

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Mormon Archive's First Ten Thousand Years: Infrastructure, Materiality, Ontology, and Resurrection in Religious Transhumanism

Jon Bialecki

Anthropology, University of California at San Diego, La Jolla, CA, USA
Email: jon.bialecki@gmail.com

Abstract

One of the chief debates in the academic study of transhumanism is whether or not this emergent movement that advocates for the technological overcoming of the limits of humanity should be considered religious in nature. This question stems from the fact that, while the vast majority of transhumanists explicitly reject established religion, elements of transhumanism seem strikingly similar to Christian eschatology. This article explores this question by asking how the ontology of an avowedly religious transhumanist movement, the Mormon Transhumanist Association, differs from the informatic ontology identified in secular transhumanism. It shows how contemporary Mormon Transhumanist imaginings of various forms of technological resurrection are informed by the infrastructure and materialist ontology associated with the Mormon practice of “Proxy baptisms” (otherwise known as baptisms for the dead) and other initiatory rituals conducted by proxy on behalf of the deceased. This influence suggests that, at least in this case, there are identifiable differences between secular transhumanism and religious transhumanism that complicate any easy reading of secular transhumanism as being crypto-religion.

Keywords: transhumanism; religion; Mormonism; ontology and infrastructure; proxy Baptism; technological resurrection

This is an essay about the dead—the bodies of the dead, the records the dead leave behind, the cryogenically preserved individuals who are classified as “medically dead” by all but those who look over them, and the resurrected dead who some anticipate will be raised again by God, and whom others imagine will be brought back to life, on God’s behalf, through our own efforts. The occasion for this meditation on the dead will be a discussion of the emerging anthropology and ethnography of transhumanism. I will be making a double intervention. First, I will discuss a form of religious transhumanism to argue that secular transhumanism, while it may not *not* be a religion, is also not a religion; second, I will make a claim about the ontology of

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transhumanism, arguing that in at least one instance a secular transhumanist ontology centered around the idea of everything as information becomes distended when viewed through at least one particular religious lens. In short, this is an exercise in opening up the possibilities of there being multiple alternate vying transhumanist ontologies. Making these two points will also necessitate a tour of a very particular religious media ecology, where the archive is intimately tied not simply to death but to resurrection and where records are conceived of not so much as representations of past events but in some ways as determining the events that they are supposed to reflect.

The stakes inherent in these sets of claims may not be apparent on first reflection; it is my hope that in laying out the argument, the underlying issues that are being engaged will become apparent. One reason that the stakes regarding transhumanism may not be immediately obvious is that many are unaware of what transhumanism is. But rest assured, even if the word transhumanism is unfamiliar, thanks to the role of information technology in our contemporary media ecology, most readers are no doubt already familiar with the set of concepts and aspirations that term indexes. While advocates and academics define the term in multiple, different ways, speaking generally, transhumanism labels the anticipation of and advocacy for new and emerging technologies, such as computer science, genetic engineering, cryonics, and nanotechnology, that are imagined to be so powerful that they will, in essence, soon allow us to transcend the limitations that have historically defined us as a species. As transhumanists envision it, we will choose our bodily form, grant ourselves superhuman intellects, perhaps upload ourselves to computers, and even become immortals. This may sound like one of Silicon Valley's less sober fantasies, and there are plenty of transhumanists associated with Silicon Valley. However, transhumanists are not limited to Silicon Valley; they constitute a wider social movement that, while it has certain demographic regularities (they are mostly white and mostly male), has plenty of exceptions as well. There are female transhumanist, transhumanists of color, and queer and non-cis-gendered transhumanists, for instance. This essay addresses one particular demographic irregularity associated with religion.

