Plac'd on this Isthmus of a Middle State: Reflections on Psalm 8 and Human Becoming[1]

STEVEN J. KRAFTCHICK

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

—Psalm 8:3–4

In our constant search for meaning in this baffling and temporary existence, trapped as we are within our three pounds of neurons, it is sometimes hard to tell what is real.

—Alan Lightman, Preface to *The Accidental Universe*[2]

OF LOCATION AND PURPOSE

The psalmist's question, echoed in the sentiments of theoretical physicist and novelist Alan Lightman, assumes a time-bound form but expresses a perennial

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[1]The title of this essay is drawn from the first stanza of Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man: Epistle II*, I.3 (1732–1734), which can be found at http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174166 (accessed January 21, 2015).

[2]Alan Lightman, *The Accidental Universe: The World You Thought You Knew* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013) x.

What does it mean now to be human? Pondering this question cannot occur only in the halls and vestibules of churches and classrooms of seminaries. It must also take place through conversations with those inside and outside the walls of communities of belief. To the extent that trans- and posthumanists are asking questions about the human being and its role in constructing and caring for the world, we should join them.

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desire. The psalmist, gazing at the celestial vault, is awed by its vastness and simultaneously aware of the human's insignificance,[3] declared by the sky's silence. The sheer expansiveness of space forces a question about human existence and purpose. Compared to the thousands of bodies of light, what possible significance can my singular, frail, and minute existence make? Face to face with this scalar discrepancy, the psalmist's "I" exemplifies all the people who have looked at a star-filled sky and wondered about their own place in the universe. The psalmist's question is thus existential, focused on the place and purpose of the human being in a universe that would appear to function just as well if humans were not in it.

Much has changed since the psalmist first wrote this hymn. We no longer perceive the heavens in the same way or by the same means. With the advent of radio and infrared telescopes we look beyond the visible stars to unseen galaxies light-years distant from our own. The vault that inspired the psalmist is now only the closest of thousands upon thousands of vaults that enclose our solar system. Not only do we see more than the psalmist, but we also see differently, and therefore feel all the more our insignificance.

> *Should we speak of ourselves as "made of stardust" rather than made in the image of God? Should we view ourselves as electrochemical processes, means of genetic information transfer, embodied souls, or inspirited bodies?*

The psalmist's question is made more acute, if not more complex, by the march of human history and scientific discovery. Science has made our world infinitely larger and infinitely smaller at the same time. If the geocentric frame of the psalmist has given way to the heliocentric viewpoint of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, that too has given way to a modern astrophysics that depicts these inertial frames of reference as no more than human heuristic devices. Our location in the universe has been decentered, with dramatic effect on our sense of purpose and meaning.

The cosmology of science has relativized the psalmist's "above" and thrust us into an existential vertigo. More than this, our vistas have shifted as well: we look outward in ways the psalmist could not have envisioned, but such innovations as magnetic resonance imaging, endoscopes, and optic fibers also allow us to look inward in ways equally foreign to ancient perspectives. The interior spaces of the human body join the galaxies to raise new questions about the human. Even more disorienting are the digital revolutions in communication that create virtual spaces and virtual persons. These collapse our comprehensions of time and presence, changing our standard conceptions of "here," "there," "in," and "out" and further complicating our sense of location.

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[3]The Hebrew word *'enosh* is often used to refer to something frail or lacking in power or importance (Pss 9:20; 90:3; 103:14). See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 182.

These spatial and temporal reorientations do not eliminate but rather intensify the psalmist's question. Should we speak of ourselves as "made of stardust" rather than made in the image of God? Should we view ourselves as electrochemical processes, means of genetic information transfer, embodied souls, or inspirited bodies? Or perhaps some other means of description is better suited to reveal who we are and what we are here for. Both the ancient psalmist and the modern physicist are posing similar questions: Toward what end have we come into being? If the scientist who views the galaxies by means of the Very Long Baseline Array differs from the hymnist who viewed the stars from the Southern Levant, the difference is one of magnitude and scope, not of existential dilemma. We know much more about the universe than the psalmist, but our knowledge makes our questions and our answers all the more pressing.

