Transhumanism – thoughts on a proposed dialogue with Christians: Reflections on *Teilhard de Chardin and Transhumanism* an article by Eric Steinhart.

I believe that the universe is an evolution.

I believe that evolution proceeds towards spirit.

I believe that spirit is fully realised in a form of personality.

I believe that the supremely personal is the universal Christ.

Teilhard de Chardin "Christianity and Evolution", Collins, London 1971 page 96.

Steinhart's article is a reasoned and thought provoking argument for the need to build links between Transhumanists and Christians of a liberal or progressive persuasion (pages 2 and 17). The great Christian scientist, philosopher and theologian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin provides the focus for his thesis:

> *'My goal … is to present the thought of Teilhard de Chardin in a way that is defensible and accessible to transhumanists… One might say that this paper offers a transhumanist reading of Teilhard or even a Teilhardian transhumanism' (pages 2 and 3)*

Specifically, Steinhart uses contemporary computational ideas to re-present Teilhard's theories in a form, he believes, will be more accessible to transhumanist thinking. A judgment on the success of this must be left to others who are more experienced but the argument is carefully stated referencing a range of transhumanist writings from the late 20th century.

The author's other motivations are clearly set out in his 'specific' reasons for transhumanists to study Teilhard's work (pages 1,2 and the summary on page 17).

> *"… I offered five reasons for transhumanists to study Teilhard: (1) Teilhard is one of the first to articulate transhumanist themes; (2) Teilhard's thought has influenced transhumanism, and several important transhumanists have developed Omega Point Theories; (3) Teilhard works out his transhumanist ideas in a Christian context; (4) transhumanism is likely to need to defend itself against conservative forms of Christianity; and (5) the future success of transhumanism may well depend on its ability to build bridges to liberal and progressive forms of Christianity."* p 17

Steinhart is concerned that the rise of conservative Christianity in the West and in America in particular, with its powerful influence upon politics, will have dire consequences for transhumanism:

> *"Transhumanism and Christianity share common themes and are likely to meet soon in a fateful way. Conservative Christians stand ready to condemn transhumanism as a heretical sect and to politically suppress the use of technology for human enhancement."* p 17

To address this, he argues in this article that studying, which also requires re-interpreting, Teilhard will both help transhumanists to build a defence against conservative Christianity, as well as 'finding potential allies' amongst Christians of a more liberal or progressive stance.

In relation to the need 'to gain access' to liberal/progressive Christianity, Steinhart offers very few suggestions other than for transhumanists to study Teilhard and to dialogue with liberal groups. In this respect Steinhart offers a somewhat strange warning:

> "A dialogue with liberal Christianity offers dangers. One is that exposure to liberal Christianity will lead some transhumanists to rely more on faith and less on the hard practical work needed to sustain technical progress." p 17

It would be surprising if the dialogue would not traverse the ground of faith and its implications for transhumanism, or that a Christian group would agree to such sanctions on the conversation.

As response to Steinhart's article, I wish to raise a few questions and reflections:

Firstly is Teilhard the 'bridge' to liberal/progressive Christianity? The link to Teilhard is well argued by Steinhart but his bête noir, conservative Christianity, would not recognize the contribution of Teilhard deeming his work too liberal or, more likely, forgotten. Also, with time, the influence of Teilhard's work is receding on Christianity in general as new scholars emerge. Whilst useful interaction on Teilhard's theses may take place at the scholarly level, which I assume is Steinhart's intention, it is unlikely there would be much traction amongst liberal/progressives whose key authors are more contemporary. Perhaps this is an opportunity for liberal/progressives to rediscover Teilhard but I suspect Steinhart is better served by identifying influential contemporary thinkers.

A further reflection is that there exists a sizable body of Christians who hold not to conservative or progressive views but to a more 'middle view' which could be styled moderate or orthodox. The so-called mainstream churches would be more representative of this viewpoint. It may be a matter of definition (Steinhart perhaps characterizes moderates as 'liberal' in the American context) but there would seem to be great benefit in transhumanists engaging with this larger group of Christians as well. In Australia, progressives sit more to the margins in mainstream church life and, whilst dialogue with them would be beneficial, transhumanists will have to find ways to advocate for a place on the agenda of mainstream churches.

For mainstream churches, the challenge would be determining whether, at this point in time, the transhumanist position is a priority in their dialogue and engagement with the plethora of issues that confront them.

Secondly, as indicated above, Steinhart has chosen to re-interpret Teilhard's thought in a 'computational model'. His argues that:-

> "Teilhard was working in the early twentieth century, at a time when biology was primitive and computer science non-existent. Many of his ideas are presented in a nineteenth-century vocabulary that is now conceptually obsolete. My method is to present these ideas in a charitable way using a contemporary conceptual vocabulary, and to show how they have been refined by transhumanists such as Tipler, Moravec, and Kurzweil."