Religion is a vexed issue in transhumanism because, while transhumanists are a varied group demographically, most are atheists and often *new* atheists (see Bialecki 2022a: 85–90, 177–90). Transhumanists commonly view religion as a ruthless competitor that makes fraudulent claims and offers a false bill of goods; religion's promises of paradise and eternal life after death stand in contrast to the real technologically produced immortality that transhumanists imagine they will soon be able to offer. This animus toward religion is so deep that transhumanists often refer to the religious as “deathists,” suggesting not just an acceptance of death but a deep emotional and ideological commitment to it. Many also imagine that religion posits an existential threat because its deathism will lead to concerted efforts to ban the very technology that transhumanists hope will liberate them from mortality (ibid.: 76–93).

Two problems arise from the transhumanist rejection of religion. The first is the seemingly perverse fact that, despite this antipathy, in academic discussions one often hears secular transhumanism criticized as crypto-religion. According to this reading, transhumanism is, in effect, a form of religion that is in denial of its own nature. Scholars have argued strongly that secular transhumanism should be classified as religion based on two tendencies that they claim to have identified in its

“eschatology.”¹ This first plank in their argument is that the transhumanist promises of immortality and of transcending the merely human are homologous to similar claims made by Abrahamic religions. The second is another isomorphism: they argue that transhumanist scenarios involving the rapid acceleration of the capacities of artificial intelligences can be mapped onto more traditional “apocalyptic” religious narratives, and that therefore transhumanism and religion share a common essence (Geraci 2010)—Christianity and transhumanism are both “religions of the end times.” These scholars are not alone in making this argument; many of the critiques of transhumanism that theologians craft are also predicated on the assumption that transhumanism is a form of religion. Some have gone so far as to posit an actual philological chain linking transhumanism and religion. Here, the term transhumanism, usually credited as having been coined by Julian Huxley in 1957, is tied to St. Paul’s third-person account of being “caught up” to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12 (Harrison and Wolyniak 2015).

How should we weigh these arguments conflating religion and transhumanism? Putting aside the epistemic violence inherent in theoretical claims about transhumanism that disregard its internal variation (Bialecki 2023a), there is, to my mind, a purposefully cruel irony in asserting that members of a group that at times vehemently rejects religion misapprehend themselves and are, in fact, religious. For that reason alone, many scholars might reject this move. Furthermore, labeling transhumanism as religion seems to be rooted in a problematic “continuity” thinking and a foreclosure of the possibility of novelty that has been the object of recent anthropological scorn (see, for instance, Engelke 2014). Discussions in anthropology have tended to be chary, though not entirely dismissive, of out-and-out readings of transhumanism as faith. Annelin Eriksen has come the closest to identifying transhumanism as religion, stating that it “clearly draw[s] on themes in Christian theology” (2021: 72). Notably, her analysis of transhumanism also draws on Dumont’s 1982 account of the genesis of modern Christianity and she is openly untroubled by the privileging of long-term continuity over the short-term changes that anthropologists like Joel Robbins (2007) stress in their discussions of Christianity and conversion. Others create more open space between transhumanism and religion. Writing on Russian Transhumanism, Anya Bernstein (2019) has presented a fractured picture in which some transhumanist elements embrace religion, others openly acknowledge explicitly religious influences without presenting themselves as necessarily religious, and still others reject religion altogether. Jennifer Huberman has tried to reframe the question of whether transhumanism is a religion by asking instead whether it should be considered a revitalization movement à la Anthony Wallace, though she says answering that question now would be “premature” (2020: 46).²

Anthropologist Abou Farman (2019, 2020) has done the most work to identify a gap between transhumanism and religion. He argues that the very possibility conditions for transhumanism are the transformation and sequestering of religion that has occurred in the wake of the establishment of secularism as a social architecture and secularity as an ethos (2019; 2020). In this account, secularism

¹For a review of the literature arguing that transhumanism is crypto-religion, see Bialecki 2018.