This shift in modes of sight, measurement, and place extends beyond the scientific community. Most of us feel this decentering experience, especially if we know even a little about the advances in modern technology that stand behind such fields as computational studies, neuro-pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, nano-robotics, and artificial intelligence.

In the daily news—which washes over us minute by minute, carried especially by the tides of Internet connections—we hear of "nine real technologies that will soon be inside you" that include implantable smartphones, cyber pills that will communicate with our physicians from within our bodies, deep brain implants made from chips smaller than a baby aspirin, and prosthetic means for enhancing sight, speech, and hearing.[4] Such forms of technological advance are no longer only the stuff of science fiction narratives or the prognostications of futurists; they are already in use, and somewhere, someone in some remote laboratory is developing even more of them.

For most of the previous century the term "technology" referred to tools that we see and use, tools external to our bodies. But the products of new technologies that we use but also wear, ingest, or enmesh in our bodies make it clear that external and observable tools are only a small part of technology. Consequently we have to adjust our ideas about technology to include new relationships of human inventions to human bodies. To envision this new technology is to revise our conceptions of both individual and social human identity.

THE HUMAN/TECHNO-HUMAN

The first volume of *Word & World* appeared in 1981, introduced with an editorial by James H. Burtness that described the background of the periodical and determined its title. Burtness focused on the conjunction between the two nouns—the "and"—noting that it signals "an insistence on some kind of connection between 'Word' and 'World.'" He observed further that the word can never

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[4]See the article by Mike Edelhart at, for example, https://au.news.yahoo.com/technology/a/25293925/nine-real-technologies-that- will-soon-be-inside-you/ (accessed February 5, 2015).

"be engaged by an escape from the world, but only through an immersion in it." And if we are members of faith communities, we must investigate "the world, society, government, technology, science, morality, everything that is worldly…with an ear for the Word which creates and sustains and redeems it."[5]

Just two years later, in January of 1983, *Time* magazine announced that its 1982 "person of the year" was a machine: the personal computer.[6] The announcement signaled that computers were changing every facet of our lives and modes of conduct, underscoring the profundity of this journal's recognition of the dialectic between "Word" and "World." And what was true for *Word & World* and *Time* thirty plus years ago remains true. Technological advances are recasting our sense of "world" and therefore requiring even more an "ear for the Word." Even now "cyber-humans" have moved from the pages of science fiction onto the emerging horizon of our lives. Thirty years ago, *Time* celebrated the personal computer. It is not hard to imagine that in the next thirty years its editors will announce the first "Person of the Year" who is 51% robotic.

The rate of technological change and advance that crosses both scientific and humanistic disciplines has prompted engineers, scientists, philosophers, anthropologists, and some theologians to posit that we are at a crux in our history as humans. We can foresee a moment when our technological innovations will be not simply external to us but also part of us—embedded within our brains and our bodies. Machines are becoming smaller, more powerful, and less costly. When we shift from silicon-based chips to carbon-based materials, we might ingest these "tools" as easily as taking an aspirin or a spoonful of cough syrup. We will become techno-human beings.

This will challenge not only theologians, philosophers, and ethicists, but also every other human being, whether they be people of faith or not. The historical cusp to which these observers point is a crux in history, not only because we experience this change but also because the sheer speed and scale at which it is happening has made it almost impossible to evaluate. As Bernard Stiegler has remarked,

> Today, we need to understand the process of technical evolution given that we are experiencing the deep opacity of contemporary technics; we do not immediately understand what is being played out in technics, nor what is being profoundly transformed therein, even though we unceasingly have to make *decisions* regarding technics, the consequences of which are felt to escape us more and more. And in day-to-day technical reality, we cannot spontaneously distinguish the long-term processes of transformation from spectacular but fleeting technical innovations.[7]

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[5]James H.Burtness, "The Word for the World," *Word &World* 1/1 (Winter 1981) 4.

