



Transhumanist Religious Experience: Beyond Secular Faith?

Márk Horváth, Lecturer, Department of Visual Education and Art Theory, Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, Eger, Hungary, purplemark@hotmail.com

Ádám Lovász, Independent Researcher, Budapest, Hungary, adam.lovasz629@yahoo.com

In this article, we advance a case for considering transhumanism as a religion. Following William James, we think of “religion” as a set of experiences that define and shape one’s identity. These may include peak experiences, the feeling of transcendence, and also access to previously hidden knowledge, or gnosis. In James’s view, mystical experiences in particular include feelings of ineffability (partial or complete incommunicability), noesis (secret knowledge), and transience and passivity (subordination to a higher power). Using a religious studies framework gleaned from James, we critically examine transhumanism, with an eye towards answering the question of how religious experiences figure into transhumanism, in so far as it functions as a religion. Specifically, we are interested in how transhumanists themselves describe their experiences through the lens of their diverse, often (but not always) explicitly secularist belief systems. Intellectual historian Hava Tirosh-Samuelson has argued for conceiving of transhumanism generally as a “secular faith.” Building on cultural anthropologist Jon Bialecki’s work on Mormon transhumanism, we argue that the complex technological circumstances of the early twenty-first century have resulted in a technognostic form of religiosity that blends a belief in human technological prowess with a religiously motivated hope for transcendence.



Introduction

Transhumanism is an intellectual and cultural movement organized around the technical transformation and improvement of humanity. Its fundamental aim is to develop and make widely available technologies that significantly enhance the physical and intellectual abilities of humans. In order to achieve large-scale physical and intellectual enhancement of human beings, transhumanists believe that the principle of “morphological freedom”—that is, the freedom to choose one’s physical and mental form—should be added to the traditional freedoms established during the Enlightenment and modernity, such as freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and personal liberty (Rodén 2014, 15). Transhumanists advocate a radical and comprehensive use of technology in order to increase the likelihood that human beings will be able to transcend the limitations of their current, biologically finite mode of existence. According to Luis Miguel Pastor and José Ángel García Cuadrado, transhumanism is a cultural, scientific, and intellectual movement that “believes that there is an ethical duty to enhance the capacities of the human being, whether they be of a biological, psychological or moral nature” (Pastor and Cuadrado 2014, 344). Through various practical and technological interventions, transhumanists seek to increase the chances of achieving what they view as the “good life” for future humans.

On first impressions, transhumanism would seem to constitute an eminently secular and pragmatist doctrine. As Nick Bostrom (2005, 4; emphasis added), one of its leading philosophical proponents, summarizes, “transhumanists hope that by responsible use of science, technology, and other *rational* means we shall eventually manage to become posthuman, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have.” Similarly, Calvin Mercer and Tracy J. Trothen point out that transhumanists hope “to control human evolution by using technology to enhance human physical, mental, affective, moral, *and spiritual abilities* and to ameliorate aspects of the human condition regarded as undesirable, such as disease and aging” (Mercer and Trothen 2021, 20; emphasis added). On first impressions, there would seem to be little here not already espoused in some form by American Pragmatist philosophers such as John Dewey, who was similarly technology friendly and sympathetic to any form of intervention contributing to the amelioration or improvement of the human condition. Indeed, for Dewey and his followers, the “enrichment” of experience is the primary aim of all intelligent human activity.¹ Because they are committed to science, secularism, and rationalism, transhumanists themselves routinely express a disdain for preexisting, traditional forms of religion and nature (More 1999), a feature they partly share with Dewey, who was a self-professed “secular humanist” and a believer in the power of education and science to alter the human condition.²

Some transhumanists however, most famously Ray Kurzweil, have advanced positions more redolent of religion than of secular humanism. Kurzweil (1999) claims that once the Singularity (a completely self-programming,

godlike artificial intelligence too advanced for humans to control) emerges, superintelligent and etherial “spiritual machines” will take over the universe, superseding the limitations of human beings. In at least some of its variants, transhumanism seems to exemplify a techno-utopianism that veers onto the terrain of explicitly religious themes, such as salvation, eschatology, and spirituality. Transhumanism, of course, is a broad church with many flavors of morality. As Pierro Gayozzo (2021, 127) summarizes, transhumanism “varies between utilitarian ethics (Cyborgism), Secular Humanist ethics (Humanity Plus, Techno-Progressivism), some pre-modern ethical systems (Archeofutourism), heroic or Nietzschean ethics (Suprahumanism), Hacker ethics (Body Hacking / Grinder), religious ethics (Transfigurism, Supermuslim) or ethical individualism (Extropianism).” Intellectual historian Hava Tirosh-Samuels on however, has gone further, conceiving of transhumanism generally as a “secular faith.”³ Before we delve into possible reasons for identifying transhumanism (even in its secular forms) with religiosity per se, we shall outline a religious studies framework for the interpretation of transhumanism and the possible religious experiences open to past, present, and future transhumanists (and transhumans/posthumans). In our conclusion, we return to the question of whether transhumanism is a religion.

