



Ted Peters

tedfpeters@gmail.com

PACCEM in SCIENTIA et TERRIS

Pax Lumina 1(5) / 2021 / 52-55

PPeace means the cessation of strife and the arrival of harmony.
Peace includes the death of discord, the ceasing of conflict,
and the end of anxiety.
**Peace also includes beauty in nature, justice in society,
and tranquility in the soul. As such, peace is eternal.**



When he wrote his 1963 Encyclical, 'Pacem in Terris', St. John XXIII was "inspired by a longing which we feel most keenly, and which we know is shared by all [persons] of goodwill: that peace may be assured on earth." When Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)," those peacemakers among us are quenching a profound human thirst.

Peace means the cessation of strife and the arrival of harmony. Peace includes the death of discord, the ceasing of conflict, and the end of anxiety. Peace also includes beauty in nature, justice in society, and tranquility in the soul. As such, peace is eternal. In our own

ephemeral experience, however, we can realise only fragments of peace. We catch hurried glimpses of God's everlasting peace only in anticipation, only as a prolepsis of the Kingdom of Peace God has promised us. Sips of daily peace simply enhance our craving for God's final and total peace.

Science similarly slakes a deep human thirst, namely, the thirst to know. The curious among us thank God for the advent of modern science: the mental machine-emitting knowledge of the intricacies and complexities

and immensities of our natural home. Through microscopes and telescopes, scientists daily uncover unseen yet ever-present dimensions of nature's mechanics along with glittering treasures to be cashed in by new technologies.

Yet, science is morally ambiguous. On the one hand, the international community of virologists has just teamed up to rescue the human race from the scourge of SARS-CoV-2 by developing protective vaccines. For this we stand up to proclaim: blessed are the peacemakers!

On the other hand, it was America's Manhattan Project in competition with Nazi military research that bequeathed to the world the threat of self-annihilation through thermonuclear war. This threat is compounded by runaway technologies contaminating, polluting, and overheating our once fecund Planet Earth. For this, we stand up and ask: where are the peacemakers?

Digitisation and Dehumanisation

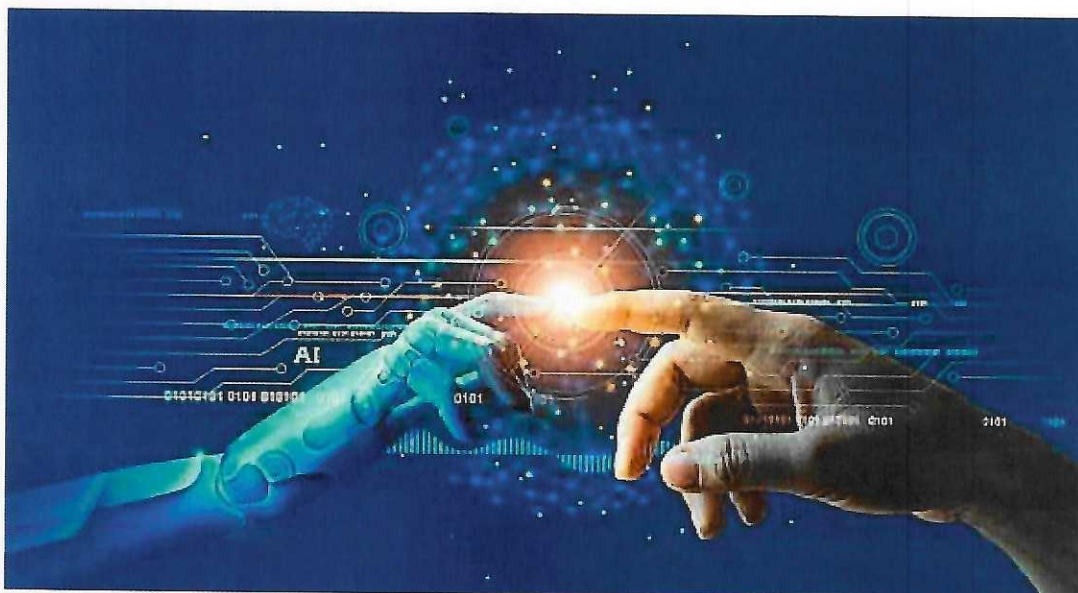
We helplessly watch as this ambiguity is being played out right before our eyes

on the worldwide web. On the one hand, the digitisation of our heartfelt thoughts distributed immediately via electronic communication to every continent on the globe should, in principle, foster empathic sharing and social harmony.