[6]Neil Badmington's remarks on how *Time*'s readers responded to this choice foreshadow the responses to the technological changes we are currently experiencing. Neil Badmington, "Theorizing Posthumanism," *Culture Critique* 53 (Winter 2003) 12–13.

[7]Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, vol. 1, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) 21.

The typical definition of technology as "the sum total of 'rational' and 'efficacious' ways of enhancing 'control over nature' (alternatives: 'command over nature,' 'domination over nature,' etc.); e.g., technology is any tool or technique, any physical equipment of doing or making, by which human capability is expanded,"[8] no longer aligns itself with our lived experience. In fact, it adds to the deep opacity because implicit in this definition are two antithetical conceptions of technology, neither of which captures its full importance. The first, "technological somnambulism," leaves us unaware of technology's effects on us because we think of it as the mere construction and use of tools to effect change in something outside of us. In contrast, the second, "technological determinism," prompts us to consider technology "as a powerful and autonomous agent that dictates the patterns of human social and cultural life," causing us to believe that it has complete power over us.[9] The net effect of either conception disconnects us from the roles that technology plays on the stages where we enact our lives. To appreciate our actual relationship to technology we must expand our definitions beyond the pragmatic axis, to an interpretive axis of symbolic and social function.[10]

> *Our human identity is undergoing a transformation. We are entering into a period when the question of what made us distinct from other animals will be joined with the question of what makes us distinct from robotic persons.*

Our relationship to technology is neither negligible nor predetermined but requires negotiation because technology affects and is affected by, interprets and is interpreted by, our relationships, our bodies, our fellow humans, and our biological and zoological environments. This means that technology mediates our "sensory relationship with reality, transforming what we perceive."[11] That is, technologies have "intentions" that amplify or reduce our perception of reality's phenomena and therefore affect our relationship to them. In other words, technologies "help to shape what counts as 'real.'"[12] "This hermeneutic role of things has important ethical consequences, since it implies that technologies can actively contribute to the moral decisions human beings make."[13]

This means that our human identity is undergoing a transformation. We are,

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[8]Bryan Pfaffenberger, "Fetishised Objects and Humanised Nature: Towards an Anthropology of Technology," *Man,* n.s*., 23/2 (June 1988) 237.*

[9]Ibid., 238.

[10]Marcia-Anne Dobres, "Meaning in the Making: Agency and the Social Embodiment of Technology and Art," in *Anthropological Perspectives on Technology*, ed. Michael Brian Schiffer (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001) 49.

[11]Peter-Paul Verbeek, *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 9.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

in effect, entering into a period when the question of what made us distinct from other animals will be joined with the question of what makes us distinct from robotic persons. Elaine Graham notes that these expanded capabilities, and especially their intersection, "have complicated what it means to be human in a number of ways," including the technologization of nature, of human bodies and minds; the blurring of species boundaries; the creation of new personal and social worlds, tools, bodies, and environments.[14]

NECESSARY PRESENT CONVERSATIONS

To understand what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what the consequences of those actions might be will require dialogue among theologians, philosophers, futurists, ethicists, and engineers who are asking how technology will redefine our sense of ourselves. To be sure, the conversations are complex, but they have already begun, primarily among novelists, sociologists, ethicists, and philosophers who are debating how to understand this moment of "posthumanism."[15]

Posthumanists hold that "within certain limits that require investigation, it is desirable to use emerging technologies to enhance human physical and cognitive capacities and to make other beneficial alterations to human traits."[16] It is in discussions about these limits and in rehearsing the questions of what is beneficial (and for whom) that religious thinking can make an important contribution.

Posthumanism is based on the growing recognition that emerging technologies are transforming our psychic-somatic selves, suggesting that we are undergoing a "techno-genesis" as we move into a phase of human existence radically different from any we have previously known. As a result, our relationship to our bodies, our environment, and other persons will change dramatically.