Religious Experience and Transhumanism(s)

There are many interpretative frameworks in the study of religion. One of the most compelling is that of American Pragmatist philosopher and psychologist, William James. What makes James’s framework appealing is that it is admirably minimalist yet also operationalizable and takes into account the subjective factor, namely, how subjects perceive and schematize their own experiences. To the best of our knowledge, the study of persons adhering to transhumanist belief systems has not been conducted using James’s framework. This is a glaring omission, as we believe it may be helpful for better understanding whether, and if so, how, transhumanism functions as a religious belief system—if indeed it is one (a question we shall leave open for now). We believe that much of substance can be added to existing accounts of transhumanism as religion if we take religious experience seriously. Needless to say, many experiences fit into the rubric of what James held to be religious experience, but this category is not limitlessly relativist by any means. James’s seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (first published in 1902), focused on the personal, subjective dimensions of faith, delving into the emotional lives of persons as they relate to what *they* perceive as divine. Indeed, James defines religion as a mode of experience:

Religion . . . shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take

it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow. In these lectures, however . . . the *immediate personal experiences* will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all. (James 2002, 29–30; emphasis added)

James's approach emphasizes the emotional underpinnings of religious life and the individual as the wellspring of spiritual insight, mostly setting aside institutional aspects of religion (cf. Reck 1967). Of primary interest here is how religious ideas originate within experiences, that is, the way religion emerges spontaneously, and often unreflectively, through practice. James aimed to comprehensively describe the diverse forms of religious experience and affirm their inherent value, grounding his analysis in psychological and biological observations alongside self-reported accounts. This inquiry into religious experience is focused upon individuals' encounters with what they take to be the divine or the sacred, the individual's direct encounter with the divine or the sacred. Under the latter, we may understand "any object that is godlike" (James 2002, 32). These encounters often transcend ordinary sensory perceptions and can manifest spontaneously or, alternately, be induced through practices such as meditation or prayer, leading to altered, even heightened, states of consciousness. Within this framework, James identifies mystical states as the most fundamental form of religious experience and indeed the core of personal religious life. These extraordinary "supra-normal cognitions" involve communion with a reality transcendent to the individual, a breakdown of boundaries suggesting a profound connection to a dimension of reality beyond conventional, everyday modes of perception (James 2002, 374). In a letter to Rev. Henry William Rankin, James (1920, 149–50) explains mystical experience in metaphorical terms: "[T]he mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual . . . I attach the mystical or religious consciousness to the possession of an extended subliminal self, with a thin partition through which messages make interruption. We are thus made convincingly aware of the presence of a sphere of life larger and more powerful than our usual consciousness, with which the latter is nevertheless continuous." What then counts as mystical experience proper?

The first characteristic of mystic experience is ineffability: such events cannot be put into words, being "more like states of feeling than like states of intellect" (James 2002, 295). Language and everyday consciousness alike fail when confronted by immediate presence. Mystics are confronted and confounded by something that exceeds the human mode of being. Indeed, "inchoate sense of presence is infinitely stronger than conception" (James 2002, 369). Despite the aspect of amazement alluded to here, the second hallmark of mystical experience for James is nevertheless gnostic, for these supra-normal cognitions do nonetheless result in a kind of extra-conceptual knowledge, being endowed

with a “noetic quality.” As James (2002, 295) explains, mystical experiences “are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance.” Third, such experiences are transient and last for short periods of time, although the flow of time seems to halt for the mystic (James 2002, 295). Lastly, mystical states are endured passively, acting as external forces changing us. Indeed, “they modify the inner life of the subject” (James 2002, 296). We therefore have at our disposal four key ingredients of what James holds to constitute the fundamental core of religious experience. Hence, these (to some extent at least) must be present in an experience for it to count as religious and mystical. Key to Pragmatism is the realization that all humans act. According to Pragmatism, there is no such thing as nonaction or complete passivity. As Michael Oakeshott (1933, 257; emphasis added), a philosopher influenced by pragmatism, points out, even the apparent absence of explicit activity still counts as action, namely, working on one’s self: “[W]e cannot deny the name of practice to the life of one who, following some creed of quietism, passes his unproductive existence in contempt of all that the world holds active and practical, for *here also is involved the change or maintenance of existence*. Practice is activity, the activity inseparable from the conduct of life.” If this is genuinely the case, then the line between religious experience and pragmatic practices such as self-enhancement could be blurred. The mystic adherent of a religion gains knowledge and uses it to enhance the self to the point where the boundaries of the self are broken down, resulting in unification with a superior presence.

Does it matter whether these experiences are “real” or virtual? Central to James’s philosophical method and to Pragmatism as a philosophy of life is the assertion that the validity of beliefs and experiences should be assessed by their practical consequences or observable fruits rather than their origins or ontological status. As self-transformation is a key goal for both pragmatists and transhumanists, it may be stated that for James, those religious ideas may be judged as most effective that contribute to self-improvement (Stagoll 2023). Regarding religious experiences, this entails that if an experience, regardless of its genesis, leads to tangible, positive, and enduring changes in an individual’s character, wellbeing, or moral conduct, then that experience holds a form of truth or validity. James highlights many instances where religious experiences led to profound personal transformations. Famously, James (2002, 300) also experimented with the inhalation of nitrous oxide fumes, which he credited with initiating him, so to speak, into metaphysical truths regarding the nature of experience: “[S]ome years ago I myself made some observations on this aspect of nitrous oxide intoxication, and reported them in print. One conclusion was forced upon my mind at that time, and my impression of its truth has ever since remained unshaken. It is that our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all

about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different.” Chemical methods using artificial materials are, on such a view, admissible and valid sources of religious experience.

