

The Transhumanist Concept of Self-Optimization in Religious-Pedagogical Reflection

Transhumanistyczna koncepcja samoopptymalizacji w refleksji religijno-pedagogicznej

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Abstract: The contemporary culture is explicitly permeated with ideas of Transhumanism. Based on principles such as technologizing and self-optimization, Transhumanism promotes the idea of constantly pushing the boundaries of immediate physical and psychological human existence. Self-optimization is about improving physical and cognitive as well as emotional and social performance. In this article, we want to explore the question of how reflection on religious education takes up the transhumanist concept of self-optimization, concretised in the theme of corporeality and artificial intelligence, and to what extent it can be addressed in Catholic religious education in Slovak schools. We will first focus on the basics of Transhumanism and then we will examine the topic of human nature and corporeality from a transhumanist perspective and try to implement it didactically in religious education.

Keywords: transhumanism, self-optimization, religious education

Abstrakt: Współczesna kultura jest wyraźnie przesiąknięta ideami transhumanizmu. Opierając się na zasadach takich jak technologizacja i samoopptymalizacja, transhumanizm promuje ideę ciągłego przesuwania granic bezpośredniego fizycznego i psychologicznego istnienia człowieka. Samoopptymalizacja polega na poprawieniu sprawności fizycznej i poznawczej, a także emocjonalnej i społecznej. W niniejszym artykule podjęto próbę przebadania kwestii, w jaki sposób refleksja nad edukacją religijną podejmuje transhumanistyczną koncepcję samoopptymalizacji, skonkretyzowaną w temacie cielesności i sztucznej inteligencji, oraz w jakim stopniu może być ona poruszana w katolickiej edukacji religijnej w słowackich szkołach. Refleksja najpierw obejmie podstawy transhumanizmu, a następnie temat natury ludzkiej i cielesności z perspektywy transhumanistycznej oraz próbę wdrożenia go za pomocą dydaktyki w edukacji religijnej.

Keywords: transhumanizm, samoopptymalizacja, edukacja religijna



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INTRODUCTION

The contemporary culture, especially in the form of films and TV series, is implicitly but also explicitly permeated with ideas of Transhumanism, such as Cyberization and Mind Uploading. Based on principles of, among others, technologizing and self-optimization, Transhumanism promotes the idea of constantly pushing the boundaries of immediate physical and psychological human existence. Self-optimization is no longer just about improving one's beauty or health, but also about improving physical and cognitive as well as emotional and social performance. This so-called Human Enhancement is a comprehensive and multi-layered topic, where the original human desire for growth, progress and improvement of living conditions meets new technological possibilities, historically unprecedented developments in science and the enormous advances in biomedicine and biotechnology (Payne et al. 2015, 13).

In this context, we would like to explore the question of how reflection on religious education takes up the transhumanist concept of self-optimisation, concretised in the theme of corporeality and artificial intelligence, and to what extent it can be addressed in Catholic religious education in Slovak schools. In this article, we will first focus on defining the foundations of Transhumanism in more concrete terms. Then we will examine the topic of human nature and corporeality from a transhumanist perspective and try to implement it didactically in religious education.

1. TRANSHUMANISM AND ITS THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Since the 1970s, Transhumanism has developed as a complex technical-scientific, philosophical, socio-economic, political and cultural movement. According to R. Sarka, it is a philosophical vision of the future that deals, among other things, with the idea of changing the human body through the use of modern technology. The goal is the integration of the artificial and the organic. The vision is of a robotic and homobotic human being. According to the supporters of Transhumanism, advanced technologies will make it possible to eliminate ageing and to expand human intelligence as well as people's physical and mental capabilities. Transhumanism is said to represent a transitional phase to the so-called posthuman age. Representatives of Posthumanism as a futuristic philosophical-scientific-technological complex currently assume that one day there will be beings on earth whose basic abilities are so radically superior to those of humans that they cannot be considered clearly human by common standards, which is why they already assign them the label of posthuman (Sarka 2009, 190).

