

The Magus of Silicon Valley: Immortality, Apocalypse, and God Making in Ray Kurzweil's Transhumanism

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Humanity lies groaning, half crushed beneath the weight of its own progress. Human beings do not sufficiently realize that their future is in their own hands. Theirs is the task of determining first of all whether they want to go on living or not. Theirs the responsibility, then, for deciding if they want merely to live, or intend to make just the extra effort required for fulfilling, even on their refractory planet, the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods.

- Henri Begson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1935).¹

1 Introduction

The protagonist of this article does not appear on your regular list of usual suspects in discussions about mediumism, spirit contact, and the occult. Raymond Kurzweil (b. 1948) is a successful American inventor, author, and entrepreneur who has founded a dozen companies, registered over sixty patents,² and is (at the time of writing, and since 2012) a director of engineering at Google. Born and bred in Queens, New York, Kurzweil's original claim to fame was as developer of the first text-to-speech reading machines for the blind in the 1970s; for musicians, he is perhaps best known as the inventor of the Kurzweil synthesizer, which helped usher in the sample-based sound of the 1980s.

In recent years, however, Kurzweil has moved on to more ambitious projects, such as how to achieve eternal life,³ make 'spiritual machines,'⁴ and

¹ Bergson: *The Two Sources*, 275.

² According to a Google patent search, conducted November 1, 2016.

³ Ranj: Google's Chief Futurist.

⁴ Kurzweil: *The Age of Spiritual Machines*.

bring back the dead.⁵ In fact, Kurzweil believes we are on the verge of technological breakthroughs that will lead to the complete restructuring of the fabric of reality, transmuting the universe into a vast, thinking being.⁶ This event is referred to as ‘the Singularity.’ Kurzweil’s outlandish estimations about the future of technology have given him the status of a prophet in the so-called transhumanist movement. In this article, I argue that Kurzweil’s transhumanism contains a dimension of transgressive, millenarian spirituality that is best understood as an emerging form of contemporary esotericism grounded in expectations about technological progress.⁷

This statement requires some qualifications. When I consider transhumanism a form of esotericism I do not mean to imply that it is the contemporary heir to one of the many historical currents that have been lumped together under this rubric. The claim is at the same time more modest and more ambitious than this: Modestly, I argue that transhumanism shares some key conceptual elements with so-called esoteric currents. Thus, I argue for a *structural similarity* with ideas, worldviews, and currents that are typically labelled esoteric.⁸ More ambitiously, however, I entertain that these similarities are not accidental, but tell us something about a Promethean ‘deep structure’ that runs through much of Western intellectual history, and which is expressed, among other places, in esoteric currents and the transhumanist movement.⁹ In this sense, Kurzweil’s transhuman ambitions may be viewed as a ‘scientification’ – or better yet, a *technologization* – of discursive knots often associated with

⁵ E.g., Berman: Futurist Ray Kurzweil Says He Can Bring His Dead Father Back to Life. Cf. Kurzweil in Ptolemy: *Transcendent Man*.

⁶ Kurzweil: *The Singularity is Near*.

⁷ For other examples, see the contributions to Asprem and Granholm (eds.): *Contemporary Esotericism*.

⁸ For the views on analogy and comparison that inform these points, see Asprem: *Beyond the West*.

⁹ This ‘Promethean ambition’ is concerned above all with the desire for perfect knowledge, with the acquisition of special powers, and the elevation of the individual. This background ‘discursive element’ comes close to what Kocku von Stuckrad has in mind when talking about ‘esoteric discourse’ as a concern with ‘higher knowledge’ and ways of achieving it. See e.g. von Stuckrad: *Western Esotericism*.

esotericism.¹⁰ Key among these are the quest for immortality, the transmutation of the world, and the making of gods.

