

A Comment on Neil Thorpe's Commentary

As a 68 year old Christian of long standing who has moved gradually towards a progressive outlook on Christianity, I have welcomed having my attention drawn once again to the work of Teilhard de Chardin. Equally, I welcome being introduced to transhumanism at a time when technology is commanding such a powerful influence over the lives of all people. Neil Thorpe, drawing on Steinhardt's highlighting of de Chardin's interest in transhumanism has cautiously made a good case supporting Steinhardt's argument for strong links between progressive Christianity and the emerging discourse about humanity's striving for higher levels, both physically, mentally and socially. But making the link is not without its challenges and handled without awareness of the pitfalls could produce very undesirable outcomes.

Progressive Christians are generally open to new ideas and reconstructed thinking. They have often moved from a conservative position and developed their view using critical thinking and by challenging long held viewpoints that don't stand up to scrutiny. They are willing to question ideas that have been essential to the authority and power of theological and doctrinal elites. They cannot be simply grouped together as they have diverse claims on the title 'progressive'. Nevertheless, the scientific world and human endeavour find a 'safe' environment across the panoply of progressive Christians. Transhumanism would not get through the gate of a gathering of conservative or fundamental Christians because it has recognised the technological power of humanity over its own destiny and given humanity a future that contrasts with their view of human destiny. Steinhardt is right to see a window of opportunity for dialogue between Transhumanists and Progressive Christians.

The progressive Jesus movement could add a great deal to the transhuman discourse and move it further along ethical and moral pathways. Thorpe rightly raises the concern that contemporary use of technology and advances in science have brought huge ethical challenges. Many of these are under the influence of vested economic interests. Many opportunists stand to gain economically by ignoring the ethical and moral challenges and this is a significant driving force in the development of future technologies. For example, the use of drugs in sport to enhance performance has shifted the purposes of sport from recreation and enjoyment to gambling and huge salaries. The winners are not society generally but those who have found ways to introduce into the human body ways of taking it to new heights of athletic capability. There are many losers also. Technological changes in humans raise questions about their long term benefit and the ability of a naturally uncertain community adapting to these changes. Nevertheless they are happening at an increasing rate. The discourse badly needs a moral and ethical component and well placed progressive Christians have a long heritage informed by science, philosophy and apologetics that would take transhumanism to new levels of integrity.

Thorpe, Steinhardt and others have helped to open this window of opportunity further and let fresh thinking into what promises to be a very worthwhile exercise in productive cooperation between two growing movements that seek relevance in a rapidly changing world. Both have much to gain by entering into dialogue.

Paul Inglis, PhD (University of Queensland) in Adult Learning; retired teacher educator and retired Uniting Church minister. 14-05-2013 Dayboro, Qld, Australia. (PSINGLIS@westnet.com.au)