According to a post- and transhumanist philosopher, S. L. Sorgner (2016, 71), contemporary technological Transhumanism is a trend that advocates the achievements and use of modern sciences and technologies to alter human nature

and human existence. The appropriate use of techniques expands the boundaries of human existence and results in the emergence of a posthuman being.

The transhuman is thus to be understood as a transitional form of the human being between human and the final posthuman, whose abilities, enhanced by technology, go beyond those of the previous human. In the context of modern technological Transhumanism, the transhuman still belongs to the human species and, according to S. L. Sorgner, has the potential to initiate an evolutionary step towards a new species (2016, 127). However, there is no consensus among authors as to whether the so-called posthuman should still be considered as a human. In this case, Sorgner states that a cyborg as a transhuman would be the most promising way to enable the emergence of a posthuman (2016, 72). According to N. Bostrom's argumentation, the posthuman still has a human nature in the biological sense, but he has at least developed an ability that distinguishes him from humans and transhumans: "By a posthuman ability, I mean a general central capacity greatly exceeding the maximum attainable by any current human being without recourse to new technological means" (2009, 108).

According to R. Heil, the theory of evolution is a fundamental transhumanist pillar, because transhumanists assume that everything that exists will evolve in some form (2018, 54-55). Transhumanists interpret the theory of evolution in the sense that humans in their present existence, which is an early stage of evolution and by no means an end point, would lose the ability to adapt to the material world that surrounds them, or even be displaced from it by other forms of existence. Precisely because this world is changing through technologizing and natural influences, man must adapt and optimize, intervene in an otherwise blind evolution and give it direction, otherwise he runs the risk of being displaced or extinct.

In its understanding of the human being, Transhumanism follows naturalistic and materialistic views, which are, however, paradoxically subsumed under the dualism of body and mind through cryopreservation. Contemporary Transhumanism is philosophically close to utilitarianism in its advocacy of human enhancement technologies, as it follows the hedonistic principle of avoiding pain and prolonging a happy and healthy life. The potential of the human being is far from exhausted, so that the human being in its entirety could be improved biotechnologically.

Transhumanism is thus based on the conviction that humanity is being radically transformed by scientific and technological means. The aim of transhumanist efforts is to accelerate this process. As far as the individual is concerned, Transhumanism is primarily about self-improvement by any means. The great goal of Transhumanism is the prolongation of life until death is completely overcome. For this reason, C. Coenen points out that as far as the species *Homo sapiens* and its future are concerned, the often-stated goal of transhumanism is the creation of an extraterrestrial civilization based on the fusion of humans and technology (2009, 268).

There are several theological issues in Transhumanism that have significant implications for other disciplines, as well as for religious education. For theological reflection, therefore, the question arises as to which transhumanist ideas are relevant for theological discourse, because according to R. Cole-Turner, there are not only differences but, at least superficially, remarkable similarities between Christianity and Transhumanism (2011, 193). For example, Transhumanism seeks to overcome the mortality and inadequacy of human existence in its own human way and by means of cybernetics and biotechnology, independently of God's activity.

There are similarities specially in the areas of soteriology and eschatology, which are closely linked to the ideas of self-perfection. The transhumanist promises of optimisation and self-transcendence are manifold; it is questionable when and if they can ever be realized. Ethically, transhumanists advocate reducing existential risks and preserving life and health, reducing suffering and increasing intelligence. However, according to Sorgner (2016), the individual's right to make the greatest possible choices is paramount: everyone is free to choose and decide which technologies they want to use to improve themselves physically, emotionally, cognitively and morally in order to live the longest, healthiest and happiest life possible. The shaping of one's own life is up to each person (2016, 153).

The goal of immortality is mentioned again and again but does not necessarily exclude the death of the body. The body is then seen as a material shell for an implicit spirit, which, in the sense of substance dualism, could lead a completely independent life outside material corporeality through the techniques of digital mind uploading, the uploading of human consciousness. However, the immortality that is often assumed here is not immortality in the strict sense of the word, but the transhumanists are concerned with prolonging healthy life.