There is, however, also a social link between transhumanism and contemporary esotericism. I argue that transhumanism, as a movement, is currently *merging with* and *mobilizing* parts of the occulture.¹¹ Transhumanist ideas have been percolating in the ‘cultic milieu’ since at least the 1970s, as evidenced by the techno-utopianism of some psychedelic revolutionaries like Timothy Leary and, on occasion, Terence McKenna. The location of the techboom itself in the valley south of San Francisco Bay also reveals a deeper entwined history between the 1960s counterculture and a futurist brand of utopianism where networked computers and an ideology of cybernetics was linked to solving environmental, economic, and social problems, while promoting alternative communities sustained by new means of communication.¹²

transhumanist milieus appear to be converging with the science-oriented, technophilian wing of what used to be the ‘New Age movement.’ Thus, transhumanism adds a new set of discursive elements to what Kennet Granholm calls the ‘discursive complexes’ that make up contemporary esotericism.¹³ Most crucially, it provides a new eschatological scenario in the form of the Singularity, at a time when the previous big scenario – that of 2012 – has recently failed.¹⁴

2 What is Transhumanism?

Transhumanism is a radically utopian movement concerned with the development and application of human enhancement technologies. The baseline assumption is that humanity has the power to transcend its biological limitations, and that such transcendence is desirable, or even necessary for long-term survival. The tools for overcoming biology and reaching our true potential

¹⁰ In the sense of von Stuckrad: *The Scientification of Religion*.

¹¹ On occulture, see Partridge: *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (vol. 1); Partridge: Occulture is Ordinary.

¹² On these fascinating links, see especially Turner: *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*.

¹³ Granholm: Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes.

¹⁴ On the 2012 millennial predictions and the social movements that coalesced around it, see e.g. Gelfer (ed.): *2012*; Whitesides: *2012 Millennialism becomes Conspiracist Teleology*.

are found in the gamut of recent and emerging technologies, from biotechnology and medical research, to nanotechnology and artificial intelligence. The unrestrained use of such technologies is considered the road to total freedom, promising to make us a species of immortal, omniscient, space-travelling demigods.

The term ‘transhumanism’ itself appears to have been coined by the evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley – grandson of ‘Darwin’s bulldog,’ Thomas Henry Huxley, and brother to the novelist and countercultural hero Aldous Huxley. In an essay from 1957, Julian Huxley, who, as many science-oriented political progressives of the era was a staunch defender of eugenic policies, wrote that

The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself —not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature.¹⁵

Although a number of other historical precursors could be mentioned, from the Russian cosmists at the beginning of the twentieth century,¹⁶ to post-war science fiction authors and futurists,¹⁷ transhumanism came to its own as a movement in the late 1980s. Key events in its emergence as a social movement include the foundation of the Foresight Institute (1986), the establishment of the journal *Extropy: The Journal of Transhumanist Thought* in 1988, and the associated Extropy Institute (1991). An international network continued to develop through the late 1990s, with the establishment of The World Transhumanist Association (now renamed Humanity+) and the *Journal of Transhumanism* (now *Journal of Evolution and Technology*) in 1998, and the Singularity Institute in

¹⁵ Huxley: Transhumanism, 17.

¹⁶ See e.g. Young: *The Russian Cosmists*; Hagemeister: Konstantin Tsiolkovskii and the Occult Roots of Soviet Space Travel.

¹⁷ See especially the works of the Persian-born author Fereidoun Esfandiary, better known as FM-2030, which include *FM-2030: Optimism One* (1970); *Up-Wingers* (1973); and *Are You a Transhuman?* (1989).

2000. Dozens of related organizations, associations, journals and institutes now exist – there is even a Mormon Transhumanist Association (est. 2006), exploring the potential of human enhancement technologies for ushering in the Mormon vision of earthly paradise.¹⁸

While the transhumanist movement has grown to have contributors, spokespersons, and followers in a number of countries around the world, its centre of gravity remains in Silicon Valley. In fact, the ideological, political, and spiritual ideals of transhumanism flourish at the core of the US tech industry. This is understandable, since the transhumanist literature typically imbues the technologies of Silicon Valley with messianic significance.