As a philosophy, "posthumanism marks a careful, ongoing, overdue rethinking of the dominant humanist (or anthropocentric) account of who 'we' are as human beings." This standpoint suggests that "'we' are not who 'we' once believed ourselves to be. And neither are 'our' others."[17] This standpoint entails "a recogni-

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[14]Elaine Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002) 2–6.

[15]Ibid., 11. I use the term "posthumanism "rather than repeat the more awkward "trans-posthumanism." I realize that I am merging two terms better kept separate; however, my intent is to point to the transitional moment itself. That we are undergoing some form of transformation as human beings seems apparent. Whether this is a form of transhumanism or posthumanism one cannot yet tell. The important point is the one Graham makes, that we must "interrogate more deeply the values and interests that underpin any representation of the 'posthuman condition.' What is at stake, supremely, in the debate about the implications of digital, genetic, cybernetic, and biomedical technologies is precisely what (and who) will define authoritative notions of normative, exemplary, desirable humanity into the twenty-first century" (Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*, 11). See further, Jeanine Thweatt-Bates, *Cyborg Selves: A Theological Anthropology of the Posthuman* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), and Nancy K. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[16]Russell Blackford, "Trite Truths about Technology: A Reply to Ted Peters," in *H+/-: Transhumanism and Its Critics* (Philadelphia: Meatnexus Institute, 2011) 176–177.

[17]Neil Badmington, "Posthumanism," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini (New York: Routledge, 2011) 374.

tion that 'Man' is not the privileged and protected center, because human beings are no longer—and perhaps never were—utterly distinct from animals, machines, and other forms of the 'inhuman.'"[18] And with this, posthumanism philosophy reflects a set of embodied practices we call the human condition. The "post" in posthumanism then refers to a *form* of human existence different from what we have known and a *mode* of understanding that challenges the humanism that instigated those practices and defined the condition.

> *About these questions, both Christians and posthumanists can converse. And the conversation needs to be more subtle than the exchange of slogans like "technophilic" or "technophobic."*

It would be easy to caricature the excesses of some posthumanists, but for three reasons we should be cautious about doing so.

First, many forms of Christian belief are as subject to caricature as extreme versions of posthumanism; both are diverse, riven by disagreement, and subject to hyperbolic exaggeration.[19]

Second, as Badmington notes,

> the sheer range of academic disciplines in which posthuman concerns have been addressed—literary studies, cultural studies, philosophy, film studies, theology, geography, animal studies…education, gender studies, and psycho-analysis, for example—testifies to the ways in which posthumanism cuts across conventional disciplinary boundaries. Posthumanism belongs nowhere in particular in the modern university, in that it has no fixed abode, but its presence is everywhere felt.[20]

What is true for the microcosm of the university is equally true for the rest of society. Posthumanism ripples across our lives whenever we eat, medicate ourselves, communicate with each other, and build our dwellings.

Third, posthumanists should not be seen as radical elitists with no interest but self-service or perpetuation. Many, such as Nick Bostrom, understand post-humanism as an ethical movement dedicated to reducing human suffering.[21]

One can well imagine real disagreements between Christian theologians and posthumanist philosophers over the questions of human agency, the purpose of human existence, and the relationship of the self to the body. Such disagreements have already emerged, for example, in the writing of Brent Waters.[22] Still, theolo-

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[18]Ibid.

[19]Harold W. Baillie and Timothy K. Casey provide a representative collection of essays that debate the different implications of posthumanism for ethics, genetics, and social practices. See their *Is Human Nature Obsolete? Genetics, Bioengineering, and the Future of the Human Condition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

[20]Badmington, "Posthumanism," 375.

[21]Nick Bostrom, "Transhumanist Values," in *Ethical Issues for the 21st Century*, ed. Frederick Adams (Charlottesville, VA: Philosophical Documentation Center Press, 2003) 3–14.

