

# CAN TECHNOLOGY SAVE US?

## AI, VR, and the Dawn of a New Faith

by Alison Main



**Adobe has a new Jesus.**<sup>1</sup> Way of The Future is heralding the first church of artificial intelligence.<sup>2</sup> And Silicon Valley regularly anoints their charismatic leaders as “Technology Evangelists.”

With cell towers now looming over temples, churches, and mosques, disembodied kinships gathering together in the virtual cloud, and glowing devices replacing holy books on our nightstands, we could be witnessing a fundamental shift in how and what we worship. What are the consequences of a faith system relocated to a digital and artificial realm?

In a November 2017 article in *Wired*,<sup>3</sup> Anthony Levandowski, the figurehead of AI’s first church, said, “This time you will be able to talk to God, literally, and know that it’s listening.” This presumes a community of faithful will pray to a Godhead in a computer. But . . . maybe we’re already there? For those seeking to be born again into an artificial reality, what is the path, and where does it lead?

### THE NEW TECHNO-RELIGIONS

What is religion? What is spirituality? What is God? Is it even possible to define such concepts? These questions have inspired polemical debates and canonical works from philosophers, theologians, poets, scholars, and gurus for thousands of years.

Religion in itself is a contentious topic, inciting wars, enslavement, violence, and political upheaval, all under the veil of belief systems. From the Crusades to the Holocaust and beyond, religion has altered the face of the world many times over. For something so powerful as an agent of change, what exactly is religion?

“Your daily life is your temple and your religion.”

— KHALIL GIBRAN

According to Christian Smith, professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame, and author of the book, *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters*, “Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realizing human good and avoiding things bad.”<sup>4</sup>


In a somewhat different perspective, Casper ter Kuile, Ministry Innovation Fellow at Harvard Divinity School says, “So often we are brought into thinking religion is about what we believe . . . But if you look more widely across the world, religion is often very closely connected to what you do. Do you perform rituals, do you honor ancestors, what are the ethics by which you treat other people? Religion as a concept is very contested in scholarship, but I think in terms of how most people experience it globally, it’s very much more about what you do than what you believe.”

Canon Susan Harriss of Christ Church in Pelham Manor, New York adds, “A religion is a system of thought and practice that directs us to powers and intelligence beyond what we can see and feel. Most religion involves some sort of ritual which is a repetitive practice that’s done together with some intention.”

In his book *God: A Human History*, Reza Aslan contends that “religion is little more than a ‘language’ made up of symbols and metaphors that allows believers to communicate, to one another and to themselves, the ineffable experience of faith.”<sup>5</sup>

The way we connect with our digital technologies

forms a ritualistic practice. It’s what we do. Pretty much all the time. Our daily interactions with the world have become virtual, artificial, and algorithmic, from more obvious channels like Amazon, Spotify, and Facebook, to more mundane experiences like banking transactions,

A photograph of a man in a red t-shirt and a white baseball cap with a red and black logo, looking down at a smartphone. He is standing in front of a large, weathered wooden cross that is part of a larger structure with curved, ribbed sides. The background is a clear blue sky. The image has a warm, slightly desaturated color palette.

**"I don't want  
to believe. I want  
to know."**

-CARL SAGAN





hotel reservations, and insurance claims, all controlled by machine learning, neural networks, and data sets.

A mere decade ago, big tech companies from Google to IBM to Microsoft enthusiastically heralded the coming of “Big Data,” “Cloud Computing,” and “Marketing Automation.” We are now living within these transformative digital methodologies. And they are powers beyond what we can see and feel.

We believe that technology can help us be superior humans, make better decisions, and change our lives for the greater good. We turn to these apps, virtual spaces, and devices to bring us solace, joy, and community, even if that community never meets in person under a shared roof; even if that solace and joy dissipates with each finger swipe and click.

So . . . from a socio-cultural standpoint, can we officially classify modern technology as a religion? Maybe.

Smith makes an important clarification of what makes a superhuman power. “Superhuman here means that these powers are (believed to be) able to influence or control significant parts of reality that are usually beyond direct human intervention.” But according to Smith’s theory, these superhuman powers must *not* be a human creation, must not be dependent upon human invention, activity, or production to exist. As Smith told me, “Buddhists don’t believe they created karma. Muslims, Christians, and Jews don’t believe they created Allah, the Holy Trinity, or Yahweh. God just exists.” This perspective would eliminate our digital and artificial technologies from constituting a “religion,” since, after all, we humans have created these technologies.