James’s subjectivist perspective represents a significant departure from traditional theological or scientific validation, which often seeks objective evidence or divine provenance. This pragmatic validation of subjectivity carries profound implications for evaluating experiences that might be chemically or technologically induced. If a virtual reality (VR)-simulated “spiritual” experience, for example, genuinely helps an individual overcome depression, foster empathy, or cultivate a more meaningful life, James’s pragmatism would compel an acknowledgement of its “truth” or “value,” even if its “root” is artificial. Transhumanist theorists have routinely referenced virtual reality or cyberspace as heralding an era wherein the human as such is spiritualized, resulting in the abandonment of corporeality. Hans Moravec (1990) has speculated on the possibility of “Mind Children” inhabiting cyberspace, simulacra of ourselves who outlive our biological bodies and potentially even survive the demise of the human race. In one of its most hyperbolic, sci-fi-influenced formulations, William Sims Bainbridge (2016, 225), a leading transhumanist, summarizes the techno-utopian vision as follows:

Actual everlasting life might be possible in the near future, using a combination of advanced technologies that have been developed for other purposes . . . First, you will be recorded: all your memories, personality, skills, physical characteristics, and genetic inheritance. Second, this information will be entered into a vast computerized database so that future generations can draw upon your experiences and you can continue to be part of this world after your death. Third, your data will be transported by robot spacecraft to the solar system of a distant star, where a new colony is to be established. Fourth, you will be reconstituted from the recording and begin a new life in a fresh, young body as a colonist of the new world.

Other authors write of “mindclones,” which are digital simulacra of humans that nonetheless “will have the same religious inclinations as human beings.”⁴ From a Jamesian perspective though, the experience itself is what matters. Bainbridge himself recounts virtual transhumanist meetings conducted online via *Second Life*. Could video conferencing itself not be a nascent transhumanist ritual practice, a way of leaving corporeality behind and making ourselves into pure minds? Without committing ourselves to any decision regarding the epistemological or ontological status of perceived disembodiment in online practices,⁵ the Jamesian approach inherently challenges the conventional dichotomy between “real” and “simulated” spiritual experiences, shifting the focus from ontological status or institutional function to lived impact. James

posits the existence of something more than the ego, a “wider self” that extends beyond the individual’s ordinary consciousness, with which mystical experiences provide contact. In this sense, one may say that the transhumanist extension of the self is presaged by the expansion of self felt in mystical experience: “[T]he conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come” (James 2002, 397). The feeling of being connected to reality may be described as a “transcendent” reality or divine presence, but it need not necessarily be. One can experience awe in relation to the cosmos or nature as well. James acknowledged a tension in his own thought, viewing religious experience as a natural phenomenon accessible to empirical scientific inquiry while also holding that religion involves an altogether supernatural domain accessible to the individual human subject but incommunicable to a wider audience, a tension that remained unresolved (Bagger 2018).

Whatever we may believe regarding the veracity of James’s model, his philosophical inquiries and the transhumanist movement are indicative of a human drive to transcend current limitations and achieve a more advanced state of being, as well as a greater intensity of experience. James’s exploration of mystical states and his concept of the “wider self” point to a yearning for contact with a transcendent reality while leaving behind human limitations. A subset of transhumanism similarly regards “enhancement” as not merely a technological or biomedical upgrade but rather a moral “extension” of the self (Tanton 2025). Transhumanism pursues transcendence but primarily through technological evolution, aiming to move beyond current human capabilities perceived as being too limiting and restrictive. With religions, transhumanism/s also share a common concern with alleviating human suffering and overcoming mortality. As Michael LaTorra (2005, 50), a Buddhist transhumanist theorist, explains, while most transhumanists are not explicitly religious, “transhumanists are practical, scientifically oriented, rational beings who seek to enhance themselves and bring about benefits for others who voluntarily accept them. So transhumanists are already fulfilling at least one of the religious vows of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism, which is the Bodhisattva vow to ‘save’—or bring about abundant good for—all beings.” Traditional religious perspectives offer eternal life and freedom from suffering through divine intervention. Transhumanists, in tandem, strive for a pain- and suffering-free, unlimited, eternal humanity to be achieved via technological, practical, political, or spiritual means. James’s pragmatism, which assesses the validity of religious experiences by their fruits or practical consequences, aligns with transhumanism’s emphasis on the practical application of technology to enhance the human condition.

Transhumanism and pragmatism alike value what “works” to improve human life. Modern technology has developed capabilities to induce altered states of consciousness that bear resemblances to those sought in traditional religious contexts. These technologies include VR and augmented reality

(AR), brain–computer interfaces (BCIs), and neural implants, as well as the therapeutic use of psychedelic substances. “Cyberdelics,” a combination of immersive VR and deep neural networks, specifically aim to simulate beneficial psychedelic effects, inducing altered states of consciousness and modulating cognitive and emotional functioning without the associated risks of psychedelic substances (Hartogsohn 2023).⁶ The authenticity of VR religious experiences constitutes a major ethical concern of course, the complexities of which we cannot unpack here. Critics contend that technologically mediated spirituality may lack the profound depth of embodied traditional practices and could result in superficial or artificial sensations. James’s “fruits, not roots”-style approach would direct focus to the observable, life-changing effects of these experiences. Methodologically, what matters for us is whether a technologically induced experience leads to positive moral or psychological transformation, a circumstance that may pragmatically validate it, even if its origin is artificial. However, it stands to reason that life-changing effects can result from non-supernatural sources. More problematically, a hallucination, if it aligns with existing beliefs, could still be life-changing without being “real” in a transcendent sense.⁷ If prosaic, everyday events, traumas, or technologically induced experiences can produce Jamesian “fruits”—such as positive life changes or profound insights—then the very definition of “spiritual growth” becomes contentious and, quite possibly, could be subjected to technological intervention. We could be heading towards a future where, to quote Aura-Elena Schussler (2019, 101), “spiritual practices are interconnected with both technological devices and technological entities such as artificial intelligences, in the name of the principle of perpetual progress and of (techno)immortality,” underwritten by a “techno-optimist ideology.” Is spiritual growth defined by the source of the experience (e.g., divine intervention, traditional practice) or by its outcome (e.g., personal transformation, ethical conduct)? This compels religious traditions to confront whether “spiritual growth” can occur outside their established frameworks and through artificial means. This situation could lead to a reevaluation of what constitutes genuine spiritual authority and agency. If an AI app can generate sermons or robots can provide life-affirming spiritual guidance, this raises questions about both the nature of religious authority and the necessity of personal discernment. It would seem that transhumanism can provide religious experiences, or at least simulations thereof. But does this make transhumanism a religion?

