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## **Christian Hope and the Promise of Transhumanism: The Perspective of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI**

**Abstract:** Hope is a theological virtue, and a great human need as well. In the Christian sense, it is an expectation of the ultimate fulfillment of human desires in God. In turn, the promises brought to man by technological development, which leads to the stage of transhumanism, where man in his human condition will be modified and even replaced by a machine, are a certain form of fulfillment of human hopes. In consequence, due to interference with its nature, the human body will become stronger, healthier, less susceptible to the effects of time, and resistant to injuries. Moreover, an expanded set of senses will enable man to receive more fully the wealth of impressions from the environment in which he lives. However, the promise of transhumanism does not fall within Christian hope, nor does it constitute the implementation of its goals. Instead, it stems from the boundless belief in the progress of man who is completely enclosed in a horizontal perspective. Christianity, in contrast, perceives the fulfillment of human hopes through a personal relationship with the risen Christ.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church, transhumanism, posthumanism, hope, eternal life, transcendence, development

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### **Introduction**

**H**uman nature is full of tension and movement. Whereas for man, he is called to continuous development. Leaning toward the future, he strives to achieve his personal *optimum potentiae*.<sup>1</sup> This very personal dynamism is the source of progress in the area of culture, political and economic life, technology and all of civilization.

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 68; Łużyński, *Struktury pośrednie*, 36–39.

The efforts of humanity toward development and progress are accompanied by the Church and its social teaching. From this ethical and wise perspective let us try to look at the very current issue of transhumanism. It will be set in the context of Christian hope and the teaching of Joseph Ratzinger. The primary goal, put by the author of the article himself, is the answer to the following question: Do the promises of transhumanism enter into Christian hope and do they somehow implement it? Further issues will be addressed in the subsequent stages of the analysis: Christian hope, the promises of transhumanism, and the attempt to evaluate it ethically from the perspective of the teaching of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

### 1. Christian Hope

Apart from faith and love, hope is one of the three theological virtues. Moreover, it is one of the deepest needs of the human being. It can be interpreted in different ways. In purely temporal terms, one can hope for a successful course of affairs, solving problems, achieving the intended goals. Hope understood in this way can, to some extent, give meaning to life. Christianity offers man the hope that flows from the risen Christ. In essence, man needs both lesser and greater hopes. In this way he sets goals that give meaning to his existence. However, once they become achieved they do not seem to satisfy all human desires, whereas great hope rooted in God meets the needs of man. Therefore, lesser hopes associated with the realization of partial, temporal goals should be inscribed in the perspective of a greater hope of eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

Christian hope definitely has an eschatological character. Christians do not know precisely what the future will bring and what awaits them. Still, they are aware that their life has meaning because they are heading toward a clearly defined goal and their existence does not end in emptiness.<sup>3</sup> It is in Jesus that man discovers the meaning of his existence, the true significance of his own life

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 30–31; Gardocki, “Christian Hope as Seen,” 271.

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 2.

and death. Not only does He, as a philosopher, teach the art of being a righteous man, but above all, as a true shepherd, He himself passes through the dark valley of death and illuminates the mystery of the passage to eternity.<sup>4</sup> This is the true meaning of Christian hope, which leads beyond the threshold of death.<sup>5</sup>

Christian hope is combined with the experience of communion. The human is a being that lives in relationships. More importantly, participation in social life both enriches and develops him.<sup>6</sup> Man places his hope in someone with whom he is connected.<sup>7</sup> The author of the encyclical *Spe salvi* highlights that in Christianity, eternity resembles “the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality.”<sup>8</sup> Essentially, man finds his ultimate fulfillment in God, who is not only the God of philosophers – pure thinking. He is first and foremost a God of faith, somebody who lives and acts, who has a name, who can be addressed and spoken to.<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI emphasizes clearly: “It is not science that redeems man: man is redeemed by love.”<sup>10</sup> God is the totality of love. Those who experience it begin to understand what life is about. Its significance lies in a personal relationship with the One who is the source of life.<sup>11</sup> The Christian perception of immortality is linked to God and has a dialogical character. Truly, the Creator will not allow His creation to perish. God as a communion of the Three Persons is immortality. It is the relationship with Him that gives immortality.<sup>12</sup> J. Ratzinger points out that the real boundary between death and life does not actually run in biological death, but between

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Gacka, “The Relational Personalism,” 42; Szymczak, “Partycypacja społeczna,” 30–33.

<sup>7</sup> Marcel, *Homo viator*, 60, 96.

<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Stępień, “The God of the Philosophers,” 25–27.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 27; Proniewski, “Joseph Ratzinger’s Philosophical Theology,” 225.

