely a means by which some human sufferings can be limited and even eliminated. It is practically a means to fulfill the biblical commandment to love thy neighbor.

The question that we will try to tackle below, hoping to find a clarification, is the following: Can the Orthodox Church be compatible with such an approach as that of the "Christian Transhumanist Association"?

In order to attempt to answer it, we will start from the anthropology of the Christian East, we will take each of the statements of the aforementioned association and we will confront them with the teachings of the Orthodox faith.

**"1. We believe that God's mission involves the transformation and renewal of creation** including humanity, and that we are called by Christ to participate in that mission: working against illness, hunger, oppression, injustice, and death."

According to the Revelation of the Holy Scripture, the world was created by God out of nothing in order for it to be able to share in the goodness and divine love: "If everything was created by God to share in His love, their purpose is to fully take advantage of this love, which is to say, to accomplish a full communion with God[...]"<sup>7</sup> As a result of the fall of man, the whole humanity experienced a

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.christiantranshumanism.org/affirmation>, accessed on 28.03.2020.

<sup>7</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology], 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1996), 1: 233.

state of decay, as shown by St. Paul in his Letter to the Romans: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rm, 8, 22). Thus, evil taints both creation and man: “The entire creation loses the image of good mixed with evil, the depths open to infinite knowledge, and reveals, through the sinful man, a face mixed with pain, with many failures and resentments. Christianity associates with sin, or with the separation from the Spirit of God, the weakening of one’s soul life, or the death of the soul, so also with diseases, corruption and physical death.”<sup>8</sup> For this reason everything that man creates is subject to error, corruption, failure, to being used for evil. Christianity has indeed fought since its inception to improve the moral and material state of man. This was manifested through its caring for the poor, the sick, the children and through the construction of hospitals, orphanages, schools. Throughout its history the Church has spoken out and advocated for the creation of a better society. At the same time, however, the acknowledgement that the transfiguration of the world and the creation of a “new heaven and new earth” will be accomplished with the Second Coming was always present. This work, however, began with the Incarnation of the Son of God and is continued by the work of the Holy Trinity within the Church through the Holy Sacraments and Services. Through these means, a renewal of man takes place and the communion with God is accomplished. Man does not remain passive in this process, however the radical change of the whole creation is made by the Creator of Heaven and Earth. So, we can partially adhere to this statement, taking into account the above-mentioned amendments.

**“2. We seek growth and progress along every dimension of our humanity:** spiritual, physical, emotional, mental—and at all levels: individual, community, society, world.”

From the point of view of the Orthodox Church, man is called to deification. This does not mean that we can become identical to God, but that we can become gods through grace. According to Orthodox anthropology, the Son of God was incarnated to deify man: “The actual model of human deification is offered to us by Christology, and the place of its fulfillment is shown by ecclesiology. [...] More precisely, to be deified means, above all, to freely assume the way of existence as a son of God, to become through grace a son within the Son. Since the condition of attaining deification is to assume the way of life of Christ as Son of God, it can only be accomplished within His Body which is the Church. [...]”<sup>9</sup> The way to accomplish this is the faith operating through love and

<sup>8</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* 1: 327-328.

<sup>9</sup> Ioan Ică Jr., „Îndumnezeirea’ omului, P. Nellas și conflictul antropologiilor” [The ‘Deification’ of Man, P. Nellas and the Conflict of Anthropologies], in Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit* [The Deification of Man], introduction and translation diac. Ioan I. Ică Jr. (Sibiu: Deisis, 1994), XII.

an active participation in ecclesial life. Practicing virtue, which is faith in action, means taking part in the divine life and for this reason there can be an infinite growth in good: “The Divine One is himself the Good (in the primary and proper sense of the word), whose very nature is goodness. This he is and he is so named and is known by this nature. Since, then, it has not been demonstrated that there is any limit to virtue except evil, and since the Divine does not admit of an opposite, we hold the divine nature to be unlimited and infinite. Certainly, whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God, because he is himself absolute virtue.”<sup>10</sup> The spiritual and moral improvement also has positive consequences on one’s psychological and physical state. A person whose life is dedicated to Christ will improve and develop his talents and will use his knowledge and creativity to fulfill the biblical commandments. The growth we are referring to, however, is not based on our strength alone, but it is rather a fulfillment of one’s collaboration with God in this process. Man alone cannot accomplish this change. In fact, it is not a continuously ascending path, but rather one of peaks and valleys. Sin makes its presence felt in everyone’s life.