Transhumanist Religion?

If there is a possibility that transhumanist religious experiences, mediated via technological methods such as VR or AI or chemical methods such as artificial psychedelics, may be conceivable, does this automatically entail that transhumanism as a whole is a religion? Is transhumanism a religion

proper, a pseudoreligion, a New Religious Movement, or an implicit religion? Unsurprisingly, given the heterogeneity of transhumanist discourses already referenced, there is no consensus in the literature regarding the answer we ought to give these important questions. Nevertheless, we shall attempt to shed new light on this topic, with a view to bring together this line of inquiry with the Jamesian pragmatist emphasis upon religious experience. Michael S. Burdett makes the case that the idea of modernity as disenchantment is an overly hasty presupposition. Rather, what has happened, especially with the advent of technological revolutions, is the immanentization of mythology. Instead of traditional myths, modernity is characterized by the predominance of “the myth of progress,” the “belief that history/society/humanity has advanced, is continuing to advance, and will advance in the future” (Burdett 2014, 132). More contentiously though, Burdett (2014, 132) also claims that this myth is inherently dependent upon future goals and, as a consequence, unavoidably utopian: “[C]hange has no goal or ideal, but progress does.” In essence, Burdett repeats the well-known hypothesis of conservative political philosopher Eric Voegelin (2012), who characterized modern left- and right-wing utopian forms of politics as manifestations of a world-denying “gnosticism.” The issue with such a one-size-fits-all narrative is precisely the way in which it collapses distinctions between specific movements and schools of thought into the rubric of “utopianism.” While some transhumanists, such as Kurzweil and other “Singularitarians,” do seem to posit an “endpoint” where human history transitions into a posthuman future (hence, transhumanism), this does not apply to meliorist, gradualist forms of transhumanism, which are closer to the pragmatist ideal of perpetual reform with no specific endpoint. In this regard, we agree with Boris Rähme’s (2020, 122) more careful assessment:

At one end of the spectrum we find what I have called moderate transhumanist positions, which combine a positive assessment of the potentials of extant human enhancement technologies with endorsement of further relevant technoscientific innovation and a long-term perspective of human-made evolution. At the opposite end of the spectrum we find what I have called profuse transhumanism, characterized by speculations about hypothetical technologies and their hypothetical impacts on hypothetical individuals and societies.

Applying this distinction to our own framework, gradualist or “moderate” transhumanism may be characterized as meliorist, secularist, and lacking in explicitly utopianism, distancing itself from religious or eschatological ideas. On the other hand, what Rähme describes as “profuse” transhumanism may indeed approximate a techno-utopianism, occasionally even resembling a religiously motivated eschatology. Before we summarize Rähme’s position, it is worth elaborating on why one could view techno-utopianism as a religion

in the first place. If we accept Rähme's distinction as informative, then one may still make a case for some "futurological" and techno-utopian variants of transhumanism approximating what Burdett describes as the "religion of technology." Unfortunately, most of Burdett's article does not explicitly address transhumanism per se, dealing primarily with the modern belief in progress, as exemplified by nineteenth and early twentieth century optimistic discourses. However, Burdett does claim that "transhumanism radicalizes" a preexistent "myth of progress" via the belief, widely shared among transhumanists, that not only does technology transform society and the economy for the better but also individual human experience can be affected directly through bodily enhancement. Transhumanists advocate for "applying growing technologies such as nanotechnology and other computer hardware to the human body" (Burdett 2014, 142). On such a reading then, transhumanism functions as an extension of an already existing techno-optimistic tendency within modernity. Subsequently, Burdett quotes Bostrom's (2008, 3) "Letter from Utopia," a speculative text dedicated to translating into human language how transhumans will feel about their enhanced, utopian reality: "[Y]ou could say I am happy, that I feel good. You could say that I feel surpassing bliss. But these are words invented to describe human experience. What I feel is as far beyond human feelings as my thoughts are beyond human thoughts. I wish I could show what I have in mind. If only I could share one second of my conscious life with you!" If, as Rähme claims, religion may be characterized as a response to the desire for transcendence, and "a commitment to the existence of supernatural entities or impersonal processes possessed of moral purpose," then surely both elements seem to be present in the more speculative kinds of transhumanist futurological discourse (Rähme 2020, 124). To all intents and purposes, Bostrom's future "posthuman," a subject who has undergone transition, is superior, even supernatural, in comparison with mundane, biologically finite humans. Further on, Bostrom's (2008, 4) article contains passages that resemble James's account of the mystically widened mind: "[Y]our brain must grow beyond the bounds of any genius of humankind, in its special faculties as well as its general intelligence, so that you may better learn, remember, and understand, and so that you may apprehend your own beatitude . . . Mind is also an end: for it is in the spacetime of awareness that Utopia will exist. May the measure of your mind be vast and expanding." Despite the bracketing of religion (at the outset, Bostrom's posthuman refuses to delve into "theological" questions), it is difficult not to impute religious meaning to such sentences, especially because of the highly mystical and spiritual language involved ("beatitude," "awareness," "bliss"). The fundamental question is, if a discourse speaks like a religion, does that circumstance alone make it a religion?