<sup>12</sup> Ratzinger, “Eschatologia,” 157–158; Kluz, “Nadzieja w życiu i postawie moralnej,” 98.

being together with the One who is Life and the isolation that rejects being together.<sup>13</sup> Whoever remains in an invigorating dialogue with God – does not die. God’s love gives man eternity.<sup>14</sup> The eternal life in question begins already here and now, in communion with God.<sup>15</sup>

Christian hope is not only an expectation of a better world, of happiness implemented “here and now.” It does not proclaim a purely social or political message, nor promise to build the “Kingdom of God” on earth. J. Ratzinger stresses that hope for a definite progress in history and a definitively happy historical society does not belong anywhere in Christian expectations.<sup>16</sup> Mortal life will always be the “kingdom of man,” with all the consequences of that fact.<sup>17</sup> The promise of an earthly paradise will invariably remain an illusion.<sup>18</sup> Whereas temporality marked by sin will constantly stay imperfect, not entirely satisfactory, and not fully meet human expectations. As the Bavarian theologian emphasizes – even faith promises life in a world that will always be full of suffering.<sup>19</sup> In his opinion, this world will at all times be a world of anguish and hardship.<sup>20</sup> All human hopes will achieve their fulfillment only in eternity. Merely religious faith brings true hope to man. According to J. Ratzinger, all attempts to attain immortality are surely bound to fail. If man wants to take the place of God, J. Ratzinger continues, and wants to be like Him, then he will remain in Sheol, in an apparent existence, and stay out of real life – which only God Himself is. Thus, man is a creature and can only move within its boundaries. Admittedly, solely a loving relationship with the Creator can save him from death.<sup>21</sup> How, then, does Christian hope fit in with the technological progress, that today also affects man himself?

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<sup>13</sup> Ratzinger, “Eschatologia,” 196.

<sup>14</sup> Ratzinger, “Po drugiej stronie śmierci,” 361.

<sup>15</sup> Ratzinger, “Moim szczęściem jest być,” 434; Ratzinger, “Eschatologia,” 213.

<sup>16</sup> Ratzinger, “Przyszłość zbawienia,” 468.

<sup>17</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Ratzinger, “Przyszłość zbawienia,” 478.

<sup>19</sup> Ratzinger, “Przyszłość zbawienia,” 477.

<sup>20</sup> Ratzinger, “Przyszłość zbawienia,” 469.

<sup>21</sup> Ratzinger, “Eschatologia,” 156.

## 2. The Promise of Transhumanism

In the context of Christian hope, let us try to look at the promises made to man by transhumanism. It is understood as the technical improvement of man, his life extension, as well as an increase of his intellectual and physical capabilities.<sup>22</sup> Transhumanism consists in the biotechnological development that leads to overcoming the natural limitations of man.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, there is no moral controversy about the desire to treat people who have suffered accidents or to help those suffering from congenital diseases. For sure, such actions have the intention of saving and prolonging human life. While, on the other hand, the announcement of improving healthy people or even surpassing nature in order to optimize human capabilities, is questionable.<sup>24</sup> Technology has always influenced the lives of people and societies. Today, however, the impact is enormous. Nanotechnology, robotics, biotechnology, and neuroscience, they all lead to a completely new situation in which humans look for opportunities to modify their biological life. Consequently, the number of senses will increase, due to that people will be able to pick up a wider range of signals from their environment.<sup>25</sup> The human body will be more durable, healthier, easy to repair, resistant to various types of stress and the impact of biological factors. All in all, the transhuman will have great health, be stronger, more resistant to diseases and the passage of time. At this stage of development the fragility of the human being will be overcome.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, a strengthening of positive emotions such as satisfaction or love will be possible, just as the reduction of negative emotions like hatred or jealousy.<sup>27</sup> The development in

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<sup>22</sup> Bortkiewicz, "Religia i Bóg," 116.

<sup>23</sup> Mazur, "Will Posthumanism," 83; Nowosad, "Teologia i etyka a transhumanizm," 62; Krzemiński, "Will Cyborgs Ever," 2–3; Wielomski, *Yuval Noah Harari*, 167–174.

<sup>24</sup> Jackelén, "The image of God," 293; Orzeł, "The Transhumanist Point," 250.

<sup>25</sup> Szymański, "Transhumanizm," 163–165; Szmyd, *Wobec kryzysu świata i człowieka*, 193.

<sup>26</sup> Nowosad, "Teologia i etyka a transhumanizm," 64–65.

