



BUT FIRST ...

The View from Here

Is Silicon Valley a bastion of rationalism? Or the cradle of a strange new faith?

BY TARA ISABELLA BURTON

Even as America welcomes its first native-born Pope, few would question that we live in a secular age. Nearly 30 percent of Americans now call themselves “religiously unaffiliated,” according to the most recent round of Pew polling data: making them the largest single religious bloc in the United States. And that number is only

climbing. Among the members of Generation Z, at least a third have dispensed with religion altogether.

It might seem that the onetime “four horsemen” of the New Atheism—Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris—have triumphed. Ours is an era of rationality and technocratic control, where science and engineering have given us the answers we once sought in sacred texts, or in magic, or in the stars. God is, if not dead, irrelevant.

In fact, what we are witnessing is not a decline in American religiosity but rather its transformation from dogma to “vibes.” A growing number of young believers choose neither to embrace nor reject religion, and opt instead to “remix” it, curating their spiritual identity the way they might their social-media feed. And there are few places in America where that remixed religious sensibility is as prevalent, or as powerful, as Silicon Valley.

Long heralded as a bastion of scientific humanism, today’s Silicon Valley doubles as a spiritual marketplace. Tech mogul Bryan Johnson, who made headlines for his thoroughly unorthodox attempts at extreme life extension (up to and including harvesting blood from his teenage son), has recently announced to his X subscribers that he intends to form a new transhumanist religion, called simply Don’t Die, which, he promises would-be adherents, will “[usher] in an existence more spectacular than we can imagine.”

Elements of the “rationalist” movement, which originated as a loosely connected group seeking to “hack” into their “wetware” (that is, their own brains) in order to learn to think more clearly, have likewise developed into a full-blown religious movement. A vegan, transgender blogger who renamed herself “Ziz” and broke with the rationalist community over her conviction that different hemispheres of the brain might have different genders and identities attracted a group of devotees. The

Zizians have now been implicated in six deaths over the past few years, allegedly including that of one adherent's parents.



The self-described rationalist writer Eliezer Yudkowsky.

And they aren't the only ones in the rationalist community exploring the shadow side of existence, as a new "post-rationalist" offshoot blends a passion for A.I. alignment with an interest in tarot, Jungian archetypes, and chaos magic. Even the original rationalists fall short of the label: among their most pressing issues is the "singularity," the point at which A.I. exceeds human intelligence.

And as rapid expansions in A.I. have made the singularity seem, if not likely, at least more plausible, so too has a religious sensibility infused A.I. spaces. OpenAI founder Sam Altman has gone on record referring to GPT-5 as a "magic intelligence in the sky"; another, anonymous A.I. engineer told *Vanity Fair* that "we're creating God." One former Google engineer, Anthony Levandowski, went so far as to formally register the Way of the Future, his new A.I.-worshipping religion, as a church with the I.R.S. Levandowski told one interviewer that A.I. "will effectively be a god.... If there is something a billion times smarter than the smartest human, what else are you going to call it?"

This new religious sensibility has its own vocabulary, its own images, its own end-time scenarios. Both Ziz and Elon Musk have referenced “Roko’s Basilisk”: a thought experiment posted on rationalist writer Eliezer Yudkowsky’s LessWrong forum, according to which, a future sentient artificial intelligence might take revenge on those who failed to hasten its development. (Musk and his former partner, Grimes, reportedly connected on Twitter after making the same Roko’s Basilisk-related pun).

The alliance between Silicon Valley and the spiritually esoteric is hardly new. Tech journalist John Markoff has written at length about the relationship between the counterculture of the 60s—with its interest in Eastern religions, psychedelically assisted trance states, and consciousness expansion—and the development of personal computing. But while the psychonauts and technopagans of the early Internet era were relatively fringe, today’s techno-utopians have managed to turn transhumanism into the closest thing the United States has to a civil religion.

Even those of us who aren’t planning to cryogenically freeze our heads or implant chips into our bodies have, whether we’re aware of it or not, absorbed the spiritual and metaphysical assumptions of this new religiosity, which preaches the gospel of self-transcendence. From wellness culture to New Age witchcraft, from lifehacking and “self-optimization” to the growing ubiquity of “manifesting”—whereby influencers claim they can magically will their desires into existence—America’s most prevalent spiritual-but-not-religious practices center around a kind of magical transhumanism, which contends that those with elevated technological or spiritual potential have the right to reshape reality in their own image.

Science and religion, technology and magic, have always been closer bedfellows than they might appear. Isaac Newton himself was a noted alchemist, obsessed not just with gravity but with the mythical philosopher’s stone. But as traditional religious institutions have lost the public’s trust, the neo-religions of Silicon Valley are

perfectly situated to fill the gap. While traditional religion has often explored the complexity and tragedy of being human, with all the limitations that entails, today's new faiths offer, instead, the promise of the post-human, when we at last hack away the last of our mortal limitations.

It's a compelling vision. And if you assume that intelligent and powerful human beings are also morally good, and prone to making decisions for the benefit of the whole human race, it might even be a convincing one. But if there's one thing transhumanism hasn't yet managed to do, it's come up with an account of human moral frailty, or what Christianity has traditionally called "sin." And that might be the hardest hack of all.

Tara Isabella Burton is the author of several books, including Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World and Self-Made: Creating Our Identities from Da Vinci to the Kardashians

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