But given the vast scholarly debate over what defines a religion, the issue is still open for interpretation. Also, consider that among throngs of digital futurists, there’s a growing community of faithful who staunchly believe in the emergence of superintelligence, an artificial general intelligence that immensely surpasses the human minds that created it. If this occurs, the AI could reprogram, replicate, and improve itself, without any human action or intervention. This super-intelligent being would not be limited by human intellect nor imagination.

Isaac Asimov wrote about this way back in the 1940s and 1950s, in his collection of short stories *I, Robot*. He imagined the emergence of a robotic culture, from its primitive stages to its development of superhuman powers. Asimov foretold of an artificially super-intelligent species, stronger and more capable than humans, that would ensure mankind was not alone in the universe. This story reflects how we have historically perceived our traditional deities. One can argue that even if Smith’s theory holds, it’s still possible that a superintelligence could indeed reign as a superhuman power that was not man-made. How will that alter the face of our future religious and cultural landscape?

Perhaps instead, we are simply becoming a secular society practicing quasi-religions. Smith says, “It could be that secularization is a shift from superhuman powers that people believe that they did not create to superhuman powers that they believe they did create.” Ter Kuile adds, “It would be easy to assume that people who are unaffiliated are secular or are non-religious in the sense that they don’t believe in God. That secular means atheist. That’s not true. And it doesn’t necessarily mean that people are rejecting all sorts of religious behaviors and ideas. It just means they’re being de-institutionalized.”

It’s possible we are de-institutionalizing ourselves from traditional faith systems every time we strap on a VR visor or “talk” to each other by way of chat apps. Secular or not, humans have an innate religious or quasi-religious impulse to find meaning in life, follow some sort of spiritual path, and connect to a superhuman power. The origin of this quest may be rooted in the nebulous sense that we—as humans—are embodied souls.<sup>6</sup> So, can we disembodify that soul through technology and grant ourselves life everlasting?



## CREATING GOD

You need not gaze too long through the looking glass to glean a religious subtext to our burgeoning techno-culture. Leading digital futurists frequently stand at podiums, charismatically preaching to their devoted followers, uplifting spirits with their prophetic visions, promises, and transformative methodologies for attaining digital immortality and life everlasting. They offer solutions to our human problems of sickness, isolation, aging, pain, poverty, and death. From cognitive enhancement to behavioral biometrics to molecular robotics, these technologies are poised to astronomically explode our concept of who we are, how we live, and when (or whether) we die.

Perhaps forever blurring the lines between reality and illusion, augmented technologies and virtual realities evoke hopes of saving the mind from the body's imminent and natural demise. By freeing the consciousness from its physical shell, they promise salvation and eternal happiness, making "heaven" truly a place on earth. Nowhere is this more blatantly obvious than in virtual gaming, where players convert their bodies into digital avatars, escaping real-world desolation and strife.

Transhumanism presumes that we as humans can and should use technology to control and direct the future evolution of our species, whether that's augmenting man with machine or totally freeing the mind from the body as some sort of cloud-based digital upload.<sup>7</sup> Formerly the sphere of traditional religions, these technologies merge us with that sense of something higher, something more than ourselves. Whether that "something more" is nature, the cosmos, the universe, or what we deem "God," humans have always longed to transcend the body and connect with a higher power or etheric state of being. Now these existential pangs are being fulfilled by technologies like smart drugs, brain implants, and augmented reality, ushering in a different kind of ascension, one from the physical realm to the virtual.

Canon Harriss says, "Part of the weakness in religious life in this century, and in perhaps the last one, is that

so few people had any experience that they thought was pointing them to God. And so the hunger for spirituality is a very healthy response to that."

As we seek to feel grounded and safe and to experience joy and ecstasy, we yearn to connect with something greater than ourselves, something that grants us a sense of awe. Until now, that awe was a sign of a traditional religious God. But what happens when that spiritual hunger is satisfied by technology instead?

In his book *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Yuval Noah Harari writes, "In the twenty-first century we will create more powerful fictions and more totalitarian religions than in any previous era. With the help of biotechnology and computer algorithms these religions will not only control our minute-by-minute existence, but will be able to shape our bodies, brains, and minds, to create entire virtual worlds complete with hells and heavens. Being able to distinguish fiction from reality and religion from science will therefore become more difficult but more vital than ever before."<sup>7</sup>

Ter Kuile adds, "Humans use language to describe God depending on the context that they're in. So, if you live on grass plains with big skies, or by the mountains, or by the sea, your image of God, and the language you use to describe God, is going to be influenced by that terrain."