Ray Kurzweil stands at the centre of this milieu. In 2008 he co-founded Singularity University together with people such as Google CEO Larry Page. Located in the South Bay, with NASA Ames Research Center next door and the Googleplex and Stanford University only a few minutes' drive away, Singularity University is a private educational institution and think-tank, based on Kurzweil's ideas, that aims to "educate, inspire and empower leaders to apply exponential technologies to address humanity's grand challenges."¹⁹ Through its focus on attracting and developing future business leaders and 'disruptive' innovators from all around the world (its 'Global Solutions' course reportedly attracted 3000 applications for 80 slots in 2013),²⁰ a generation of potentially very influential individuals are being exposed to Kurzweil's ideas on technological development. We are in other words not talking about a figure at the fringes of Silicon Valley, but of an influential leader at the heart of one of our days' most powerful industries.

Kurzweil has presented his grand vision of our imminent technological future through a number of best-selling books. The titles of three of these reveal the increasingly ambitious message. In 1990, Kurzweil published *The Age of Intelligent Machines*, arguing that we would soon see computing power explode so that machines would be able to compete with and even beat humans in an increasing number of cognitive tasks. Seven years after its publication, IBM's

¹⁸ See their website: *Transfigurism*.

¹⁹ Anon.: About.

²⁰ Miguel: Elite University Aims to Solve World's Problems.

computer, Deep Blue, broke new ground by beating Gary Kasparov in a six-game match of chess.²¹ Thus, when Kurzweil released *The Age of Spiritual Machines* in 1999, the intelligence of machines were no longer in dispute. Meanwhile, home computers were rapidly becoming commonplace and the world wide web had fully emerged, satiating everyday life of the Western middle classes with computer technologies. The next frontier was to make machines more like humans, and eventually to transform humanity itself. By merging human and machine intelligence, Kurzweil argued, humanity will transform itself into a new species of supermen. This far more ambitious project was continued in his 2005 book, *The Singularity Is Near*. In this book, transhumanism's millenarian dimensions emerge fully-fledged, as Kurzweil describes a coming event that will transform not only human life, but the entire universe as we know it: the 'singularity'.

3 The Coming Singularity: Kurzweil's millennial predictions

What is the singularity? To get to grips with this concept, we need to understand Kurzweil's view of history.²² Transhumanists tend to share a 'macrohistorical' vision²³ by which all of human *and* natural history, even the history of the universe itself, can be understood in terms of a single mathematical concept: the exponential function.

The plausibility of this grand narrative is unmistakably bolstered by the performance of the tech industry over the past half century. It can indeed be cast as a generalization of 'Moore's Law,' originally formulated in 1965 by the co-founder of Intel, Gordon E. Moore.²⁴ Moore's Law originally predicted that the number of transistors on integrated circuits would increase exponentially, doubling every eighteen months. However, this trend was expected to flatten out

²¹ See Hsu: *Behind Deep Blue*.

²² Again, the ideas expressed by Kurzweil did not all originate with him. The mathematician, computer scientist and science fiction author Vernon Vinge appears to have been the first to conceptualize and name the technological singularity, more or less in the sense presently understood by singularity transhumanists. This happened in essays in the mid-1980s, first in an opinion piece in the futurist journal *Omni*, in January 1983. See Vinge: First Word, 10.

²³ Cf. Trompf: Macrohistory.

²⁴ Moore: Cramming More Components onto Integrated Circuits.

when some physical ceiling was met – which Moore predicted would happen by the mid-1970s.

Kurzweil defends a much more radical version of the exponential view, which he has dubbed the ‘Law of Accelerating Returns.’²⁵ It is more radical in three ways. First, it is *recursive*: the results of past changes accelerate the future speed at which change happens. This contrasts with Moore’s law, which has doubling-times fixed at eighteen months.²⁶ Connected with this, exponential growth is seen as practically *unrestrained*. New technological abilities tend to find new and previously unforeseen ways to sidestep limitations. The ceiling is replaced by a stairway: Reaching a ‘limit’ only means that the exponential process will start over again on a higher level. Third, these overlapping exponential processes are universalized: exponential growth is *not* confined to computing power alone, but applies to *all* of technology, as well as to all of evolution – including non-biological evolution. The exponential function describes the *telos* of the entire universe – from the Big Bang to the end of times.