The theological areas opened up by Transhumanism, which are also relevant from the perspective of religious education, include the role of the body, Christian anthropological as well as ethical questions around the nature of the human being and its nature, the idea of creation according to the *imago Dei*, the transcendence of the self from the old to the new human being and related eschatological ideas such as the hope for the completion of life in the world to come, the belief in the incarnation and bodily resurrection of Christ, but also the preoccupation with death and resurrection and the question of life after death.

The discussion of Transhumanism in the context of Catholic religious education can therefore go beyond the obvious ethical and anthropological content and the reflection on one's own handling of the principle of self-optimisation in order to promote concrete competences of the pupils and to apply them in specific life situations.

2. THE TRANSHUMANIST CONCEPT OF SELF-OPTIMIZATION

Although the desire to transcend human nature is an integral part of many cultures, it is only in recent decades that the possibility of changing human nature has come within reach thanks to advances in theoretical and practical science. According to B. P. Göcke, this development is a welcome step for Transhumanism in the cultural evolution of humans, enabling them to autonomously control the course of their biological evolution and become masters of their mental and physical characteristics, far from random mutations and lengthy adaptation processes (2018, 117).

Self-optimization or self-improvement is expressed through the transhumanist concept of Enhancement, but its meaning is quite broad. It can refer to bringing about a change or a process of change in which something is improved or increased in value. It also refers to an increase in size or value by adding something else. The other way is to raise something to a higher level of development and thus refer to progress. This term is adopted as a *terminus technicus* in certain languages because a literal translation would not capture the content with equal accuracy. One could use the term Human Enhancement, but this only represents part of the phenomenon. Since this formulation is a quantitative judgement a priori, it would mean that every change, every transgression of the limits of human beings or every increase in their abilities would automatically represent an improvement and progress. After all, what is better cannot be bad and cannot entail negative consequences. An example of this misconception is the prolongation of human life. Although it has the enormous advantage for the individual of delaying death, from the point of view of society as a whole we encounter certain difficulties, such as the inadequate infrastructure, for example, in the care of the elderly and, above all, the economic problem of insufficient funds for old-age provision. We see, then, that the use of the term Human Enhancement would lead to the elimination of the moral dilemmas with which the idea of Enhancement is unreservedly associated. For similar reasons, one can still use the term augmentation, which does not mean that a particular change is beneficial, but rather refers to a quantitative increase in a particular characteristic (Payne et al. 2015, 14).

B. P. Göcke (2018) emphasizes that, from a transhumanist perspective, permanent changes in human nature are preferable to temporary changes, and in particular qualitative changes are preferable to quantitative changes in order to change the biological nature of humanity. However, since cybernetic improvements cannot be passed on to the next generation but must be reused, and since only genetic changes to the germline of an individual's genome can be passed on to the next generation, permanent biological changes to human nature are of greater value to the transhumanist agenda than temporary technological improvements (2018, 124). In this context, the nature of change offered by genetics and robotics in particular is a crucial factor in specifying the transhumanist agenda. In contrast to quantitative change in human nature, qualitative change is that which aims to

alter the basic capacities and capabilities for physical and mental activity given by the genome of our species. "For example, since it is not possible for humans to breathe underwater, changing humans to enable them to breathe underwater or give them wings would be qualitative change" (2018, 125).

However, Göcke asks at the same time why it is necessary or important for transhumanists to change human nature? The reason is not only the advantage that changing human nature makes it possible to perform certain actions, but also that the biological nature of humans is changed so that they can lead a better life than before (2018, 127). According to S. L. Sorgner, transhumanists exclusively share the basic position, which must always be adapted to the latest philosophical, scientific and technological findings, that the use of technology is generally in the interest of humans and should therefore be assumed to be so in the future, and that the appropriate use of technology also increases the likelihood of expanding the boundaries of human existence, which would be in our interest because it also promotes the likelihood of living a good life (2016, 9-10).