One of the most articulate and consistent defenders of the transhumanism-as-religion hypothesis to date is Hava Tirosh-Samuelson. In essence, her

position may be broken up into two related assertions: transhumanism, as an implicit religion, constitutes a “secular faith.” However, despite (or perhaps, precisely because of) its implicitness, transhumanism also constitutes a New Religious Movement. Less charitably put, Tirosh-Samuelsan appears claim that transhumanism is not only a secular faith but also a cult that, because of its avowal of secularism and science, is unaware of its own ontological status as a cult. Taken together, these two hypotheses amount to a contentious position worth engaging with. Tirosh-Samuelsan (2012, 712), similarly to Burdett, locates transhumanism in a broader modern “rebellion against human existence” (Hannah Arendt’s expression).⁸ Transhumanism, on this reading, is a child of cybernetics and the idea of the cyborg (cybernetic organism), a new, technologically enhanced hybrid mode of being, signifying “the breaking of boundaries between nature and culture, organic and inorganic, human and animal, and a new understanding of human embodiment” (Tirosh-Samuelsan 2012, 713). In the “posthuman condition,” there is “no demarcation between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot technology and human goals. In the posthuman condition there is no separation between humans and their environment,” entailing the merger of enhanced humans with technology (Tirosh-Samuelsan 2012, 714). This also implies that transhuman or posthuman⁹ experience is inherently a technological experience. Referencing Moravec’s ideas, Tirosh-Samuelsan claims that transhumanists, following a dualistic metaphysics, propose the abandonment of biological corporeality and the transition into pure mind. Machines are supposedly destined to convert the universe into an “extended thinking entity” (Moravec 1990, 116), a view that incidentally also resonates with the paradigm of “planetary computation.” Planet Earth as a whole is, according to some, becoming a thinking entity, thanks in large measure to smart technologies.¹⁰ Tirosh-Samuelsan herself admits that transhumanism is not homogeneous. Simplifying things somewhat, we may distinguish between transhumanism/s that focus “on human enhancement in the present” and transhumanism/s that are preoccupied with “cyber-immortality in the future,” the latter being “saturated with religious themes” and characterized by an “apocalyptic mentality” and an “eschatological orientation” (Tirosh-Samuelsan 2012, 716). It would appear then that not all transhumanism/s are equally religious in their emphasis.

Despite this qualification and the (often radical) atheism of many mainstream transhumanists, Tirosh-Samuelsan (2012, 718) goes on to describe transhumanism generally as a secular faith: “[T]ranshumanism should be understood as a peculiar hybrid of religious and secular motifs, a secular faith that fits the contemporary postsecular moment.” Why is this the case? The word “transhumanism” was first coined by biologist Julian Huxley in 1957 (Huxley 1957, 17). In Huxley’s view, it would be a “new ideology” functioning as an extension of “evolutionary humanism,” which he conceived of as a science-based

belief system, a “religion without revelation” (Tirosh-Samuelson 2012, 719). In another essay, Tirosh-Samuelson proposes that Huxley was influenced by his grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley, a popularizer of Darwinism who held heterodox religious views (coining the term “agnosticism”), as well the spiritual views of his mother, Julia Huxley, who evidently believed in pantheism (Tirosh-Samuelson 2014, 57–58). These biographical facts are treated by Tirosh-Samuelson as evidence of a religious influence within transhumanism from the outset. Contemporary strands of transhumanism too are implicitly religious, sharing “with Western monotheistic religions a strong eschatological impulse, even though transhumanism speculates about the eschatological end of the world as a goal that can be accomplished by human efforts alone rather than with divine intervention” (Tirosh-Samuelson 2012, 721). Despite its explicit denial of traditional religions or religious methods of transcendence, on such a reading, transhumanism is a secular faith¹¹ that similarly contains both salvific and eschatological components. More contentiously, Tirosh-Samuelson also characterizes the transhumanist movement *tout court* as a New Religious Movement (NRM), i.e., the religious studies terminology for nonmainstream religions colloquially known as “cults” (Tirosh-Samuelson 2012, 721). According to Amarnath Amarasingam’s (2008, 2) operative definition, NRMs, as distinct from traditional religions, are small, offer individual ecstatic experiences, individualistic, separate themselves from the mainstream of society, advance esoteric knowledge claims, and center around the worship of charismatic leader. Indeed, Amarasingam (2008, 13) describes futurology as an NRM, for it does have “charismatic leaders, authoritative texts, mystique, and a fairly complete vision of salvation.” Observe that this second hypothesis is a significantly stronger claim than asserting the implicit religiosity of transhumanism generally. Tirosh-Samuelson herself references the diversity of transhumanist positions regarding religion, ranging from explicitly religious transhumanism to the rejection of all traditional religions as obsolete, relics from supposedly pretechnological eras. Why then is transhumanism generally religious? Tirosh-Samuelson’s claim is that transhumanism amounts to a secularized and immanentized eschatology, to quote scholar of religion Robert M. Geraci (2007, 56), a “technoreligion for the masses.”¹² Religious ideas, such as the resurrection of the dead, do indeed abound within proto-transhumanist and transhumanist discourses. The Mormon Transhumanist Association explicitly holds that transhumanism constitutes the continuation of God’s creation, with human beings destined to become “co-creators” of “worlds without end” in an infinite creative process (Tirosh-Samuelson 2012, 728–29; cf. Cannon 2017; Cannon 2015). In the “postsecular” moment, it becomes evident that religious belief, far from disappearing, has morphed into different varieties, manifesting (in the case of transhumanism) into “a secularized idiom of science and technology”: transhumanism “functions as a religion, albeit a secularized one,” adapted to the post-secular conditions of late