²Wallace’s revitalization theory (1956) can be summed up as a mid-twentieth-century heuristic for tracking how charismatic figures at first reimagine and then later reinvigorate societies beset by decline or crisis.

robbed religion of its monopoly on making authoritative statements about what might be glossed as ultimate issues: the fates of the individual, the species, and the universe. Science can now also speak to these issues, and it does so with newfound levels of prestige thanks to secularism's demotion of religion. But the answers science gives are not comforting: instead of the eschatology of resurrection and salvation, science offers to the individual a cessation of consciousness with death, to *Homo sapiens*' likely extinction as a species, and to the universe an entropic "heat death," or the dissolution of all atoms due to either cosmic expansion or electron decay (see, generally, Mack 2021). Transhumanism steps into this scientific void and tries to reintroduce something other than this cosmic nihilism through a sort of substitution: the creation of a techno-scientific spirituality—albeit one crafted entirely using speculative thought whose grammar and contents are regulated by a scientific rationality and an engineering imagination—that offers individual immortality, collective transcendence, and the transformation of the universe into smart matter and pure consciousness.

One sign that this secular-techno-scientific rationality is controlling is the ontology that Farman sees as foundational to transhumanism. As secular transhumanists see it, all of reality, and particularly the person, is constituted by information. While this is an extrapolation from information sciences, it is also something of an ethos inasmuch as it gives both a nature and a telos to the universe: all of reality is composed of information that, as post-humans carry out their destiny to colonize and reorganize the cosmos, will increase asymptotically with the creation of more intelligent agents and intelligent matter. But as informatics gives, it also takes away. Through creating a plane of immanence, distinctions in strata cease to be important; this is why it is possible for an embodied human, which in this view is just one set of information, to be uploaded to a virtual space where they/she/he can be reconstituted digitally as the same set of information resituated in a new domain.

Farman's claims here should be read carefully. He is not so much arguing that secular transhumanism is not a religion (inasmuch as he is arguing it is different from religion) as that its social logic is thoroughly secular, its ontology is entirely techno-scientific, and its aspirations, while they rhyme with much of religion's, are so differently constituted that what transhumanism produces is not religion as we know it (also see O'Connell 2017; and Singler 2017). All of this is to say that, even if you come to the issue with a different sensibility about what is and is not religion, the specificity of how secular transhumanism is constituted makes it a different object regardless of how you classify it. Secular transhumanism either is not a religion, or it is a religion like no other—but it is certainly not just another varietal of religion.³

Let us test Farman's claims. The investigation carried out in this essay is not so much a positivistic inquiry into the falsifiability of his hypothesis as it is a stress test by way of counterexample, slightly distending the situation to see if Farman's reading of transhumanism buckles under new conditions. This is because of the second vexing irony regarding transhumanism and religion: alongside religion-antithetical secular

³It should be noted here that Farman's use of "religion" is genealogical to the degree that he discusses it not as a trans-historical universal but as a contingent and local category. While this is clearly not the only modality through which religion can be framed (see Bialecki 2017: 198–217), such a genealogical framing certainly is effective at capturing the dynamics of religiosity in the larger Anglophone world and matches the way that other anthropologists interested in transhumanism tend to understand the issue.

transhumanism, there are also some explicitly religious transhumanisms. Some instances of transhumanist religions are objects with no non-transhumanist correlate: the best exemplar of this is probably Terasam, a movement named after a concept from science fiction author Octavia Butler and co-founded by technology CEO Martine Rothblatt and her wife Bina Aspen Rothblatt. We could take as another paradigmatic instance the New Thought-informed immortalist group People Unlimited Inc. (see Eriksen 2021; Cohen 2021). But most transhumanist religiosities are variants of established, conventional religious movements. There are Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, and Christian (effectively, Protestant) transhumanists.