Leading a good life and improving people's morally relevant well-being, can thus be achieved through quantitative improvements in their mental and physical qualities, because people lead better lives if they are more intelligent, healthier and more athletic, and all in all they would prefer a state of higher intelligence, health and athleticism to a state of lower intelligence, health and athleticism (Göcke 2018, 129).

One aspect that stands out, according to A. Aguti, is the underestimation of the state of cognitive and volitional disorder that characterizes human nature and is traditionally referred to with the doctrine of the fall. As far as the latter is concerned, the position of Transhumanism is clearly techno-optimistic. Aguti points out that this underestimation, however, is another element in understanding the ambiguity of the term enhancement in ethical and religious terms (2018, 484). Indeed, it can be doubted that a being such as a human being, who clearly shows signs of cognitive and volitional impairment, both in the personal and social spheres, is capable of enhancing, even perfecting himself, to become something other than himself. On the other hand, it is obvious that there are elements in the folds of a person's self-improvement that not only hinder him but also direct him where the improvers did not foresee and where they do not want to direct him.

The destructive potential of technoscience is obvious to all. From this perspective, the transhumanist visions are both alluring and disturbing: they are presented as visions of paradise but may turn out to be visions of hell in the end (Aguti 2018, 485).

Z. Sitarčíková therefore speaks directly of the struggle against human nature. In doing so, she emphasizes that the age-old question of human nature is being raised again. Transhumanism does not deny the existence of human nature, but it raises it to another level: it is no longer human nature that determines who one is, but it is the one who says what human nature should be. Human nature thus becomes a kind of flawed biological material that needs to be worked on. The

essentialist understanding of human nature is rejected by transhumanists, and thus the metaphysical question of the meaning of human existence in the conception of man gives way to the question of functionality as pragmatic efficiency and human performance based on quantitative parameters of work, trade and consumption. Biological nature is rejected in the name of technology, which is supposed to give people more freedom. The more control man has over himself, the freer he will be. However, if man can shape man as a species according to his wishes, then the species he has created is no longer free (Sitarčíková 2012, 112). Therefore, M. Škabraha argues that the path of technological improvement does not automatically lead to more freedom; on the contrary, it can deprive us of freedom if we use it to solve a problem that we could not overcome internally. Then, it is an escape, and technology can ultimately be a domination to which we submit because we do not know how to deal with our freedom (2008, 229).

According to Z. Sitarčíková, the Human Enhancement proclaimed by the transhumanists is a reconstruction of the essence of the human being, characterized by an effort to liberate us from the core of our being, which is at the same time a destruction of what we have in common as human beings. The transhumanist *homo perfectus* is not an image of the perfection of human nature, its complete realization. Rather, it is an image of the struggle against what human beings have been given. Natural reproduction, disease, ageing, death, all these are natural to humans. Transhumanists, on the other hand, see these as limitations, impositions, deficiencies or defects of nature. Humans must free themselves from them (2012, 108).

The question of human self-improvement is also directly related to the concept of human corporeality itself. In Christianity, man and his body are irrevocable and at the same time multidimensional in their meaning; the central element is the belief in the incarnation, in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, who is both true man and true God. The community of Jesus' followers is described as the body of Christ, in which all members of the church, as parts of the body, are endowed with different gifts and are interdependent. B. Konz emphasizes that the body also has an eschatological dimension, for Christians believe in the resurrection of Christ, who conquered death and takes everyone into the reality of the resurrection (2022, 10). However, Christianity knows that earthly life is also dominated by contradictory, destructive, often falsely stabilizing forces in nature and culture, for the physical existence of human beings is marked by the tension between being accepted in the image of God and a fragmented, earthly existence that hopes for redemption.

In general, Transhumanism views the biological human body as an object that is in some way distinct from the human itself. The body, for example, is an imperfect biological machine that accumulates internal damage and therefore requires constant preventive maintenance. The body is an imperfect biological object that needs a genetically evolved solution to its vulnerability to pain. Alternatively, the body can be seen as a personal property over which everyone

should exercise the greatest possible control, including improving birth defects as they see fit. Finally, the body can be seen as an imperfect substrate from which we should escape as soon as possible (Thweatt 2018, 367).