modernity (Tirosh-Samuelson 2012, 729). Elsewhere, Tirosh-Samuelson (2015, 175) notes that “trans/posthuman thought . . . offers an eschatological vision that tells us much about its view of human embodiment, the purpose of human life, and the destiny of humanity. This vision is also apocalyptic in the sense that it is predicated on a dramatic, radical departure from the present—the Singularity event—justified by knowledge about the structure of the cosmos, discovered by science rather than revealed by an angel, as in ancient apocalypticism.”

If we were to have any misapprehensions regarding Tirosh-Samuelson’s aims, these are thoroughly dissipated by a subsequent essay, “Technologizing Transcendence: A Critique of Transhumanism.” It becomes evident that the theologian’s goal is not merely descriptive but rather polemical: Tirosh-Samuelson’s aim is not only to demonstrate that transhumanism is a religious movement but also to critique it as a poor substitute, an ersatz religion. Tirosh-Samuelson identifies both horizontal and vertical modes of “transcendence” operative within transhumanism. Adherents of the latter reject biological finitude, seeking to go beyond the normal functioning of the human organism, underwritten by a dualistic metaphysics that asserts the primacy of “mind” over “matter” (Tirosh-Samuelson 2017, 271). Cyberspace will allow for the transition from corporal human being to a posthuman condition in the context of “a linear but inexorable progress that will bring about the demise of biological humanity and the emergence of superintelligent post-biological posthumanity” (Tirosh-Samuelson 2017, 274). Technological enhancement, at least in the most intensely utopian manifestations of transhumanism, will result in vertical transcendence, the transition to a superior mode of being. For transhumanists who posit an end to terrestrial history, “the telos of the quest for transcendence will finally be achieved: Death will be vanquished once and for all and humanity will accomplish its dreams of eternal life, but attaining such perfection will be predicated on the elimination of humanity” (Tirosh-Samuelson 2017, 275). The problem is that transhumanism cannot reconcile meliorism with apocalypticism. In summary,

While expressing the human quest for transcendence, transhumanism has secularized traditional religious motifs at the same time as arguing that transcendence is technologically feasible. Alas, the transhumanist project is inherently self-contradictory, because of the tension between the “horizontal” and “vertical” meanings of transcendence. Transhumanism is obsessed with the human body but privileges mind over body; transhumanism perpetuates the discreet, embodied, and rationalist self, while creating AI technologies that give rise to a decentralized, disembodied, distributed, and collective self; transhumanism claims to engineer transcendence by human reason, while ignoring the fact that the truly Transcendent is in principle unknowable. (Tirosh-Samuelson 2017, 279)

What Tirosh-Samuelson is claiming is that transhumanism is an internally inconsistent ersatz religious belief system that, most seriously, is unaware of its own religious status. By consequence, it is inherently incapable of coming to terms with its own theological inconsistencies. But if we return to James's idea of religious experience implying the reality of a "widened self," then transhumanism could be viewed in a less uncharitable light. If secular modernity, as philosopher Charles Taylor claimed, implied the historical elaboration of a "buffered self" closed off to transcendence, one could also view trans/or posthumanism as implying the breakdown of the closed, atomistic self. If transhumanism implies opening up the human to its technological ecology, then, to quote Albert R. Antosca (2019, 23), we could also see this as a process wherein "humans are now moving back to a pre-buffered state of enchantment by moving past the human, past the anthropocentric, having transitioned from a pre-humanistic structure, through a humanistic one, to the functionally enchanted post-humanistic structure of meaning." While it may be heuristically useful and can also serve polemical purposes, using "implicit religion" as a concept runs the risk of devaluing the subjective, lived experiences of transhumanists, whether we categorize them as religious believers, members of a political movement, or scientists. Against Tirosh-Samuelson's position, Rähme rejects the idea that transhumanism constitutes a religion. In the latter's view, because of the absence of explicitly supernatural themes in (most of) transhumanist discourse, it would be more correct to view transhumanism as a secular "ideology" (Rähme 2020, 130–31). What both authors miss, however, is any substantive engagement with the experiences (religious or otherwise) of transhumanist adherents themselves. Cultural anthropologist Jon Bialecki (2022, 223) quotes Lincoln Cannon, founder of the Mormon Transhumanist Association, to the effect that:

It is here that we return, not leaving the cosmological behind, but rather marrying it to the intimate, inclusive, and possessive which marked our point of departure. We have parents, siblings, children and friends who've gone, but they're only absent for a moment. They persist, and we'll soon meet again. Even if you or I depart, we'll yet greet our family and friends, and everyone else who's gone, beyond present notions of suffering and death, in eternity, not as a euphemism for death, but rather as eternal life that's real as light and warm as love.