If one assumes an understanding of historical and cosmological development in terms of the exponential function, the concept of the singularity follows quite naturally. It delineates the final exponential turning-point (that is, relative to the human point of view), where change will accelerate so fast as to practically transform everything in the blink of an eye. In Kurzweil’s view, the singularity will be triggered in the near future, when artificial intelligence first outmatches the human brain, and continues to expand beyond human capacity at an exponential rate. This ‘explosion of intelligence’ will be the tipping-point, and Kurzweil prophesizes its imminent arrival in 2045. But the super-intelligent AI will not be on some lonely computer locked away in the deep vaults of a secret research facility. It will be created in a distributed network of intelligent nanorobots, that will already be infused in, and merged with, the human organism, connecting our individual brains with everyone and everything else. The intelligence explosion will not happen separate from human bodies – it will

²⁵ The following description of Kurzweil’s views on exponential growth and its relation to the Singularity is based on Kurzweil: *The Singularity is Near*, 35-110.

²⁶ For a discussion and modelling of the mathematics involved, see Brunner: *Modelling Moore’s Law*.

be part of human bodies, radically transformed and fully merged with machines and with each other. These enhanced humans of 2045 will not only have telepathic abilities, but the ability to completely merge their personalities and memories with each other to form 'hive minds' if they so wish.

Once this happens, the world will be changed for ever. Kurzweil imagines that the conscious cloud of molecular machines that humanity will now have become will set out to transform and rearrange the matter that makes up our planet. Eventually, all the matter and energy of the solar system will be made part of the expanding network of intelligence. We will transform our surroundings into a massive brain. Matter will become intelligent and conscious; "infused with spirit," as Kurzweil puts it.²⁷ Expanding exponentially, this process will eventually ripple through the galaxy until "the universe wakes up."²⁸ Intelligence and consciousness is the destiny of the universe – and humanity's (or at least the tech engineer's) messianic role is to bring its release.

4 An Intermezzo on Techno-Spiritualism: Transhuman Aspirations, All-Too-Human Motivations

The above summary has portrayed the emergence of Kurzweil's singularitarian transhumanism as an intellectual journey, developed in an unfolding dialectic between the ingenuity of reason and material technological change. This is very much Kurzweil's own story, idealized to the max by the sterile rationality of the exponential function. It is, however, a story that obscures a deeper personal motivation based in common human affects.

In a series of interviews, Kurzweil has provided a glimpse into biographical details that have helped determine where he has invested his inventive talents.²⁹ In a story that rings familiar to historians of spiritualism, the loss of his beloved father at a tender age left a long-standing motivation to circumvent the barrier between the living and the dead. In his 2011 documentary about Kurzweil, director Barry Ptolemy casts the brilliant inventor

²⁷ Kurzweil: *The Singularity is Near*, 390.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁹ See especially the interviews in *Transcendent Man*; cf. also the interview in Berman: Futurist Ray Kurzweil Says He Can Bring His Dead Father Back to Life.

as a tragic hero who, devastated by his father Fredric's death to heart disease, invests all his ingenuity into vanquishing death altogether and bringing his dad back to life. Instead of succumbing to fatalism about our mortality, or resorting to religious compensators for what cannot be had (eternal life without disease), people must face up to the tragedy of death and start doing something about it.

The desire to defy and conquer death is, of course, a classic theme, and it permeates the culture of transhumanism. 'Radical life-extension' is one of the core concerns of the movement, whether pursued through existing techniques such as exercise and diet, experimental remedies such as supplements (Kurzweil himself reports taking over 200 different supplements a day), or future technologies ranging from gene therapies to nanorobots acting as intravenous MDs, maintaining the body from within. As is also the case with most religions, the obsession with death and dying has resulted in uniquely transhumanist burial practices: Echoing the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh, cremation is viewed as a grotesque and barbaric practice that destroys all of the body's inherent 'information' and thus ruins forever the possibility of reanimation. The correct alternative, provided by companies such as Alcor Life Extension (founded 1972), is to freeze and preserve the body with the latest in cryogenics technology, in the hope that some future technology may thaw the preserved tissue and blow new life into dead cells. When the present author visited a transhumanist conference in San Francisco in 2014,³⁰ the culture of death-defiance was on full display – from stalls pushing vitamins and minerals, to a talk by Alcor's CEO, Max More, to the promotion of a children's book entitled *Death is Wrong*.³¹