G. Samek Lodovici underlines that Transhumanism wants to free itself from the body itself in order to achieve true autonomy, because the human body can become sick because it is vulnerable and represents a principle of limitation that has basically nothing to do with our identity. One must overcome the heaviness of the body, in which everything is opaque, limiting and inescapable, and stop accepting that one is forever a prisoner of the physical, biological and anatomical form that limits one. Similarly, the pleasures now associated with the body become separate from the body itself, from one's own body and from the bodies of others. For some transhumanist writers, the existence of others may thus become superfluous: We will create happiness exclusively in our own minds (2018, 521).

3. SELF-OPTIMISATION AS A TOPIC OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Catholic religious education in Slovak schools has had an updated curriculum since 2020, which sees religious education not as teaching the content of the Catholic faith or religion, but as developing pupils' religious competences. Thus, teaching is oriented towards the competences that pupils acquire in the course of the lessons and that are substantial, acquired over a longer period of time and can be measured empirically. Competences are acquired through reflection and confrontation with specific knowledge that the student can link and apply to specific life situations. In this perspective, we also consider the religious education reflection on the transhumanist issues of corporeality and artificial intelligence as an opportunity for pupils to acquire religious competence and as learnable cognitive knowledge and skills to solve specific problems in their daily lives.

The reality of Human Enhancement raises complex questions that are important for religious education and the acquisition of religious competences. How does self-optimization affect our image of humanity? What does Enhancement mean for social interaction? How much room do we want to leave for aberrations when peak performance can be achieved at any time? Is it up to each individual to decide whether to make use of Enhancement measures, or is regulatory control necessary? To what extent does the image of man created by artificial intelligence correspond to the Christian image of man? Is the individual still autonomous in his decisions in a performance-oriented society? Will the gap between rich and poor widen or will social differences even out?

In this context of self-optimisation, B. Konz sees the topic of corporeality as a suitable basic theme in religious education. Learning to live in one's own body within the contextual framework of society is a lifelong developmental task, as human beings have to cope with a changing body until their last breath. Especially in adolescence, it is a particular challenge for young people to deal psychologically with physical conditions

and changes. Today's adolescents are offered a wide range of orientation options and staged treatments of their own bodies, especially in social media, where they seek and experience recognition (2022, 8). The desire for health and well-being is a basic need to be recognised, but more extreme forms of body optimization and self-improvement become problematic because the desired ideal state of the body requires constant effort and cannot be fully achieved, because human life continues to be characterised by the processes of ageing and mortality, so that efforts at self-improvement will inevitably fail in the end. From a theological perspective, this raises the question of what religious interpretations and orientations can be offered for the treatment of the body or the pursuit of self-optimisation (Konz 2022, 8-9).

In religious education, we can look at the transhumanist idea of perfection and optimisation, through which man overcomes all human limitations, especially his physical limitations. C. Terno proposes to first introduce the principles of transhumanism and then confront the pupils with biblical Christian ideas of man and critically question the basic idea of optimisation. It is about the advantages and disadvantages of technical possibilities and the inevitable limits of technology in terms of improving human performance. The pupils approach transhuman people with their own attitude. Then they deal with questions on the topic of a good and healthy life. This is followed by the question of the basic human need for improvement - especially through technology (Terno 2022, 22).

As already mentioned, the human body is seen in Transhumanism as flawed and in need of improvement. The goal is to optimise the organism and not only stop the deterioration of the human body, but to prevent it. Behind this, the question of the biblical anthropological image of man arises. From a theological-anthropological point of view, the problem here is whether man becomes his own creator, so to speak, by transcending human limits or even the human being.

How can the topic of improvement and optimisation be didactically implemented in religious education? C. Terno introduces this topic by first presenting the basic ideas of transhumanism. For this purpose, the film *Transhumanism - Man 2.0* is shown at the beginning. The aim of the lesson is to be able to name the expectations and problems of Transhumanism (2022, 22).