The other notion present in statement 2 is that of progress. This is a relatively modern idea, although, according to Nikolai Berdyaev, it traces its origins back to the messianic idea of the Jewish people, being a secularized version of it: “This idea has ancient religious-messianic roots. It is the old Judaic idea of the messianic solution of history, of the advent of a Messiah who will solve the earthly destiny of Israel and, with it, that of all peoples. It is the ancient belief in the realization, sooner or later, of the Kingdom of God, the reign of perfection, truth and justice.”<sup>11</sup> Transhumanism advocates for a new world and for solving the problems of humanity through technical-scientific means. According to some sympathizers of the movement, there will come a time called “singularity” when artificial intelligence will surpass human intelligence and the pace of technological change, and social change implicitly, will be very fast. This moment is a kind of coming of the Kingdom of God on earth. Indeed, at a technological and scientific level, we are dealing with real, measurable, tangible progress. One way or the other, every one of us feels it. However, every new technology holds within itself the potential to be used for wrong. That is why this progress is permanently haunted by the parasitic presence of evil. The church does not oppose scientific and technical progress but urges wisdom and discernment in its use. The faith-based teaching of the Church calls for a struggle with evil, no matter what form it takes, acknowledging that it is necessary, first

---

<sup>10</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, translation, introduction and notes by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, trans. George Reavey (London: Lowe and Brydone Printers, 1949), 186.

of all, for a growth in virtue in order for the life of society to improve. As a result, any form of individual and collective advancement cannot be done without the presence and work of grace in creation. Without Christ, we cannot fulfill the “growth and progress” this statement refers to.

**“3. We recognize science and technology as tangible expressions of our God-given impulse to explore and discover and as a natural outgrowth of being created in the image of God.”**

Science and technology are permanently present in our lives. Man wants to know the reality surrounding him and to improve his living conditions. This fact is fulfilled also by the technical means he invents, and through them the fact that man is made in the “image of God” is also manifested, that is to say, that man is both creator and ruler of the world: “The Church Fathers regard man as a true commander and ruler of the universe and understand this reign as a form of exercise of his role as emperor. Thus, for the believer who regards things from a theological perspective, no progress or technical conquest could ever be grounds for astonishment. By revealing the secrets of the universe, man does nothing but fulfill one of the steps of his destiny, since most definitely the organization of the universe is moving in the direction of its humanization.”<sup>12</sup> The Holy Scripture regards technology as form of practical wisdom: “See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills— to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts” (Exodus, 31, v.2-5). Technology emerged as a necessity in the world after the fall into sin, when the harmony between man and nature was lost, and the former became subject to the adversity of the latter. In Heaven there was no need for technology because man was in the presence of God. Instead we can state that science was present because Adam was called to name the animals: “Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals” (Gen.2, 19-20).

There must be no conflict between science, technology and the Church. Such a strained relationship can only arise when science is ideologically used against faith or when technology is used for immoral purposes. For this reason, the Church must analyze certain scientific discoveries and technical achievements

---

<sup>12</sup> Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit* [The Deification of Man], 11.

to prevent them from leading to human destruction. Of course, it is not an issue of banning scientific and technological knowledge, but rather of exercising caution to avoid any form of idolatry.

**“4. We are guided by Jesus’ greatest commands** to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength... and love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

The commandment of love is central to Christianity. We could say that this statement is the basis for the other points of this Christian Transhumanist Association, because it guides the purpose which considers that there is certain compatibility between Christianity and Transhumanism. Based on this commandment, one can argue that the creation and use of technology to combat suffering is a form of love for one’s neighbor. The most conclusive example comes from the medical field, regarded as a method by which man is brought from disease to health. Of course, the problem of love is a much more complex one. It is a virtue towards which we must strive and which is difficult to achieve. It is not a mere feeling, but rather a work of the will. In fact, Christ speaks not only of the love for thy neighbor, but also of the love for thy enemies. The cultivation of this virtue cannot be done by technological means, but, indeed, it can be manifested through them. This can be reached by approaching God in His Church, through the Holy Sacraments, asceticism, prayer and through the fulfillment of the commandments. Indeed, this commandment must be the foundation upon which various technologies are built and created, in order for man to be able to put them to good use.

**“5. We believe that the intentional use of technology, coupled with following Christ, will empower us to become more human** across the scope of what it means to be creatures in the image of God.”