While the quest for immortality is a commonplace feature of the transhumanist movement, the resurrection of, and contact with, individual loved ones is a somewhat more heterodox feature. Kurzweil's idea of how this can be achieved, even when the body has not been preserved, relies entirely on his views on artificial intelligence and the power of computers. The first thing we must note is that Kurzweil assumes a minority position in the philosophy of mind and personality holding that the mind is, basically, a pattern-recognition

³⁰ Transhuman Visions 2.0, February 28, 2014, Piedmont Veteran's Hall, Piedmont, CA.

³¹ Stolyarov II and Stolyarov: *Death is Wrong*.

algorithm, and that the traits of individual minds – their knowledge, personalities, and so on – are the results of the specific kinds of data on which this algorithm has performed computations.³² This view, which, in contrast with mainstream cognitive science puts the algorithm front-and-centre while diminishing the role of the biological tissue of the brain and the nervous system to being simply a “substratum” and ignoring altogether the issues of evolutionary and developmental processes, has at least two implications. First, that human minds could, in principle, work equally well on a silicon basis; and second, that individual minds may be replicated by copying data structures across ‘devices’ just as one would copy files between computers. If this view were correct, it would promise to reduce two central philosophical problems (the nature of the mind and personal identity) into engineering problems.

This is how Kurzweil treats the issues, and this is how he hopes to one day be able to communicate with a man who died in 1970. The mind is information, and information never dies. When the AI technology that Kurzweil is involved with developing at Google becomes sufficiently advanced, all he needs to do is feed the machine learning algorithm sufficient data about his dad, and Frederic Kurzweil will, for all practical purposes, have been reborn in the circuitry of a computer. Precisely for this reason, Ray has been collecting every last trace of ephemera that Frederic left behind, from DNA samples and physiological data, to voice recordings, diaries, letters, photographs, and notebooks. Since Frederic was a musical composer, there is also a wealth of artistic productions for the algorithm to chew on. Following Ray’s thinking, when this information is synthesized by the algorithm and embodied in the mediumship of an avatar, conversation with the ‘other side’ will be just as real as what spiritualist mediums have been claiming. In both cases, communication will be less than perfect, and only bits and fragments of the lost person may pass through the veil. But those parts have a direct continuity with the deceased, and the medium does embody the personality of the dead.

5 Transhumanism as Esoteric Discourse

³² In his book on the subject, he christens it the “Pattern Recognition Theory of Mind” (PRTM). Kurzweil: *How to Create a Mind*.

It is not hard to draw analogies between transhumanist thought and concepts that are familiar from the study of esotericism. The above intermezzo highlighted a similarity with spiritualist discourses that reveal an analogy between the information-theoretical immortality of the transhumanists and the partial and fragmented ‘survival of personality’ of the spiritualists and psychical researchers,³³ allowing for a comparison of the AI avatar and the spirit medium. We may view this as a *technologization* of the very human problem of reconciling the brutal reality of death with the desire for contact and intimacy with deceased loved ones. However, it is crucial to note that a technological solution to this problem was precisely what spiritualism itself claimed to provide: a series of techniques, instruments (human and artificial), and theoretical elaborations for how to establish contact, driven by the same Promethean assumption that humanity has the power within itself to solve even the daunting challenge of death.

Other aspects of the transhuman worldview easily inspire similar comparisons. We can, for example, discern an ‘alchemical’ ideal, concerned with the transmutation of the body, the soul, and the world itself, and the attainment of immortality as a stage towards spiritual perfection. This fairly obvious analogy is also perceived and used with effect by some of the authors who dwell in the borderlands of esotericism and transhumanism.³⁴ We find a concern with ‘higher knowledge’ – a vast extension of reason beyond present limitations, requiring the complete transformation of our minds. Combined with both these is an ambition of *apotheosis* – of becoming divine, eternal, perfect beings. There is even a notion of ‘living nature,’ although expressed through an *eschatological* event where the ‘dead’ universe comes alive and ‘wakes up’ at the end of history.