[22]Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World*

gians and posthumanists can benefit from jointly asking about the interaction of technology with our bodies, the imminence of change in those bodies, and the substance of embodiment. About these questions—and others—both Christians and posthumanists can converse. And the conversation needs to be more subtle than the exchange of slogans like "technophilic" or "technophobic."[23]

This is especially so because our collective experience of rapid change, along with its opacity, occur simultaneously with the need to make decisions about the pressure of technology on our everyday lives. Both Christians and posthumanists can profit from such a conversation. All of us wonder who and what the human being will be. Can a Christian-trans/posthumanist conversation be of any help? The answer to that question may well be no, but if it is, why the no? And if yes, what will be required for the conversation to move forward? Our answers will help determine our understandings of what technology is, how it should be part of our lives and decisions, what our limits as agents for those changes entail, and ultimately what we as embodied persons will become.

THE (TECHNO-)HUMAN BEFORE GOD

In this light, we return to Ps 8. Again, the psalmist's questioning "I" was an exemplary "I." But in another sense, that "I" was not exemplary. The psalmist does not ask about the human *qua* human, nor simply about its relation to the universe, but about the human relationship to and before God. The psalmist directs the question neither to a silent universe nor to the potential of human ingenuity but to a personal God. The psalm opens and closes with acclamations of the glory of Yahweh, "our LORD," and it addresses Yahweh in the second person, underscoring the personal relationship between God and human beings as well as the rest of the creation.

The psalmist's question is prompted by his view of the heavens, but the moon and stars alone do not inspire his awe. It is the majesty and purposefulness of God that prompt the psalmist's question. As awe inspiring as the celestial array is, it pales in comparison to the one who created, designed, and possesses it. As glorious as they may be, the heavens are God's possession, and the glory of God is above them. The heavens are the work of God's fingers, placed where they are by God's design. The human being is also made by God and appointed to its place in the created order. But more stunning than the spectacle of the night sky is God's mindfulness of the infinitesimal human beings who dwell on the small planet below it. It is this reality that overwhelms the psalmist, as the use of *mah* (what) to introduce the phrase emphasizes. The God who created the heavens, whose glory is above and

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(Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006). For another form of engagement, see the essay by Stephen Garner, "The Hopeful Cyborg," in *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, ed. Ronald Cole-Turner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press) 87–100.

[23]See Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human*, 6–11, for a helpful gradient mapping of the possible evaluations from "disenchantment" to "reenchantment" of the human condition.

beyond them, is the God who thinks of the human being and who cares for it. This is the psalmist's confession.

Theological conviction informs—and transforms—the existential question. In verses 5–8, the psalmist answers his question by confessing: "Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas" (Ps 8:5–8).

The answer is given in terms of the human's location in the world, only a little less than the *elohim* (the gods of the heavenly court) and above the other earthly living beings, but also in terms of the human's function. God, in caring for the human being, charges it with caring for the creation. The psalmist's answer to the question thus combines location and purpose. Through the use of spatial metaphor the psalmist connects the place of the human beings to their responsibilities, both to God and for the rest of God's creation. As a result, the question of human meaning and place becomes a question about God.

> *Human beings are God's representatives in the world, commissioned to care for it in a manner that reflects God's own character and sovereignty. The charge is not one of exploitation but of representation—the re-presentation of God's ordering and harmony.*

In short, the psalmist claims that the answer to the question "What is the human being?" is relational, whether with regard to a personal God, or to other human beings, or to other nonhuman creatures. The language and motifs in the psalm suggest as much since they direct us to Gen 1:26–28 and the creation of the human being by God.