And then there are Mormon Transhumanists and the Mormon Transhumanist Association (or MTA).⁴ The MTA is the oldest and largest religious transhumanist association (see, generally, Bialecki 2022a; Kneese 2023: 97–140; Kneese and Peters 2019.) It was started in 2006 by fourteen mostly Provo, Utah-based BYU graduates who, despite having no degrees in STEM fields, found themselves working in Utah’s booming tech sector (their degrees were from fields such as philosophy, music, and linguistics). They found each other in internet chat rooms, where they would have conversations focused on trying to get a grip on the nature and implications of both the industry they found themselves in and the new forms of technology that they had stumbled into. Eventually, they began to suspect that some of the eschatological promises of Joesph Smith’s nineteenth-century “restored gospel” movement might have been intended by God to be fulfilled by its human beneficiaries via technology. God had created the path, and it was up to humans to use engineering to follow it. After conversations along this line intensified, they incorporated into a 501(c)(3) nonprofit and applied for affiliate status to Humanity+, the world’s largest secular transhumanist umbrella association. The affiliate status was granted, but only after some tension; at one point, Humanity+ disaffiliated the MTA, allegedly because of the MTA’s religious nature (it was subsequently reaffiliated after a change in Humanity+’s leadership). By 2020, the MTA had grown to over a thousand members, with a strong social media presence, monthly meet-ups, a well-regarded annual conference featuring both secular transhumanist and Mormon

⁴A note on the use of the term Mormon: In the August 2018 General Conference (a bi-annual series of talks from Church leaders that all members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are encouraged to listen to, either in person, or more likely via broadcast or internet live-stream), President Russel M. Nelson stated that members should only use the Church’s full name, and rejected the use of “Mormon” to refer to the institution, its members, or the associated culture. I respectfully refrain from following his admonition here for two reasons: First, most of my research on the Church was done before the announcement, and hence my engaging in such a change in nomenclature would be ahistorical at best, and revisionary or anachronistic at worst. Second, many individuals and organizations, including the Mormon Transhumanist Association (the particular group I worked most closely with), have declined to change the name. This is partly for institutional reasons having to do with their status as a non-profit corporation. Another reason is that the term Mormon, though initially derogatory, was embraced by Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Further, a large part of the nineteenth-century religious speculative movement that the MTA draws some of its inspiration from understood itself to be engaged in “Mormonism” as well. The MTA also notes that several religious movements trace their origins back to Joseph Smith and include the Book of Mormon in their canon, and to change the association’s name might alienate those constituencies. Finally, even those who aspire to follow Nelson’s guidance find themselves often invoking the name Mormon despite their best intentions: as one of my interlocutors said, “I’m an orthodox Mormon. Even though I guess using the word ‘Mormon’ isn’t very orthodox.”

religious keynote speakers, a semi-academic edited volume, and a collectively written article published in a well-regarded progressive Mormon magazine.

Mormon Transhumanism is a good case study through which to put Farman's project to a stress test. If Farman's claims are valid, then the transhumanism in Mormon Transhumanism should be different, and the presence of religious elements, or the fruit of the organization's religious groundings, should result in their transhumanist imagination varying from secular transhumanism in marked ways. There are numerous places where one might look for differences—for instance, one might compare transhumanist and Mormon Transhumanist sensibilities regarding the ethics of artificial intelligence (see Bialecki 2019; 2023b). However, in this essay, I want to focus on discussions and practice regarding baptism and the raising of the dead. To do so, I will sketch out a brief genealogy of Mormonism's attitude toward the dead and the role of the archive and media in both death and resurrection, with the goal of rendering Mormon Transhumanist concepts more legible when held up against secular transhumanist concerns.⁵

Let us start with the baptism of the dead. Even in a religious movement full of practices and doctrines that look like either innovations or heresies from the perspective of default American Protestantism, the baptism of the dead and the offering of other proxy ordinances for the departed stands out. The idea behind this practice, in short, is that various saving ordinances—"ordinances" being a term used for a set of rituals that would be glossed as sacraments by other Christian movements—are only available to embodied individuals. In fact, the purpose of being born into the world is not just for spirits in premortal existence to have their agency tested in it as amnesiacs blind to their premortal lives, but also for these actors to be able to carry out embodied rituals that will allow them to enter the highest tier of heaven, where it is possible to achieve exaltation or theosis, that is, to become *like* or *a* god. However, those who have already died and thus can no longer be baptized can be the recipients of proxy baptisms, in which an embodied individual is baptized in the name of the deceased (see Bialecki 2022b; Cannell 2013: 232). It should be noted that this is not a *fait accompli* for the departed; true to the emphasis on individual agency, those who have been baptized by proxy retain the capacity to accept or reject the baptism as they choose.