Now that we're immersed in screens, data sets, and digital networks, it makes sense that people would start talking about their brains, and themselves, as a computer. Our technological and virtual landscape may be changing how we conceptualize God, and, in turn, determining whether we are appropriating God-like powers to ourselves in the process.



"It may be that our role on this planet is not to worship God—but to create him." "

- ARTHUR C. CLARKE





## BECOMING GOD

In 2018, Netflix released the screen adaptation of Richard K. Morgan's cyberpunk noir novel *Altered Carbon*. In the show, set more than 300 years into the future in Bay City, the human body is relegated to a disposable and replaceable "sleeve," while memories and consciousness are uplifted into a disk-shaped "cortical stack" implant in the vertebrae at the back of the neck. As long as your stack is not destroyed, theoretically, you can live forever, by transferring your stack to a new body ("re-sleeving"). And if, perchance, you fancy your original physique for eternity, as long as you've got some serious bank, you can clone your body *ad infinitum* and keep re-sleeving into the same likeness. In this dystopian society, those with "religious coding" denounce this practice, choosing to believe in one body, one life, and at the end of that singular life, you die to be with God. This philosophy, of course, causes some tension between the believers and the nonbelievers in this futuristic society.

Ok, so that's a novel and a TV series. It's not our reality. Yet. But this fictional glimpse into a possible real future leads us to question where society is heading with our current technological explorations and whether our traditional religions will soon be at odds with new techno-religions that are far more adept at eradicating the "human mortality problem" through a prophesied algorithm.

As Harari writes, "Modern science and modern culture have an entirely different take on life and death. They don't think of death as a metaphysical mystery; and they certainly don't view death as the source of life's meaning. Rather, for modern people death is a technical problem that we can and should solve."<sup>7</sup>

Artificial technologies evoke a rather Christian perspective of sin, transcendence, and redemption. In the Christian tradition, eternal salvation is bestowed upon believers through God's grace; and redemption is granted through transcendence of the human body. Modern technologies offer similar promises. If the body is a mere physical compartment, futurists hope to redeem the spirit and elevate the mind via digital upload.

But what does it mean to never die? And instead of seeking eternal rewards in the afterlife, what if the rewards could be had in *this* life, one that exists on a continuum, *ad infinitum*? Perhaps techno-religions align most closely with Hinduism, which presents the self as an immaterial, immortal soul that survives through reincarnation.<sup>5</sup> It just takes some extrapolation of the tenets of Hinduism to realize that soulful reincarnation through cyber technology instead.

And maybe there's a hint of Buddhism thrown into the mix. In the Buddhist tradition, "awakening" is not received from a god or deity, but is achieved by humans themselves.<sup>8</sup> In the merging of virtual and actual realities, there's a sense of unity of all things, something that the prescient Internet of Everything is poised to grant us. We are all one in the digital cloud. We are data. We are information. We are the algorithm. And we can live forever, interconnected and hyperconnected in virtual suspension.

*"What we believe shapes who we are. Belief can bring us salvation or destruction"*

- TAKESHI KOVACS,  
ALTERED CARBON

## CYBER WORSHIP

Harari writes, "... the most interesting place in the world from a religious perspective is not the Islamic State or the Bible Belt, but Silicon Valley. That's where hi-tech gurus are brewing us brave new religions that have little to do with God, and everything to do with technology."<sup>7</sup>

The list of Silicon Valley elites and biotech start-ups fervently delving into life extension reads like a Who's Who of tech-divined oracles. These players call to mind the

Christian evangelical TV stars, with their flashy lights, big screens, rocking worship bands, and mic'd-up preachers. Life extension websites hearken zealous religious organizations in their mission statements and vernacular of conversion.

Smith says, "The word 'evangelical' is rooted in the Greek word for 'good news,' which means these are people [who] think they have good news that they should tell other people. And that's related to the word 'evangelistic,' which has to do with people trying to sell or persuade other people of something. They're proselytizing." What is happening in Silicon Valley may be metaphorically evangelical in a quasi-religious fashion. "It has a certain irony to it," Smith says. "Because we used to sell that Jesus rose from the dead. And now we're going to sell virtual reality."

## VIRTUAL REDEMPTION

It's not a question of whether technology and religion can coexist. Or whether all technologists are secular atheists. But rather, do our digital technologies seek and embody the same spiritual transcendence of what makes a traditional religion?

The human body and mind may be forever altered through biotechnologies and virtual realities. But it's not just the physical realm that's evolving with these artificial technologies. It's the spiritual one as well, and with that, where we seek and find individual and collective salvation.

All of this ultimately boils down to two fundamental questions: Do you have faith in technology? What do *you* believe in? ➡

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*"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."*

- PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

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