The Genesis author and the psalmist, in echoing this tradition of creation, locate the human being not in terms of its essence but by its role and purpose in creation. The human is created in the "image of God" and therefore given "dominion" over the created order. Human beings are God's representatives in the world, commissioned to care for it in a manner that reflects God's own character and sovereignty. The charge is not one of exploitation but of representation—the re-presentation of God's ordering and harmony. The creation is "husbanded" by the human being. Thus the created world is enriched and sustained by its presence.[24] Neither the Genesis author nor the psalmist has solved the question of the human being in the world: they have modulated it into another key. The human is located in the creation, but as part of creation it is expected to assist the creation in reflect-

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[24]A history of the interpretation of "dominion" is provided by Richard Bauckham in "Dominion Interpreted—A Historical Account," in *Living With Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011) 14–61.

ing God's glory and dominion. How this is to be done neither text reveals. That the human is distinct from other animals Genesis makes clear, but the essence of this remains unclear. Answering the psalmist's question by asserting, "The human is the *imago Dei*," only underscores the need for hermeneutical reflection.

The evocative nature of the term "image of God" and its relative infrequency (it appears only in Gen 1:26–28; 5:1; and 9:5–7) have provided interpreters a blank canvas on which to portray theological conceptions of the human being, which revolve around one central question: "How are we like God and unlike other created beings?" That question requires multiple answers, that continually change because both God and human beings are dynamic, and the world that God creates and in which they dwell is ever evolving. This is the reason for Paul Ricoeur's remark: "When the theologians of the sacerdotal [that is, priestly] school elaborated the doctrine of man that is summarized in the startling expression of the first chapter of Genesis—'Let us make man in our image and likeness'—they certainly did not master at once all its implicit wealth of meaning."[25]

A SHAPE FOR FUTURE CONVERSATIONS

As the long and fascinatingly complex history of the phrase "in the image of God" shows, this confession only sharpens the question of what the human being is.[26] When we recognize its open-endedness, we have to recast our ideas of ourselves and our environment, including those we have deemed "not human."[27] Without this fluidity in meaning we are tempted to accentuate the rationality of the human being rather than to see the human being as an embodied relational being, responsible for its environment's care. Feminist and other critics have properly forced such reconsiderations of the *imago*, opening new avenues for consideration.

As we have noted, current (and future) developments in the fields of nanotechnology, pharmacology, informatics, and genetics are making that aspect of "the human self" even more acutely a part of the discussion. As we continue to blend and blur the lines between our organic bodies and the technologies that enhance them we are entering into a "post/transhuman" stage of our individual and collective existence. This shift in our culture will affect our understandings of our corporate and individual selves; our notions of community, gender, embodiment; our ecological environment; and the future of the human being.

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[25]Paul Ricoeur, "The Image of God and the Epic of Man," in *History and Truth* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965) 110.

[26]Interpreters as varied as Irenaeus, Augustine, Maimonides, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Brunner, and Trible have offered interpretations of the term and human nature. For an overview of these interpretations, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005); D. Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953); and A. Jónsson Gunnlaugar, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26–28 in a Century of Old Testament Research* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988).

[27]See the history of "defining the human" by Joanna Bourke, *What It Means to Be Human: Historical Reflections from the 1800s to the Present* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2011).

Just as past interpretations of the *imago Dei* reflected and responded to cultural and societal shifts, so our current interpretations should and will take these significant changes into account. One of our tasks must be to consider interpretations of the "image" and see how they relate us to our modern technologically constructed world. These considerations cannot occur only in the halls and vestibules of churches and classrooms of seminaries. They must also take place through conversations with those inside and outside the walls of communities of belief. To the extent that trans- and posthumanists are asking questions about the human being and its role in constructing and caring for the world, we should join them. To the extent that their answers are connected to the goals of enhancing individual and corporate health we should cooperate with them. When there is an appreciation of the power of hubris to derail us, we should promote it.

The conversations must be characterized by an attitude of *sic et non* (both yes and no). If we fail to find such an attitude, from either side of the conversation, we should stop and ask why. And then, with the psalmist, we should return to the question of what the human being is and might be on this isthmus of a middle state. ⊕

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