This apocalyptic vision and the combined views on history, evolution, and human potential is perhaps the most intriguing aspect for our purposes. At first sight, it may look as if transhumanism is just another attempt to ‘immanentize the eschaton,’ in Eric Voegelin’s sense: transhumanists, like political and religious utopians before them, seek ‘transcendental fulfilment’ *within* history

³³ See especially the theories of Myers: *Human Personality*.

³⁴ See, e.g., the conspiratorial and mythomaniacal exposition in de Hart and Farrell: *Transhumanism*.

and by material means.³⁵ But this reading does not carry all the way: the Singularity is imagined to lead to a genuinely transcendent eschatological event. In fact, its eschatology resonates with premillennialism and dispensationalism – eschatological theologies that have been strongly influential also on modern esotericism, from Theosophy and Thelema to the New Age.³⁶ Singularitarian transhumanism belongs to this same theological neighbourhood.

Moreover, the macrohistorical outlook of transhumanist spirituality implies an evolutionary ‘theology of emergence,’ which it shares with much esoteric thought since the early twentieth century.³⁷ This aspect is neatly illustrated in one of the many dialogue sections of *The Singularity Is Near*, where Kurzweil casts himself discussing religion with his good friend, Bill Gates. After discussing the need for a new, essentially leaderless religion that can come to grips with the concept of the singularity, Gates asks: “So is there a God in this religion?” To which Kurzweil answers:

Not yet, but there will be. Once we saturate the matter and energy in the universe with intelligence, it will ‘wake up,’ be conscious, and sublimely intelligent. That’s about as close to God as I can imagine.³⁸

The divine emerges from matter, with a little help from human ingenuity. There is no Creator god, existing independently of the world. Instead, a divine intelligence is created *by* and *inside of* the universe, in a sort of emergent pantheism. Essentially, Kurzweil has the monotheistic creation story in reverse. Not only that: since it is *human agency* that will create god, Kurzweil’s version would also come across to defenders of Abrahamic orthodoxy as the ultimate idolatry.³⁹ This is Kurzweil as the hermetic, god-making magus, and the ultimate techno-pagan.⁴⁰

³⁵ Voegelin: *The New Science of Politics*, 120.

³⁶ See, e.g., Hanegraaff: *New Age Religion*; Bogdan: *Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon*.

³⁷ For this concept, see Asprey: *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 232-247.

³⁸ Kurzweil: *The Singularity Is Near*, 375.

³⁹ Cf. Hanegraaff: *Esotericism and the Academy*, 104-107.

⁴⁰ See Davis: *TechGnosis*.

6 Converging Milieus: The Case of the 2045 Initiative

Kurzweil defines a 'singularitarian' as "someone who understands the Singularity and has reflected on its meaning for his or her life."⁴¹ One person who has most certainly done this is the young Russian billionaire and online media tycoon, Dmitry Itskov (b. 1980). Itskov has realized that the singularity is coming in 2045, and has decided to take a proactive approach by investing his fortune in a project for physical immortality through cybernetic bodies that he calls 'avatars.' The first prototypes that his organization, the 2045 Initiative,⁴² have forecast will be remote-controlled via brain-computer interface; later, brain transplantation and even consciousness upload will be available – assuming a similar metaphysics of mind as Kurzweil's information focused view. By the time of the singularity, the avatars will have become polymorphing bodies made up of swarms of nanorobots.

But Itskov's vision is a lot broader than this. He believes that the coming Singularity forces us to reform our spiritual and political outlook. To this end the 2045 Initiative aims to facilitate a transhumanist revolution that bridges from technology to politics, culture, ethics, and spirituality.⁴³ As a part of this strategy, the 2045 Initiative has taken concrete steps towards synthesizing transhumanist ideology with spirituality. In practice, this means lobbying the support of established spiritual authorities. Itskov has, for example, been able to gather the support of the Dalai Lama – at least for long enough to pose for a picture where His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso appears to endorse a poster of the Avatar project together with Itskov during an audience at Dharamsala in 2012.⁴⁴

At the time of writing, the 2045 Initiative has held two big international conferences, one in Moscow (2012) and the other in New York City (2013). The Moscow conference featured a panel dedicated to 'interfaith dialogue.'⁴⁵ Besides a Russian Hindu monk, a Tibetan Buddhist, and the Orthodox archbishop of

⁴¹ Kurzweil: *The Singularity Is Near*, 370.