Following the teachings of Christ in the use and creation of technology would be a means for the divine image to manifest itself in the world because an improvement of the human life would be achieved, a fundamental aim of the Church from its very beginnings. It was the one to create hospitals, schools, orphanages, universities with the purpose of improving the state of the people. At the same time, many monks and priests have been involved over time, to a lesser or greater extent, in the development of scientific and technological knowledge. There are canonized saints in the Eastern Church, priests and hierarchs dedicated to these activities, such as St. Luke of Crimea and martyrs like Pavel Florensky. The two, science and technology, have been seen as methods by which we can know God’s creation, and through certain technologies the commandment of the love of one’s neighbor is actually fulfilled. It should



not be forgotten, however, that as a result of the fall, the face of man was altered and therefore evil affects the way in which all these creative activities are carried out. This is why we must act rationally and conduct a thorough analysis of each technology that is developed, to see if the benefits they bring outnumber the negative or even destructive effects. However, an effect of the ancestral sin is contained in the truth that everything that man creates is not perfect but subject to decay, error and use for destructive purposes.

### **As a conclusion**

Attempting to answer the question “is the Orthodox Church compatible with Christian transhumanism?”, we tried to show that in the Protestant faith there is the “Christian Transhumanist Association” that wants to play a fundamental role in carrying out a dialogue between this new trend and theology. This movement has a fundamental role in creating a dialogue between theology and the new trend, which is characterized by an open attitude towards technology and science, seen as methods of knowledge and creation through which the fact that man is created in the image of God is manifested. What defines Christian transhumanism is an extraordinary optimism towards technology. The roles of the Church, of the ascetic struggle, of the Sacrament are not emphasized, which can be explained by the fact that we are talking about an association that emerged in the Protestant environment. The reality of sin and its consequences are not very clearly articulated. The image of God is mentioned but not its alteration after the fall. Another reservation concerns the adoption of the concept of Christian transhumanism. Christianity, however, does not seek to transcend man but to “restore it”. The incarnation of Jesus and the fulfillment of His commandments is the way to accomplish this desideratum. Jesus Christ, the incarnated Son of God, is the perfect man and only through Him can we also become “new beings”. Technology can at most help us practice the virtue of helping one’s neighbor, but the anchor of this commandment is in the One who gave it to us. Man cannot accomplish anything by himself. Therefore, it can be argued that there is a contradiction in terms between Transhumanism and Christianity. The church can assert its involvement in scientific and technical development, but these must not be idolized. So it can be said that there is no complete compatibility between Christian transhumanism and orthodoxy – even if we can, for the most part, agree with the five statements of the above-mentioned association – which gives a definition of this movement – because transhumanism ultimately militates for the disappearance of man. This fact cannot be accepted by the Church because, according to the teachings of faith “for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Lc. 19, 10), and does not desire the elimination of man.

## REFERENCES

### Books

- Berdyaeu, Nikolai. *The Meaning of History*. Translated by George Reavey, London: Lowe and Brydone Printers, 1949.
- Gallagher, Brandon. "Godmanhood vs. Mangodhood: An Eastern orthodox Response to transhumanism". *Studies in Christian Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2019): 200-215.
- Gregory of Nyssa. *Life of Moses*. Translation, introduction and notes by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.
- Ică Jr., Ioan. "Th 'Deification' of Man, P. Nellas and the Conflict of Anthropologies", in Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit* [The Deification of Man], V-XLI. Sibiu: Deisis, 1994.
- More, Max. "The philosophy of transhumanism". In *The transhumanist Reader*. Edited by Max More and Natasha Vita-More, 3-17. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013.
- Panayotis Nellas, *Omul – animal îndumnezeit* [The Deification of Man], Sibiu: Deisis, 1994.
- Stăniloae, Dumitru. *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology]. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Vol. 1. Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1996.

### Web resources

- Bostrom, Nick. *The transhumanist FAQ - A General introduction - Version 2.1. (2003)*. <https://nickbostrom.com/views/transhumanist.pdf>, accesed on April 2, 2020.
- <https://www.christiantranshumanism.org/about>, accessed on 28.03.2020.
- <https://www.christiantranshumanism.org/affirmation>, accessed on 28.03.2020.
- "Nașterea lui Hristos și eugenia transumanismului." [The Birth of Christ and the Eugenics of Transhumanism]. Interview with father Jean Boboc, by pr. Ioan-Aurelian Marinescu. <https://ziarullumina.ro/interviu/nasterea-lui-hristos-si-eugenia-transumanismului-140196.html>, accessed on 28.03.2020.