<sup>27</sup> Szymański, "Transhumanizm," 165.

this direction will bring about a postbiological, posthuman, or even anti-human stage in the life of man.<sup>28</sup>

Surely, even now the human mind cannot cope with the speed of computation that can be performed with the help of a computer.<sup>29</sup> In the future, the intellectual capacity of man will be increased. This will provide him with a greater ability to accumulate, analyze and memorize information.<sup>30</sup> Memory limitations, inaccuracy, and the slowness of calculation, so characteristic of the human condition, will be overcome. That way man will become a child of the “virtual Kingdom.”<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, the connection of the human brain to a chip would provide direct access to the knowledge contained in the volumes of the encyclopedia. The possibility of logging the vocabulary and grammar of many foreign languages into one’s brain would facilitate their rapid and effective uptake. Such promises are indeed hard to reject. This way we would reach a stage of development that can be called the posthuman. Life in such a world would no longer be biological, but technical. Whereas *homo sapiens* would have attained the stage of *techno sapiens*.<sup>32</sup>

The indicated process will lead to the end of a human-centered world and to the opening of a “posthuman” era. Incarnation into a living biological organism will be regarded more of an “accident” than a certain inevitability of life. The body will be treated as a prosthesis which in the event of a defect can easily be replaced with another. There will be no difference between corporeal existence and computer simulation, biological organism and cyber mechanism, goals set by humans and robot technology. In consequence, machines will not only expand the physical and mental capabilities of humans in the posthuman era, but in fact replace them. This will take place when they reach the “singularity” phase where they become independent through the possibility of autonomous learning. Once

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<sup>28</sup> Herce, “Is human enhancement possible,” 168–169.

<sup>29</sup> Geraci, “Apocalyptic AI,” 147–148.

<sup>30</sup> Szymański, “Transhumanizm,” 165.

<sup>31</sup> Geraci, “Apocalyptic AI,” 147–148, 154.

<sup>32</sup> Jackelén, “The image of God,” 293–295; Huzarek, “Funkcjonalistyczna teoria umysłu,” 37.

this stage of creativity is achieved, machines will usher the world into a technical and mechanical era.<sup>33</sup>

With immense and ever-increasing technical possibilities, man himself transcends the boundaries of humanity and creates a being that is his own creation. Furthermore, transhumanism leads to the complete plasticity of man, who is able to modify his features according to any expectations. It seeks to create a new human being free from the limitations of the human condition. At the same time, the abilities that are currently limited by the biological condition of humans will be realized.<sup>34</sup> How, then, can the enormous technological progress in the context of Christian hope, be assessed?

### 3. Authentic or Illusive Hope

Man does not develop entirely by himself. From the Christian perspective, this development is a vocation and has its source in the encounter with God. Without Him it will lose its proper direction.<sup>35</sup> Naturally, man desires truth, goodness and beauty, yet only in God can he find the ultimate truth, supreme good and excellent beauty.<sup>36</sup> Without this supernatural perspective human development is deprived of its fullness. Moreover, the personal fulfillment of man needs to be perceived in a theological perspective and in God as the supreme goal.<sup>37</sup> However, if this perspective is missing, the creations of human creativity may turn against man himself, and by that become a threat to him. Therefore, at the center of social reality there should be a God-oriented man. It is this relationship that enables reason in search of the right order of things, to find a direction corresponding to the dignity and supernatural vocation of man. In this perspective, let us also take a look at transhumanism and the promises it makes to man.

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<sup>33</sup> Osiński, *Transhumanizm. Redetarius contra Secutor*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Nowosad, "Teologia i etyka a transhumanizm," 62–63; Harari, *Homo deus*, 283; Harari, *21 lekcji na XXI wiek*, 109.

<sup>35</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Zdybicka, *Religia i religioznawstwo*, 31.

<sup>37</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 18.

Benedict XVI warns against the absolutizing of technological development. Deprived of ethical criteria, it loses its orientation and becomes ambiguous. A purely technical man, devoid of ethical references, will not be able to use freedom responsibly nor handle the tools at his disposal properly.<sup>38</sup> The pope points to the theological dimension of development and states that it is, first and foremost, a vocation that God assigns to man. Only in this perspective is man able to find the purpose and meaning of his existence.<sup>39</sup> Then again, a man with a purely technical mentality is convinced of his own self-sufficiency, that he is the independent and sole creator of his own life. He does not consider the fact that the grammar of the Creator is inscribed into the structure of creation and man himself.<sup>40</sup> Benedict XVI prophetically proclaims that “we are a gift, not something self-generated. [...] Not only are other persons outside our control, but each one of us is outside his or her own control.”<sup>41</sup> He also warns against the temptation of human self-sufficiency and the rejection of the Creator’s plan for man.

The promise posthumanism offers to man is some form of self-salvation through technology. Man takes his future into his own hands and creates it himself. The consequence of this is that man gives in to the temptation of having complete autonomy from God, truth and nature. At the same time, he deprives himself of the ethical criteria that enables him to manage the enormous technical capabilities placed at his disposal, in a responsible way. This promise is also being reduced to a continual prolongation of man’s temporal life. Christianity, on the other hand, sees his fulfillment in God and the eternal life that He offers to man. While transhumanism proposes salvation, achieved due to man and only in temporal life.