⁴² See 2045.

⁴³ See anon.: International Manifesto of the '2045' Strategic Social Initiative.

⁴⁴ Anon.: The Dalai Lama Supports 2045's Avatar Project.

⁴⁵ A video of the meeting can be viewed on the 2045 website: Anon.: Round Table 'Dialogue of Faiths.'

Ottawa, it featured Alan Francis, an American Gurdjieff follower and Fourth Way guru active in California and Russia.⁴⁶ The second conference, in New York City, also featured an intriguing list of speakers, bringing together transhumanist ideologues such as Kurzweil, with researchers and engineers in fields like robotics, neuroengineering, and artificial intelligence, and a number of household names in the 'New Age' and 're-enchantment of science' scenes: Amit Goswami of *The Self-Aware Universe* was there, as were the two main theoreticians of 'quantum consciousness,' Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, and the scholar and advocate of Tibetan Buddhism in the US, Robert Thurman, who spoke about the "merging of our cybernetic and subtle bodies."⁴⁷

7 Concluding Speculations: Transhumanist Spirituality and the Future

The 2045 Initiative is only a recent and high-profile example of a more pervasive trend: the transhumanist gospel is merging with parts of Western 'alternative spirituality'. Should we expect to see this trend increase in the years ahead?

There are two reasons why continued convergence does seem likely. One concerns the *persuasiveness* of transhumanist spirituality in a world that is, after all, really becoming more deeply infused with new technologies. Considering that those who create and profit from the new technologies and those who develop transhumanist ideology are sometimes the exact same people, we should only expect this rhetorical force to intensify. Transhumanist spirituality can be viewed as the ideological-religious 'superstructure' offered up by a social class of ascending power. Founded on a radical DIY ethos, an iconoclastic (or, in the new jargon, 'disruptive') attitude to existing political, technological, and economic structures, and a presumption about universal access to the tools for self-amplifications – all rooted in the counterculture of the 1960s – the ideology of technological utopianism tinged with libertarianism and human potential spirituality feels different when it emanates from what is now Silicon Valley's multibillion dollar corporations, and alongside an ever-expanding line of products that each offers a tiny share of participation in the augmentation race. As companies are expected to roll out technologies like self-driving cars and AIs

⁴⁶ See his entry on the Gurdjieff Club website: Anon: Alan Francis.

⁴⁷ Overview of speakers with video presentations available at *Global Future 2045* website.

that will displace large portions of the human workforce across a broad swath of professions, we should expect the ideology of 'smart,' 'disruption,' 'augmentation,' and the 'post-' or 'transhuman' to amplify in order to legitimize the dramatic social and political shifts that may result. In this cultural climate, tech-savvy gurus who are able to tap into the symbolic capital of Silicon Valley may thrive.

The second reason why we may expect the trend to continue has to do with the notion of the singularity, and with what Michael Barkun has termed 'improvisational millennialism.'⁴⁸ With the singularity now often fixed at the date 2045, singularitarian transhumanism can supply a new eschatological scenario for post-2012 esoteric millennialists. The 2012 phenomenon connected the psychedelic prophesies of Terence McKenna with Maya calendar speculations, UFO-logy, conspiracy theory, and much besides. Now that Itskov's movement is targeting the 2045 singularity directly at Western spiritual communities, we should not be surprised to see this date sail up as a candidate for the final 'transformation of consciousness'. This time it would not be meditation or psychoactive substances alone that would expand our minds and transform the world, but rather the infusion of nanobots in our brains. The rest, as usual, would be the end of history.

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⁴⁸ Barkun: *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 18-24.

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