On the other hand, much to our chagrin and disappointment, just the opposite is happening. Like hail from a thunderstorm, we are bombarded hourly by disinformation, conspiracy theories, ethnocentrism, pornography, and competing ideologies. Instead of approaching social harmony, we are hopelessly entangled in a web of crisscrossing contrasts, counterpoints, and conflicts. If we had previously donned a dhoti of hoped-for-peace, that fabric of unity has been torn.

It appears that digitisation dehumanises. Yet, we should be careful. The technology of digitization combined with access to webthink does not dehumanise. Only humans dehumanise. Machines do not.

To get more precise, dehumanisation is the process of 'othering' or perhaps 'otherising' people. Dehumanisation begins by turning a 'we' into a 'they.' Tacitly, we allow the 'they' to slide




gradually down a slippery slope to a subhuman status. Once at the subhuman level, do we lose our moral obligations toward them? Yes. Apparently, this is human nature we have inherited from our ancestors. Scientists call it evolution; theologians call it original sin.

Just as science slakes our thirst to know, technology assuages our thirst to change things. Both, however, are ambiguous. To be ambiguous is to be subject to more than one evaluation, to be either good or evil depending on the contextual situation. We human beings must honestly confess: it is we who determine whether science saves or whether technology kills. No matter how beautiful the human artwork, someone is capable of spoiling it with graffiti.


CRISPR Gene Editing, AI, IA, and the Coming of the Posthuman

Our generation bears the albatross of ambiguity when it comes to the question: should we employ science and technology to alter our human nature? Should we direct our electric rickshaw up the road toward a new stage in evolution and the engineering of a new posthuman species?

The transhumanists among us see today's 'Homo sapiens' as a 'trans' species on the way, so to speak, to a super-intelligent post-human species. How might today's engineers enhance human intelligence sufficiently to take control of our evolutionary future?



**We human beings must
honestly confess: it is
we who determine whether
science saves or whether
technology kills.
No matter how beautiful
the human artwork,
someone is capable
of spoiling it
with graffiti.**



Rightly or wrongly, many evolutionary theorists believe that the unit of speciation in evolution is the gene. With the ongoing perfection of CRISPR/Cas9 gene-editing [a newly developed technique in molecular biology for altering the genomes of plants, animals, and people], the prospect lies before us of enhancing human traits and even enhancing the human germline for the foreseeable future. Might we edit into our children genes for increased intelligence? Right now, the technology is too underdeveloped to make this happen; yet it's on the futurist's horizon.

Artificial Intelligence or AI has taken centre stage in the world drama, with many fearing that AI robots will replace flesh-and-blood workers. Far more significant, in my opinion, is the prospect of Intelligence Amplification or IA. Medical practitioners have successfully implanted computer chips in people's brains for therapeutic purposes, such as to govern epilepsy episodes.



Is it only a small step to implant a computer chip in a human brain that provides access to information? And with instant access to all the information in Wikipedia, will this lead to amplified human intelligence? Will the cyborgs of the next generation attain a level of intelligence sufficient to take over? Might our enhanced intelligent creatures then ratchet up the process leading finally to superintelligence? Will our super-intelligent descendants then think of us back in the 21st century as antiques, dinosaurs, fossils to be buried and forgotten?

Upon a closer look, such a scenario for taking control of future evolution seems more like relinquishing control.

Conclusion

We human beings know what it means to thirst for peace when we have only discord available to drink. We also know what it means to have the thirst to know things through science and the thirst to

change things through technology. But let us be clear: science and technology cannot quench our thirst for peace.

Science and technology are morally ambiguous. They can be used by human individuals and societies either to inflict suffering or to relieve suffering. Determining which is strictly a human contribution.

With or without science and technology, the thirst for peace drives us from faucet to fountain looking for what Jesus called, 'living water' (John 4:11).

(Ted Peters co-edits the journal, *'Theology and Science'*, on behalf of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, USA. He recently edited a new volume on artificial intelligence, *'AI and IA: Utopia or Extinction?'*. Along with two colleagues, Arvin Gouw and Brian Patrick Green, he is now editing a new book, *'Religious Transhumanism and its Critics'*)