Transhumanism and, consequently, posthumanism elevates man to the rank of the Absolute.<sup>42</sup> It is, in a sense, the fulfillment of religious apocalypticism and replacement of its promises. It should,

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<sup>38</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 12, 14, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 6–17.

<sup>40</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 34, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 68, 70.

<sup>42</sup> Tamatea, “If robots R-US, who am I,” 148.



however, be emphasized that we are here talking about a technological utopia. Nevertheless, the promise of transhumanism based on any modification of human nature seems to be something very distant. Still, “salvation” through technology should in fact be perceived as a deceptive promise of “paradise on earth.”<sup>43</sup> Christian salvation is realized in communion with the Person of Christ. As J. Ratzinger emphasizes, paradise opens up in Jesus. It is dependent on His Person. Christ himself is the paradise, the Light, the fresh Water and the safe Peace to which the expectations and hopes of people are directed.<sup>44</sup> The hope of eternal life can only be a gift of the risen Christ. In Him man acquires a certain foundation of existence, a direction toward which he is heading. Man cannot be saved by technology. Only Love, which was finally authenticated on the Cross, has the power to accomplish this. Christian hope is not heading toward something, but is directed at Christ.<sup>45</sup> J. Ratzinger stresses that man is not locked in his finitude in an immeasurable way. Surely he must first learn to accept his finitude, and then acknowledge that he is not self-sufficient nor autonomous. He needs to give up the lie of irrelevance and freedom.<sup>46</sup> Authentic hope can flow only from a relationship with Christ, who is the source of life. In Him man opens up to the hope of a life that never ends. In this spirit, one can understand the papal statement that man is not saved by technology, but by love alone.

## Conclusion

Christian hope has an eschatological character. It is the promise of eternal life, which begins in a living relationship with Christ, who is the source of all life. Technical development does also offer a promise to the human being of a more perfect life. Due to this, man, as a result of interference with his nature, would have a body that is stronger, healthier, less susceptible to the effects

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<sup>43</sup> Green, “Transhumanism and Roman Catholicism,” 196–197.

<sup>44</sup> Ratzinger, “Eschatologia,” 131.

<sup>45</sup> Koch, *Das Geheimnis des Senfkorns*, 277; Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 26.

<sup>46</sup> Ratzinger, “Wolność i wyzwolenie,” 543.

of time and resistant to injuries. In other words, he could live a longer and more comfortable life. Furthermore, his intellectual abilities would be enhanced, and by integrating with technology, he would be able to accumulate and process information more quickly and more efficiently. In addition, an extended set of senses would make it possible to more fully perceive the wealth of impressions from the environment in which a person lives. Accordingly, the moment of transition to the posthumanist stage would be the achievement of the singularity phase by machines, or the possibility of transposing the human mind into a machine and beginning a new postbiological stage in the life of man. However, these are promises whose implementation is still very distant in time, if not completely utopian. The promise of transhumanism, and even more posthumanism, does not belong to Christian hope and does not constitute the realization of its goals. It stems from the boundless belief in the progress of man who is completely enclosed in a horizontal perspective. Christianity, on the other hand, sees the fulfillment of human hopes in a personal relationship with the risen Christ.

### **Chrześcijańska nadzieja a obietnica transhumanizmu. Perspektywa Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI**

**Abstrakt:** Nadzieja jest cnotą teologiczną, jak również wielką potrzebą człowieka. W znaczeniu chrześcijańskim jest ona oczekiwaniem ostatecznego spełnienia ludzkich pragnień w Bogu. Pewną formą wypełnienia ludzkich nadziei są obietnice, jakie niesie człowiekowi rozwój techniczny prowadzący do etapu transhumanizmu, na którym człowiek w swojej ludzkiej kondycji zostanie zmodyfikowany, a nawet zastąpiony przez maszynę. Na skutek ingerencji w jego naturę ludzkie ciało będzie silniejsze, zdrowsze, mniej podatne na działanie czasu i odporne na urazy. Poszerzony zestaw zmysłów pozwoli pełniej odbierać bogactwo wrażeń ze środowiska, w którym człowiek żyje. Jednak obietnica transhumanizmu nie mieści się w nadziei chrześcijańskiej i nie stanowi realizacji jej celów. Wypływa bowiem z bezgranicznej wiary w postępek człowieka, zamkniętego zupełnie w perspektywie horyzontalnej. Natomiast chrześcijaństwo upatruje spełnienie ludzkich nadziei w osobowej relacji z Chrystusem zmartwychwstałym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kościół katolicki, transhumanizm, posthumanizm, nadzieja, życie wieczne, transcendencja, rozwój

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