

Editorial

Dialog 56:3 (September 2017) 207-209.

The Deluge of Dataism: A New Post-Human Religion?

Four more than a half-century now, *Dialog* theologians have surfed culture's big waves. At times we merely paddle rudderless through the breaking waves, while at other times we ride the breakers with balance and etiquette. How deluged will we get as a new cultural wave crashes on our beach: the new religion of Dataism?

"Where have all our children gone?" we pine during half-empty worship services. Our Sunday school programs have nearly evaporated. We know the answer: Our children are hooked up to electronic media. Concentration is confined to a cell phone screen. Friendships are digitally mediated. Self-images rise and fall with each text, photo, or video.

Is this breaking wave on our culture's shore itself a new form of religion? Do Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram constitute denominations? Do we find our rituals on Snapchat and beliefs on YouTube? Is this new spirituality leading anywhere?¹

Yes, this is a religious revolution, says Yuval Noah Harari, a lecturer in the Department of History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Harari even names it: *Dataism*. "The most interesting emerging religion is Dataism, which venerates neither gods nor man—it worships data."² This is a post-humanist as well as post-Christian religious movement. Neither God nor humanity remain sacred. "Dataism declares that the universe consists of data flows, and the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing."³

Why might our human race find such a post-human spirituality attractive? Because the Internet replaces mystical union. "As the global data-processing becomes all-knowing and all-powerful, so connecting to the system becomes the source of all meaning. Humans want to merge into the data flow because when you are part of the data flow you are part of something much bigger than yourself."⁴

Theologians, recall, referred to this experience as ecstasy (*ek-stasis* or standing outside oneself). The mystical route to ecstasy is exhilarating, to be sure. Perhaps electronic ecstasy has a similar draw. Yet, New Testament-based Christians have long thought that love—especially *agape* love—is the most divine form of becoming "part of something much bigger than yourself."

Having discarded belief in transcendent divinity some centuries ago, we modern Westerners find wildcat drillings for spiritual oil everywhere. Ancient yearnings for redemption, transformation, and salvation deliriously re-express themselves in today's frantic search for a *naturalistic* religion where we humans take the place of the gods. Cosmopolitan Brazilian philosopher and politician, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, for example, wants to "translate the message of salvation religion into naturalistic terms."⁵ A society devoted to a naturalistic religious worldview would be united in love and cooperation, according to Unger. Love "is the experience of connection with another person such that the connection enhances our freedom or self-possession rather than detracting from it."⁶ Does naturalistic religion lead without detour toward love and cooperation? No, not necessarily.

Harari's naturalistic humanism does not develop a corresponding ethic of love, because arbitrary

human choice becomes the sole authorization of value and meaning. Unless one chooses love and cooperation, society should not be organized this way. Individual free choice based upon individual feeling is the final arbiter for Harari, not merging into something much bigger.

This leads self-proclaimed humanist Harari to declare Dataism to be heterodox. Dataism threatens his atheistic humanism.⁷ To be a humanist is to assert that human life is sacred and human feeling is the source of all meaning and value. He is gleeful at the past triumph of humanism over traditional beliefs in the divine. "The central religious revolution was not losing faith in God; rather, it was gaining faith in humanity."⁸ Anthropocentrism has rightly replaced theocentrism. "For centuries humanism has been convincing us that we are the ultimate source of meaning, and that our free will is therefore the highest authority of all ... I need only consult myself with regard to what I wish to do; what I feel to be good is good, what I feel to be bad is bad."⁹ Love and cooperation in society would be valued as "good" only if free individuals would feel that it is good. This is the essence of Harari's ethics.

The future religion Harari evangelizes for is Techno-humanism, not Dataism. Techno-humanism will be salvific, he promises. His religious vision mimics that of today's transhumanists: by cobbling together intelligence amplification, artificial intelligence, robotics, genetics, nanotechnology, management of war, and the defeat of death through a technological fix, our species will give way to a post-human species. The new species will be superior, even godly. "Techno-humanism agrees that *Homo sapiens* as we know it has run its historical course and will no longer be relevant in the future, but concludes that we should therefore use technology in order to create *Homo deus*—a much superior model."¹⁰ Human transformation will be the product of technological triumph, a self-transformation through which we will take our rightful place as our own gods. Harari prophesies that technological progress will provide the road to apotheosis.