There was no single impetus for this doctrine. Part of the warrant for the baptism of the dead is rooted in a quizzical passage penned by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:29 ("What do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?"). The practice is also obviously an attempt to wrestle with questions of theodicy and with the shadows left by personal tragedy. As noted by one historian (Bishop 1990), at the time that Smith announced the doctrine many Mormons had recently died in the violence of the "Mormon War" in Missouri and many more succumbed to malaria after their subsequent relocation to the swampy river bend of Nauvoo, Illinois. This series of events could not help but bring issues of mortality into sharp focus. Further, Joseph Smith was haunted by the fact that his older brother Alvin had died before him and thus could not be baptized as a Latter-day Saint; since Mormons believe in the

⁵ A secondary reason for my focus on the MTA is that there has been an upsurge in work by media studies scholars focused on the restored gospel movement (see, e.g., Peters and Peters 2018; Avance 2018), and as we shall see, media is important toward the understanding of both Mormon and Mormon Transhumanist ontologies.

necessity of baptism but reject the validity of baptisms by other faiths or denominations, Alvin would be cut off from salvation.

Whatever its origins, the practice of baptism of the dead is also clearly shaped by a theory of language that runs against the grain of Protestant and modern secular sensibilities about writing and speech. That is because recording and inscription play a strange ontological role in the practice. A bit of history helps here. When Smith first announced the doctrine in 1840 he provided little in the way of formal instruction, regularity in practice, or institutional control; people would identify deceased folks that they wished to have baptized and then head to the river and stand in as proxies for relatives and friends of either gender. Very soon, though, regularities were introduced. Cross-gender proxy baptisms, for instance, were prohibited in 1845 because Brigham Young judged that vicariously standing in the place of someone of a different gender was “inconsistent with the laws of heaven” (Bishop 1990: 87). Baptisms were also spatially circumscribed by being limited to the temple, which in theory forced a temporary halt to the practice until November 1841, when the structure’s baptismal font was complete (though the building would only be made available for other ritual uses in 1845). Finally, anyone requesting a proxy baptism had to present a certified receipt from the chief temple recorder saying that they were a “full tithe payer and thus ... entitled to use the baptismal font” (ibid.: 93).

But both the recorder and the act of recording have another important role to play in the baptism of the dead. In a series of letters Joseph Smith penned while on the run from charges of being an accessory to the attempted assassination of former Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs, he set up a requirement that each baptism must have a recorder present to be valid. This mandate to record was no mere formality or bookkeeping concern; the act of recording had ontological effects in the eternities. As Smith wrote, “That in all your recordings, it may be recorded in heaven; whatsoever you bind on earth, may be bound in heaven; whatsoever you loose on earth, may be loosed in heaven ... [a]nd again, let all the records be had in order, that they may be put in the archives of my Holy Temple, to be held in remembrance from generation to generation, saith the Lord of Hosts” (Doctrines & Covenants 127:7–9). In short, these were not Protestant sacraments that functioned as symbols but actual juridical acts that affected the post-mortal realm and had to be handled with bureaucratic precision. Given this eschatological importance, it should be no surprise that this recording was not to be done in a loosey-goosey fashion. The recorder had to be an eyewitness to the baptism, being “very particular and precise in taking the whole proceedings, certifying in his record that he saw with his eyes, and heard with his ears, giving the date, and names, and so forth, and the history of the whole transaction; naming also some three individuals that are present, if there be any present, who can at any time when called upon certify to the same, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established” (ibid. 128:3). Moreover, all initial recordings have the same force and import as if they had been done by the general recorder: “The record [made by lower-ranked recorders] shall be just as holy, and shall answer the ordinance just the same as if he had seen with [the chief temple recorder’s] eyes and heard with his ears, and made a record of the same on the general church book” (ibid. 128:4). In short, what mattered was the act of proper recording, and not the identity of the author.