Mormon Transhumanists experience themselves as already being cocreators of the universe, together with God. Recollecting an urgent medical procedure in connection with childbirth complications, another Mormon Transhumanist adherent recounts feeling a fondness for technology: "[T]he machines brought my son life. The machines brought me life. I had grown fond of

them . . . I was filled with gratitude. I welcomed the technologies and humanity . . . I listened to the humming of my beloved machines that were intimately connected to my nude body” (Bialecki 2022, 277–78). Do we not find in such experiences all the hallmarks of Jamesian religious experience? A felt presence opens up the individual body to a wider self, a hybrid subjectivity that incorporates nonhuman elements, often passively undergoing changes. Gratitude and fondness are felt for the transcendent power that saves the subject. For Mormon Transhumanists, God is the creative process of the universe considered as a whole. It is not our aim to pass judgment upon the veracity of such statements but rather to call attention to the importance of grasping how individuals, even now, can and do experience themselves as cyborgs and transhumans. And there are cases when such experience translates into the oceanic language of mysticism. Mormon Transhumanism is one type of religious transhumanism, and exemplars from other religions outside Christianity could be found.¹³ Our task here has been a modest one, namely, to elaborate a model of transhumanist religious experience that may be expanded to other contexts. The more ambitious and wide-ranging task of discovering new modes of transhuman/ist religious experience is one that necessitates further empirical research on the part of scholars of religion and cultural anthropologists alike.¹⁴

Conclusion: Taking Transhumanist Religious Experience Seriously

While religious studies texts discussing transhumanism have dwelt mainly upon functional (does transhumanism work as a religion?—sometimes) or doctrinal (do transhumanist texts contain theological topics?—sometimes) issues, to date there has been surprisingly little focus on how transhumanists themselves undergo religious experiences and what the content of such experiences could be. Hence, further research is warranted in this direction, especially regarding the intersection of VR, AR, “cyberdelics,” and other artificial spiritual technologies and how these may shape the future of religions, transhumanist or otherwise. By collecting and putting transhumanist experiences to the Jamesian “test” of pragmatism, future researchers may uncover the presence of mystical experiences among adherents of the transhumanist movement. In our view, transhumanism, insofar as it results in religious and mystical experiences indicating the presence of something that transcends the human, can function as a religion.¹⁵ Table 1 summarizes a Jamesian matrix that may be of use in future research on transhuman/ist religious experiences.

Characteristic	James's Description (from <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>)	Manifestation in technologically induced states (VR, BCI, psychedelics, medicine)	Jamesian authenticity question
Ineffability	The experience defies verbal expression; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others and must be directly experienced, similar to feelings.	Users of cyberdelics or VR simulations report experiences that are difficult to put into words, resembling the ineffable quality of traditional mystical states.	If a technologically induced experience is ineffable and produces positive "fruits," does its artificial origin diminish its validity?
Noetic Quality	Mystical states are perceived as states of knowledge, providing "insights into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect," often carrying a sense of authority.	Technologically induced states can generate new insights or revelations, leading to a perceived state of fundamental or direct knowledge about reality.	Does the noetic quality of a simulated experience imply contact with something transcendent, or merely a manipulation of brain states?
Transiency	Mystical states are short-lived, typically lasting from half an hour to a few hours, and cannot be sustained indefinitely.	Technologically induced states, such as surgery or those resulting from cyberdelics or specific VR programs, are typically of a determinate duration, aligning with this characteristic.	The transient nature is replicated, but does this fleetingness, if artificially induced, still carry the same spiritual weight?
Passivity	The mystic feels their "own will were in abeyance," as if grasped and held by a superior power, even if preliminary actions facilitated onset. Technologies can have this effect.	In immersive VR or under the influence of psychedelics, users often report a sense of surrendering control or being overwhelmed by the experience, aligning with passivity. Additionally, technologies can result in the feeling of a widened self.	Does a technologically induced sublime sense of passivity diminish human agency or spiritual discernment, particularly if it leads to deferring moral decisions to technology? Alternately, does technology enhance the sense of agency?

Table 1: William James's four characteristics of mystical experience and their manifestation in technologically induced states.

