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Technology Unleashed: A Review of Transhumanism and the Image of God

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Technology Unleashed: A Review of Transhumanism and the Image of God

Abstract

"As Christians we must realize technology's formation capability, reflect on it, and consider our relationship with technology."

Posting about the book *Transhumanism and the Image of God* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Comments

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in things

Technology Unleashed: A Review of *Transhumanism and the Image of God*

Sam Ashmore

Title: *Transhumanism and the Image of God: Today's Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship*

Author: Jacob Shatzer

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The first iPhone was set to be released the summer of 2006, and I remember thinking, “Do I need this? I have a phone, camera, baby blue iPod Mini, and a computer.” Six people I knew purchased the phone, and when I saw it for the first time I was amazed. I won’t forget how mesmerized I was by the fact that it combined four of my devices into one. Amazement soon turned to desire; I wanted one, I needed one! After holding out for several years (by that I mean my parents did not purchase one for me even after much pleading and begging), I got the iPhone 4; little did I know this would lead to the iPhone 6, 7, and 8—which is where I currently stand.

This form of technology, and others, created in me a desire to continually get the latest and greatest forms of technology, forming me in a way I never imagined. Jacob Shatzer, an assistant professor and associate dean in the School of Theology and Missions at Union University, in his book *Transhumanism and the Image of God* addresses the way technology forms us, especially in regards to Christian discipleship. Shatzer goes beyond the classic “youth group” discussion of smart phones becoming an idol, an avenue for engaging inappropriate content, or even a place that builds a spirit of comparison

through social media. Instead, he addresses topics such as artificial intelligence, mind uploading, and augmented reality and claims that technology is shaping people in deep, brain-altering, worldview-shifting ways.

To start off, Shatzer spends the first two chapters of the book defining key terms: technology, transhumanism, and post-human while laying the claim of his argument. Shatzer, quoting Dorcas Cheng-Tozun, defines transhumanism as “faith in technology to vastly expand the capabilities of humans” (39). This is the most succinct definition and clear point of the book: The purpose of technology is to expand and grow human capabilities in order to gain a post-human existence. This may shock or unsettle some, but the reality Shatzer wants to point out is that “technology disciplines us” (11-12). I agree with Shatzer and advocate that as Christians we must realize technology’s formation capability, reflect on it, and consider our relationship with technology.

From there the book is quite clear and straightforward: Chapters 3-5 continue to define transhumanism and how certain technologies such as augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and mind uploading lead people to be disciples of transhumanism without even realizing it. Chapters 6-10 focus on several key actions and solutions to be disciplined by Christ rather than the power of technology. To be honest, I was unsure about reviewing a book with the title *Transhumanism and the Image of God*. Do I even know what transhumanism is? With terms like “hybronaut” and “mindclones” and topics such as artificial intelligence and robots, I doubted I could properly understand and share about them. However, Shatzer writes a clear and concise book with an easy-to-follow flow, making it highly readable for those interested in technology and its impact in Christian discipleship.

One of Shatzer’s main strengths in this book is that he aptly draws major applications from both James K.A. Smith’s book *Cultural Liturgies* and A.J. Conyers’ book *The Listening Heart*. Shatzer uses Smith’s idea of liturgical practices and combines them with Conyer’s understanding that people are drawn to power and control, no longer shaped by the idea of calling from the transcendent. With this, Shatzer coins the term “liturgy of control,” referring to technology throughout the book. Technology leads people to desire more and more power and control over their lives. For example, people can choose their own idealized image to portray in social media. Or with the advent of inventions such as robot vacuums, people have more time to do what they want as a result of artificial intelligence. Freedom to choose is what makes us fully human, right? Shatzer powerfully reveals the way technology disciplines us through the idea of control. Technology puts humanity in the driver’s seat rather than God and His Word. We choose rather than follow, which contrary to what Christians are called to do as Christ-followers.

This leads us to the second strength: Shatzer, at the end of the book, gives four practices and four small steps to combat the liturgy of control that technology and transhumanism perpetuates. He urges the Christians to practice Sabbath, solitude, work, and prayer as well as practice small steps of reflection, question-asking, and boundary-setting regarding technology. These are not life-altering, revelatory practices and habits, but are quite normal, and ordinary—which is the beauty of them. The mundane is where life is lived, and where the living God interacts with His people. If Christians begin practicing Shatzer’s suggestions, we can practice release of control as well as recognition of God’s sovereignty that shapes us over and above the lure of technology.

My critique, in some ways, is a critique of one of the above strengths. Shatzer opposes the promise of power and control that transhumanism pushes through technology by showing that Jesus calls His disciples to a very different position. Jesus calls His disciples to take a position of child-like faith.¹ Children in many ways do not have control. They are dependent, needing to rely on their parents or caretakers for many physical and emotional needs. This is an incredible Biblical truth and Christian calling. However, Shatzer does not expand this discussion beyond simply quoting the verse above with a basic call towards humility. My, rather broad, critique of his entire book is that I would have liked more Scripture, a definition of Christian discipleship, and more of a Biblical theology consisting of what Scripture has to say on discipleship. While I realize this was not the aim and scope of the book, I think there should have been more integration of discipleship throughout the book rather than a mere mention at the final chapter. I also realize this may have been intentional in order to gain not only Christian readers, but a wider audience.

In conclusion, this book does not deny the usefulness of technology or claim that the only right response is to rid yourself of technology all together. In our current era, that may very well be impossible. Instead, the purpose of this book is to awaken Christians to realize that technology is shaping and forming us in opposite ways from how the Gospel shapes and disciplines us. Shatzer quotes Michael Harris², “Every technology will alienate you from some part of your life. That is its job. Your job is to notice. First notice the difference. And then, every time, choose” (38). As Christians we need to notice, and then we need to choose a practice or rhythm that releases control and recognizes dependence on the Father. Overall, this book is a great introduction to the conversation, and while a post-human future may not be a reality yet, the practices and beliefs of transhumanism through technology are at work in our everyday.

FOOTNOTES

1. Matt. 18:2-4
2. From his book *The End of Absence: Reclaiming What We've lost in a World of Constant Connection*