In the eyes of media scholar John Durham Peters (2016), what Smith accomplishes here is a dizzying inversion of both Protestant and modernist metaphysical sensibilities about writing, in which immediacy is prized over distance and the

eternal is given pride of place over the temporal.⁶ By way of contrast, here, second-hand information controls first-hand, and proper writing is the chief engine of truth rather than serving as a mere fallible and contingent representation of truth, inasmuch as that which is not recorded just is not at all. This, of course, is not the first moment where the archive and the dead are sutured together in Mormon thought; the foundational text of this religious movement, the Book of Mormon, is a funereal account of a perished civilization, making it at once an archive and a necrology (Brown 2011). And when carrying out ordinances like baptism on the living, the priesthood also has the capacity to affect “heaven” through acts on earth. However, these exercises in priesthood authority over the living were more along the order of Austin-style performatives than they were something with the almost retrospective power of writing associated with Smith’s revelations on recording. Or, to be more exact, it was the act of recording itself that was the performative that had ontological force.

Whether the first instance is identified in the Book of Mormon or in the procedures for registering post-mortal baptisms, it seems that in early Mormonism we have an interest in media, death, and resurrection that bleeds over into something more. Over a century and a half, this practice of baptism of the dead gave birth to what might be thought of as not just an infrastructure for the preservation of information regarding the dead, but also for affecting and managing the dead. This infrastructure currently includes practices and archives not just for recording proxy ordinances but also for documenting genealogical data worldwide and making that data accessible in furtherance of those ordinances. There are roughly fifty-one hundred Family History centers located in 145 countries, where people can receive assistance gathering and ordering genealogical data (in 2023 their name was changed to “FamilySearch centers”).⁷ More importantly, there is also FamilySearch, a free, online resource containing genealogical information for some eight billion names, all recorded in some three billion digital images of genealogical material.⁸

Family History Centers and FamilySearch do not stand alone. They are integrated into what we might call—tongue-in-cheek—the temple-industrial complex. This is because FamilySearch is not just a database, though there is little sign it has any other functions for its non-Mormon users. Those who take the additional step of entering their Church member identification number into FamilySource gain access to an otherwise hidden tab entitled “Temple.” Clicking on it allows the user to select “ordinance ready” ancestors already identified through the user’s FamilySearch-constructed genealogical tree. Selecting an ancestor or a married pair of ancestors creates a PDF of what is called a “Family Name Ordinance Card” for the individual or a couple. The PDF card, which is a thin, rectilinear box, contains on it:

⁶Contrast Durham’s depiction of Mormonism with discussions of the recent Protestant language ideologies, which favor immateriality, spontaneity, originality in expression, and voice and the spoken word (Engelke 2007; Keane 2006; Robbins 2001).

⁷On the name change, see <https://www.thechurchnews.com/members/2023/1/10/23547874/familysearch-announces-new-name-for-family-history-library/> (last accessed 15 July 2024).

⁸It is worth noting how expansive this data is and how varied the sources of information contained in this archive. For instance, FamilySearch is also deeply integrated with a service not owned by the Church entitled BillionGraves, which presents itself as the “world’s largest” searchable index of GPS cemetery data.

Printed: 17 August 2024 14:18

Name

John or Jean LeBlanc

Male

Baptism	10 August 2007 LVEGA
Confirmation	18 September 2007 LVEGA
Initiatory	<input type="checkbox"/>
Endowment	
Sealing to Parents	

9NGF-TKC

Birth: 29 May 1873
Margaree, Inverness, Nova Scotia

4-1039-6622-7596-2156

View completed ordinances in FamilySearch

Check the box if you need this card after it is recorded. ☐

Figure 1. This is an image of a “Family Name Ordinance Card.” Such cards, generated from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints genealogical database, list an alphanumeric identifier, genealogical information such as date of birth and locale, and post-mortal ordinances that either have been or have yet to be performed on behalf of the ancestor.

