



Living without Limits

Kuruvilla Pandikattu
Papal Seminary, Pune

Can we think of a time on earth without death? Using our technological advancements, can we make another species? How does our human future really look like? These are some of the questions this article addresses.

This article is the follow up of a very inspiring and mind-boggling article published a few months ago in the Financial Chronicle on “Life, death and everything else.” The lead line is “Science begins where spiritualism ends in the karmic dance of life and death.” The interview with Aubrey David Nicholas Jasper de Grey, an English gerontologist and co-author of “Ending Aging,” was both promising and fascinating: promising for his claim to eliminate physical death and fascinating by his enthusiastic future vision.

The author, Shubhrangshu Roy, Editor-in-Chief, Financial Chronicle, has shown exceptional brilliance in bringing insights from Buddhism (Dalai Lama and Tibetan Book of the Dead), Hinduism and Western thoughts. The interview with de Grey brings out brilliantly his “transhumanist vision.”

The questions raised and the answers attempted go beyond the classical understanding of death. It takes technology seriously and at the same time critically. That’s heartening for all of us. As one who has been exploring this area of physical immortality, I welcome this idea wholeheartedly. It is a noble task to reverse the aging process and to eliminate physical death.

Aristotle the Father of Western thinking proclaimed just before his death: “Death is a cure.” As against him, Eric Drexler, the father of Transhumanism and author of “Engines of Creation” broadly affirms: “Death is a disease. Cure it”

It is true that the traditional society looked upon death as a great leveler and got used to it. So Martin Heidegger claimed that humans are “being-unto-death,” right at the moment they are born. Mitch Albom, the author of best-seller “Tuesdays with Morrie,” asserts paradoxically: “When you learn how to die, you learn how to live.” Thus the meaning and authenticity of human life are intimately intertwined with that of death.

On the other hand today some of the eminent technologists like Ray Kurzweil, Nick Bostrom want to hasten the overcoming of death. The futurist Kurzweil hints at the arrival of “technological singularity,” which will eliminate physical death as we know it. The transhumanist philosopher Bostrom presupposes the end of death in the immediate future and chalks out the strategies of reaching superintelligence.

One thing is certain. Through the synergetic working together of techniques like cryonics, nanotechnology, human genome project, enzyme (telomeres), tremendous growth will take place in the area of reversal of aging and extension of life. Whether we will finally be able to

overcome death, I am not sure. The cynical remark applies here: only one thing that can be sure about predictions about the future is that future will be very different from the predictions.

The interview with de Grey has raised numerous philosophical and moral questions on the meaning of life and death. His attempts at eliminating death has to be welcomed. As a society, we need to consider that even if physical death is overcome, it is eliminating one aspect of human limitation: temporal limitedness.

There are other more significant areas where human beings need to progress. The emotional, aesthetic, moral and spiritual growth of human beings are even more important than the temporal growth. The usual argument is that the more one has time to grow, the more one become mature emotionally, aesthetically, morally and spiritually. But that is not necessarily borne out of facts.

So together with the noble task of searching for physical immortality, we need to invest our time, energy and technology to advance the other human areas of development, leading to wisdom, self-actualisation and collective integration. Along with our technological prowess and developments, can we make our own lives more meaningful, significant and fulfilling? Can we develop ourselves emotionally, aesthetically and spiritually so that we can speak of total or integrated development? More than at any other time, today we possess the resources to achieve such a holistic growth.

Two insights of Albert Einstein are relevant here. “All our lauded technological progress – our very civilization – is like the axe in the hand of the pathological criminal.”

Despite our tremendous technological advancement, we behave like the “pathological criminal.” Again Einstein affirms: “The release of atomic energy has not created a new problem. It has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one.”

The existing problem, that Einstein refers to, is learning to live with each other. As individuals and communities if we cannot respectfully deal with each other, then our technological growth can be our own downfall. If we cannot find feel at home with ourselves, with our fellow human beings and with the world, we will be doing a terrible disservice to ourselves. In fact, Martin Luther King Jr. is right: “We must learn to live like brothers or Perish like fools”

In this context John F. Kennedy’s warning is pertinent: “Ours could be the best or last generation.” With the incredible technological prowess at our disposal we can truly make ours the best generation. Does our moral and spiritual growth match with our technological growth? If not we can put an end to ourselves.

We do possess today the technological capability for both these choices of eliminating physical death or total life! Do we have the moral and spiritual integrity and capability to choose for life?

If not, the worst scenario could befall us. The same technological progress, about which we can rightly be proud of, may lead to our own self-annihilation! Thus technological search for physical immortality is to be welcomed by all means! Simultaneously, we need to foster the human quest for the emotional, aesthetic, moral and spiritual development, without which the technological growth may annihilate us!

We need to recognise the healthy limits demanded of us. In order to achieve anything – including spiritual progress –

we need to encircle ourselves within some fixed – though not rigidly – markers, which gives us orientation and direction. Only through such markers can we grow. Only within such broad framework can we progress.

Will we sing to the dance of death and life or death over life? We can live the dance of death and life leading to deeper life. Maybe we can also learn the dance of spiritualism and science! That could be a mutually enriching venture! 🌱

First Published in *The Financial Chronicle*

The Alumni of Papal Seminary and Jnana-Deepa Vidayapeeth are invited for an International Conference on “Befriending the Other” on the occasion of sixty years of their existence in Pune, on November 24-28, 2015. Please mark these dates on your calendar.

For details, please visit: www.papalseminary.in



The Star of Bethlehem and the ‘Ray of that Truth Which Enlightens All Humans’: Reflections on the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*

Boris Repschinski S.J.

Leopold Franzens Universität Innsbruck, Austria

Only a few days after his election as bishop of Rome in 2013, the new Pope, going by the name of Francis, went to a youth prison to celebrate the liturgy of Holy Thursday with incarcerated youngsters. Among conservative circles in the church this led to some consternation when he washed the feet of 12 of these youths. This reaction focused less on the fact that among the youths were two Muslims. The real focus of attention was the previously unheard of washing of the feet of two women.¹ Some people seemed to think that a pope washing the feet of women was the first step to a –presumably terrible – ordination of women to the priesthood. The outrage went so far that the official press officer of the Vatican, Federico Lombardi, had to issue a statement clarifying that the washing of feet did not have the status of a sacrament of the

1 For an example see <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-official-end-of-reform-of-reform-by.html> (visited on 22nd April 2013).