After elaborating the most important ideas of Transhumanism and possible points of criticism, these can be confronted with the biblical Christian image of man. The basic concepts of biblical Christian anthropology are explained and elaborated by reading Genesis 1-4. To deepen and secure the discussion, a quotation is given which characterises Transhumanism as a religion of salvation. The next step could be the discussion of Transhumanism, which propagates salvation in the here and now. For example, while communism sees the creation of a new human being living without suffering and injustice in the creation of a new social order, Transhumanism seeks to overcome human limitations such as physical limitations and mortality through anthropotechnology. This view can be compared to the biblical Christian concept of human justification. According to the biblical

Christian view, man's attempts to perfect himself fail. This does not mean that man should not struggle against suffering and injustice, but he cannot create a perfect world. Nor can he exonerate himself. His reality is sin, his separation from God. Overcoming this separation is ultimately only possible through God. The doctrine of justification starts precisely at this point by introducing the idea of God's grace and rejecting human efforts to achieve success and perfection. The lesson shows that the biblical Christian idea of man's fallibility, which he cannot overcome by his own efforts, is a principled opposition to Transhumanism (Terno 2022, 22-24).

In addition to the theme of improvement and self-optimization, the idea of artificial intelligence can also be taken up by religious education. As digital natives, young people are familiar with digital technologies and artificial intelligence applications in many areas. They are part of their world. This can be used as a basis for anthropological and ethical learning in religious education. K. Zweig sees room in religious education for the question of the extent to which the image of man created by machines corresponds or contradicts the Christian image of man with its emphasis on the individuality of man. The thematisation of artificial intelligence in religious education reveals many moral problems that are now even more prominent and require us to be able to formulate and formalise our human values very precisely (Zweig 2020, 7).

How can the topic of artificial intelligence be didactically implemented in religious education? J. Walldorf suggests the topic of the identity of artificial intelligence as a first step. The pupils consider in which areas artificial intelligence is already present today. In a next step, the pupils are asked to think about the opportunities or dangers. Afterwards, a discussion takes place in the class in which everyone explains their point of view. The second step is to identify artificial intelligence in different cultural manifestations, for example in films. Based on the films, one can address some anthropological-ethical questions: Can intelligent machines become human? The developments in the field of artificial intelligence immediately raise questions about our sense of self-worth: Is the human being in the end just a complicated machine? In many science fiction films, we encounter the idea of software systems or robots as animate beings that can be endowed with mental characteristics like humans. Here, scenarios are created that are emotionally charged and go far beyond the current realistic possibilities. A further step is the question of eternity and salvation associated with new technologies. The pupils explore possible research on the topic of artificial intelligence and immortality, in which quasi-religious hopes also manifest themselves. The final step is to consider the ethical foundations of the age of artificial intelligence. First, the question can be clarified to what extent digital technologies and artificial intelligence can pose a threat to democracy and self-determination. On this basis, the question of the need for ethical foundations and a digital humanism can be raised, which differs from both the ideologisation of digital technologies and apocalyptic fears. Its aim is to strengthen democracy and human judgement when working with new technologies (Walldorf 2020, 23-25).

SUMMARY

The aim of this article was to explore the extent to which religious education thinking reflects the transhumanist conceptualisation of Self-optimization. Transhumanism and its technological conceptions of human transcendence correspond to widespread views of possible human futures that fluctuate between technophilic optimism and technophobic cultural pessimism. We have focused specifically on the thematisation of Self-optimization in religious education reflection and teaching. In religious education, these topics, such as artificial intelligence and also transhumanist apocalypticism, seem to be particularly topical, interesting and attractive for pupils. Catholic religious education can contribute to the complex process of personal empowerment of students to the extent that it succeeds in making a connection to students' own lives. Catholic religious education is not only about teaching the contents of the Catholic faith or religion, but especially about developing the religious competences of the pupils to deal concretely also with transhumanist contents and concepts, which are so present in current culture, through reflection and confrontation and to apply them to specific life situations.

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