The concern here is whether a 'computational model' adequately represents the thinking of Teilhard. Steinhart devotes most of the rest of the article, some 15 pages, to elaborating his interpretation of Teilhard's thinking for transhumanist consumption. I am not equipped to engage in a critique of his interpretation of Teilhard but am concerned that Teilhard's concept of 'consciousness' is replaced with 'computation'. Later, without elaboration, the concept of 'intelligence' is introduced. Some discussion of the interplay between 'consciousness' as a redundant

concept, 'computation' as its replacement, and 'intelligence' would have been beneficial. I suspect that 'computation' is not a concept that Christians, conservative or progressives alike, will warm to as it is suggestive of mechanistic or deterministic notions.

Thirdly, there is the matter of ethical and moral issues. Steinhart states that, *"Transhumanists advocate the ethical use of technology for human advancement"* p 1. Steinhart correctly states that Christians too, are concerned with ethics and in particular their application to advancements in science and technology. His concern for the power and influence of conservative Christians in the US suggests that this is the area of greatest potential conflict.

A significant issue is the extent to which transhumanist advocacy of the ethical use of technology can have any influence on rapid developments in discoveries or the political will to apply these technologies for moral or malevolent purposes. Evidence to date from our recent history would suggest that advocacy, alone, is rarely an effective tool for ensuring that ethical issues are taken up by business, industry or by governments. Underlying any technological advance is the purpose for which it may be used. Further underlying this is the belief and value system that directs how it will be used. The challenge is to expose the subversive or destructive belief systems exercised by those who wield power and to replace them with values and ethics that reflect the highest aspirations of a just and inclusive human society. This is a political exercise at base and advocates of transhumanism will have to address this as a significant part of their agenda.

Just as transhumanists have to commit to advocacy for ethical use, the obverse is true that the ethical application of technology for human advancement is also a major issue that world cultures and their political systems must address.

The politico-industrial sphere is where any ethical concern must play a critical role. Though not covered in any depth by Steinhart, it is the area of ethical advocacy that has substantial potential for finding common ground for transhumanists and those Christian groupings I referred to in the previous point.

In this context, intriguingly, Steinhart states that, *"A study of Teilhard's writings can help transhumanism embrace a deep conception of social justice and expand its conception of social concern…"* p 2. Christians have much to contribute in the area of ethical behaviour, social justice and a vision for the future of human life.

Finally, there are theological issues that impact on the proposed dialogue:

- the Divine – the understanding and place of God in a transhumanist future.
- Jesus Christ – the significance of the life and resurrection of Christ and implications for humanity
- Salvation - the nature of the individual's relationship with God in Christ and the understanding of the church as the 'embodiment' of Christ.
- Humanity – 'What is human?' as humanity evolves in a transhumanist context. The understanding and place of concepts such as the soul or spirit; individual freedom and freedom of choice, the exercise of Will and the like.
- Eschatology (end times) – the interaction between the variety of Christian responses to the consummation of God's purposes with those of a transhumanist future

These and other questions will contribute to and shape the perspective that liberal/progressive Christians will hold on the benefits and future of transhumanism. These cannot be dispensed with if any genuine dialogue is to occur.

Perhaps the last word belongs to Teilhard himself. When discussing what he believes in the book referenced in the introductory quote, he states that by upbringing and intellectual training, *"I belong to the 'children of heaven'"*, but by temperament and by professional study, *"I am a 'child of the earth'".* Far from these being conflicting influences, he felt that a synthesis had been achieved in which *'the one has not destroyed, but has reinforced the other.'*

> *"Today I believe probably more profoundly than ever in God, and certainly more than ever in the world"* p 97.

Teilhard argues that this 'synthesis' is, for him, the particular solution to the great spiritual problem which humanity is now coming up against: How to live with faith in an increasingly scientific and technological world.

This is the departure point for dialogue.

Afterword: *"What is the praxis for me?"*

As a christian employed as Christian Educator, my developing encounter with Transhumanism has been challenging and exciting in the possibilities it affords. My work is taking me into eLearning with the establishment of courses and the like for those who choose online learning. Questions for me are what this learning can be like utilising the extensive resources of the internet and the various ways these might be communicated digitally. More important, is the concept of a establishing a communal 'digital mind' in which the community of learners constantly contribute to and draw from the thinking that may evolve when course participants become learners, teachers, thinkers, sharers and the like. A challenge here is to go beyond the old paradigm of teacher/learner to "learning minds" facilitated by technology.

On another level, the challenge for me is to advocate (provoke!) my church organisation to start engaging with transhumanism and to do so in a way that is responsive and considered. All too often the church, like many institutions in society, can lag behind developments and discoveries and find itself forced to react rather than to contribute meaningfully to these developments.

There is another challenge in helping christians engage in the dialogue with transhumanism in open and helpful ways. Part of this is helping people to cope with the fear of the unknown or misperceptions of what transhumanism might mean for them. There is an almost natural tendency to conservatism and resistance to change within humans which is sometimes exacerbated by the church's own culture.

Some troubling realities but some exciting possibilities…