Christian theologians hold very little optimism that technological progress is capable of such a grand human self-transformation. Oh yes, innovation has proven itself capable of accomplishing physical marvels! But the human soul remains unchanged with technological advance. Sinful human persons still find ways to twist and tangle new things to serve their selfish and sometimes violent purposes. No amount of technology can be salvific. For salvific transformation, we must rely upon divine grace. This is the central message of Oxford University theologian Michael Burdett: "The Christian response to technological futurism is that the future is God's future and must be set within the interpersonal nature of a promissory triune God who brings new possibilities to the world."¹¹ For thorough transformation, we must pray to the God of grace.

Where does this leave us? It appears that Dataism is the new sheep-stealing religion. Dataism is diminishing the herds of both traditional churches and the naturalistic humanists who had previously stolen traditional sheep. Both premodern religion and modern humanism might want to protect their fold from Dataism's wolves. Christian theologians in particular might want to warn those sheep heading for either Dataism or Techno-humanism: there's no salvation there. Asking technology to deliver human self-transformation is like asking a Little League baseball team to beat the New York Yankees in the World Series.

I do not recommend that critical-thinking theologians stand rigid on the shore and let the twenty-foot waves of either Dataism or Techno-humanism simply inundate us. Like tow-in surfers, I recommend going out deep into the surf to meet what's coming in.¹² Then, ride the undulations back in. The human yearning for transformation is a divinely inspired desire, even if expectations of a technological fix will most likely lead to a wipeout.

Ted Peters
Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary

Q1

Endnotes

1. Communications technology does not affect only our objective lives. It also impacts our subjectivity. "Despite these asymmetries in relation to access to technology, most of us in the Nordic region, as elsewhere in the world, are influenced by the instant communication flows that shape information and global media. This process brings about important changes in consciousness. Individuals and groups are forced to embrace, oppose or relate in other ways to the 'global condition.'" Elisabeth Gerle, "Contemporary Globalization and its Ethical Challenges," *The Ecumenical Review* 52, no. 2 (April 2000): 158-171, at 159. "What is new is the extremely fast transport of information and people, of things and ideas—all much sooner and easily interchanged and perhaps even intermingled." Anna Marie Widberg Pedersen, "New Spirituality and the Crisis in European Churches and Culture," *Swedish Missiological Times* 90, no. 4 (2002): 449-466, at 465-466.

2. Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper, 2017), 371.

3. *Ibid.*, 372.

4. *Ibid.*, 391. The transhumanist (H+) vision of a post-human species would similarly require self-sacrifice on the part of present *Homo sapiens* in order to make way for a future superior species. Although atheistic and naturalistic, H+ evokes religious sensibilities. See Ted Peters, "The Boundaries of Human Nature," *Dialog* 54 no. 1 (Spring 2015): 5-8. The H+ does appeal to numerous Christian advocates of transformation through technology. See The Christian Transhumanist Association, online

at <https://www.christiantranshumanism.org/about>, and Ronald Cole-Turner's website, Theology Plus, online at <http://www.theologyplus.org/> (both accessed May 31, 2017).

5. Robert Mäkgabeira Unger, *The Religion of the Future* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 262, 124.

6. *Ibid.*, 172.

7. "There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and not justice outside the common imagination of human beings." Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper, 2015), 28.

8. Harari, *Homo Deus*, 223.

9. *Ibid.*, 225.

10. *Ibid.*, 357.

11. Michael S. Burdett, *Eschatology and the Technological Future* (London: Routledge, 2015), 2; see review by Michael Epinette, *Themelios* (April 2017), online at <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/review/eschatology-and-the-technological-future> (accessed May 30, 2017).

12. Leaders here include especially Celia Deane-Drummond and Peter Manley Scott, eds., *Future Perfect? God, Medicine and Human Identity* (London: T.&T. Clark, 2006); Ronald Cole-Turner, ed., *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2011); Derek F. Mather and Calvin Mercer, eds., *Religion and the Implications of Radical Life Extension* (New York: Macmillan Palgrave, 2009); and Gregory R. Hansell and William Grassie, eds., *Transhumanism and Its Critics* (Philadelphia: Metanexus, 2011).