Notes

- ¹ “Engineering and medicine, all the utilities that make for expansion of life, are the answer. There is better administration of old familiar things, and there is invention of new objects and satisfactions. Along with this added ability in regulation goes enriched meaning and value in things, clarification, increased depth and continuity a result even more precious than is the added power of control” (Dewey 1925, 10–11).
- ² For more on the connection between transhumanism and pragmatism, see Aaron Bruce Wilson (2022). Regarding the transhumanist implications of Dewey’s ideas regarding pedagogy, see Allen C. Porter (2023).
- ³ Under this term, we may understand all systems of ideas that do not present themselves as explicitly religious but nonetheless implicitly contain religious themes and topics in their discourses. One example is environmentalism, with the environment functioning as a metavalue that provides meaning to believers (Dunlap 2006).
- ⁴ See Bainbridge (2017, 222); cf. Martine Rothblatt (2014). Bainbridge himself is however opposed to traditional forms of religion and holds transhumanism to be incompatible with prior religions, even envisioning hordes of religious fanatics destroying data centers that hold immortal transhuman minds, resulting in “infocide” (Bainbridge 2007, 3). How seriously we should take such remarks remains an open question, as there seems to be an underlying note of irony as well in the prospect of someone agonizing over future subjects who have no stronger claim to reality than being data gleaned from formerly living human individuals.
- ⁵ According to at least some users, video conferencing offers a safe mode of self-distancing and quasi-disembodiment. This does not reduce the circumstance of embodiment, but it does seem to permit a more distanced and individualist relation to our corporeality (Vidolov 2022).
- ⁶ Interestingly, psychedelics are immensely popular in Silicon Valley, a circumstance which emphasizes how technology breeds subcultures which promise reenchantment to their participants (cf. Tvorun-Dunn 2022).
- ⁷ Philosopher Robert Nozick presents readers with a thought experiment: What if we were able to hook ourselves up to an “experience machine” that fulfills our every desire for the rest of our lives? Would we connect to it or not? According to Nozick, the fact that most people probably would not—due to a range of considerations—automatically entails the falsity of ethical hedonism. Enjoyment is not the most important value for most humans (cf. Nozick 1974, 58–60).
- ⁸ In the prologue to *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958, 2–3) connects space travel with eugenicism and ideas of life extension already prevalent in the 1950s, diagnosing them as indicative of a—in her view, misguided—desire to artificially transcend the limitations of the human condition: “[I]t is the same desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth that is manifest in the attempt to create life in the test tube, in the desire to mix ‘frozen germ plasm from people of demonstrated ability under the microscope to produce superior human beings’ and ‘to alter [their] size, shape and function’; and the wish to escape the human condition, I suspect, also underlies the hope to extend man’s life-span far beyond the hundred-year limit. This future man, whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself.”
- ⁹ Tirosch-Samuelsøen correctly emphasizes that philosophical posthumanism and transhumanism are antagonistic, while both nonetheless posit the “obsolescence of the human.” The former rejects the Enlightenment and its associated rationalism, while the latter adheres to rationalism and pro-Enlightenment secularism (Tirosch-Samuelsøen 2012, 715–16).
- ¹⁰ (cf. Casero, 2024; Rubin, Veloz and Maldonado 2021; Hui 2024). Discourses on “planetary intelligence” resemble Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s teleological ideas about technology creating the preconditions for the emergence of a “noosphere.” This begs the question of whether matter itself is not always already “intelligent” and self-organizing in the first place. If we accept the possibility of autopoiesis, monistic pantheism, panentheism, and/or panpsychism, then such a

technological transition would not make the cosmos any more autonomous or intelligent than it already is. Hence, the idea of a transition to a machinic cosmos, planetary computation, or noosphere treats matter in the present as unintelligent, even dead, something that must be brought to life via artificial means.

- ¹¹ The phrase “secular faith” emerged around the abstract neo-Hobbesian philosophical question of whether society can have moral legitimacy without a religious basis. As Annette Baier (1980, 147) explains, “the secular faith which the just live by is, then, a faith in the possibility of a society for membership in which their just action theoretically qualifies them. They believe, in part, because of the previous demonstration that there can be such qualified members, so they join a movement already started.” Of course, this is operationally speaking a tautology—a modern secular society is legitimate because its members hold it worthy of allegiance, thereby constructing its legitimacy internally, without transcendent legitimation sources (nature, god/s, etc.). More recently, “secular faith” has reemerged in discourses about secularism and post-secularism. Generally, the former is used as a placeholder for hybrid forms of faith that do not ground themselves on religious values—we have already mentioned environmentalism as one exemplar, which often contains quasi-eschatological and apocalyptic cultural themes while grounding its ideological claims upon interpretations of scientific evidence (Dunlap 2006). The latter denotes the supposed global “return” of religion within politics in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Ungureanu and Thomassen 2015). In this sense, post-secularism attempts to grasp the hybridization of religion and politics, although others regard post-secularism as merely a mode of domesticating and assimilating religions to the (real or imagined) hegemony of the market (Possamai 2017).
- ¹² Tirosh-Samuels (2012, 726) quotes this approvingly, taking it to indicate support for her claim that transhumanism is both a secular faith and an NRM. Yet, if NRMs are inherently esoteric, elitist, and exclusionary, then this undermines the second half of her dual hypothesis: a religious movement that seeks to become ubiquitous must unavoidably be universalist in its orientation, appealing to a broad base.
- ¹³ Tirosh-Samuels mentions the example of Judaism. Even adherents of Conservative Judaism are often supportive of biotechnology and genetic engineering technologies, believing that these methods, some of which may be perceived as consonant with the transhumanist goal of human enhancement, are permitted by the laws of the Jewish religion (Tirosh-Samuels 2015). However, it must be added that Tirosh-Samuels does not mention any Jewish religious figures who are explicitly supportive of transhumanism per se. Confucianism may also, in theory, be brought into alignment with transhumanism, although in this case also, the paucity of actual exemplars of Confucian transhumanist communities or individuals is something of a hindrance (Kim 2022).
- ¹⁴ It is an open question whether engagement with AI constitutes a practical mode of transhumanism. One interesting emerging field relates to the integration of AI into the study of religion and the role AI plays in religious practices themselves. Of particular interest for example is how AI may stimulate new religious experiences. The novelty of this field presents methodological challenge and also opportunities for thinking through the complex interrelations between religion, technology, and the study of religion, while also accounting for cultural differences in the usage of AI (Alkhouri 2024; Chanda 2025).
- ¹⁵ We do not wish to claim that James’ view of religion is the sole valid interpretative frame when it comes to the philosophical or psychological, let alone theological study of religion. However, we do believe that it may be used to effectively categorize how adherents of religious movements schematize their experiences.

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