- the name or names of the ancestor(s)
- a seven-character alphanumeric designator identifying that specific ancestor to prevent its being confused in the database with other individuals of the same name
- birthdate and place of birth
- the name and address of the individual making the request (that is, the FamilySearch user who selected the “ordinance ready” ancestor or pair of ancestors)
- the ancestor’s gender (with complementary male and female ancestors identified for all couples)
- a barcode identifying this specific card (along with a sixteen-character numeric code in case the barcode reader has difficulty reading the code)
- a list of ordinances to be performed
- specifically, for individuals: baptism, confirmation, initiatory (a washing and anointing ritual that is technically a part of the endowment), endowment (the chief initiatory rite in the temple available to all adult members in good standing), and sealing to parents (when that option is fitting)
- for couples, sealing to spouses

The next step is to print out the “Family name ordinance card” (usually referred to colloquially as a “name card” or “temple name”) and take it to one of the 188 temples worldwide.⁹ Once there, after presenting the card, you can either serve as the proxy

⁹As of this writing (July of 2024), there are 188 operating temples, seven temples that are temporarily closed for renovations, seven that are scheduled for dedication, and 148 that are either under construction or scheduled to begin construction soon, or have been announced as future construction projects.

for the same-sex ancestor whose card you presented, or you can have the temple give the name card to some other volunteer to stand in as a proxy at a later point. (It is common for Saints under the age of eighteen to attend the temple to stand in as a proxy for baptisms, and older volunteers often come to the temple to serve as proxies for other ordinances).

It is hard to convey the sense of affective and intimate ties to ancestors and the expansion of temporal horizons that this entire techno-religious apparatus can induce for those who integrate it into their religious practice. Put simply, though, the mixture of expansive genealogical knowledge and care through ritual ties the living and the dead together in ways quite different from what most genealogically challenged anglophone Americans experience. People commonly refer to ancestors six or seven generations back with the same kind of ease and informality that I would use to refer to an aunt or a cousin. I have seen completely filled charts of maternal and paternal heritage that go back six generations and identify sixty-four great-great-great-great grandparents, for a total of one hundred and twenty-six ancestors. I saw one name card for an ancestor born in the fifteenth century. (The FamilySearch software even allows one to build genealogies that trace back to Adam and Eve, even if some genealogical research professionals both inside and outside of the Church have voiced skepticism about the accuracy of those descent claims.¹⁰)

Furthermore, despite the importance of the internet to FamilySearch, this practice smacks not of digital ephemerality and accelerated ahistoricism but of a decelerated, material historicity. The internet is commonly thought of as destabilizing and rhizomic, an engine of churn and change, and traces of this destabilization can be found here: one Mormon friend jokingly referred to FamilySearch as “Necro-Facebook.” But the temple-industrial complex also brings to the fore another aspect of the internet: what often goes forgotten in discussions of the internet is that its original purpose was to *preserve*. Distributed and redundant, ARPANET, the internet’s predecessor, was intended to ensure that, in the event of nuclear war, not only would the various surviving nodes of a nation-state remain in communication but that governmental records regarding citizens would survive. Though most of the nation’s citizens would likely perish, thanks to the internet they would survive the apocalypse in the form of “databodies,” to use the term that media scholar Brian Michael Murphy (2022) employs for the penumbra of archived information that is created by and for each American.

But even given the aspect of internet-as-preservation, the archival nature of what we have here is unusual in its scope and scale. That is because of the materiality of this whole process. Part of this has to do with the nature of the temple. While there have been multiple shifts in the architectural style of Mormon temples over the years, very few convey a sense of ephemerality. This trait of solidity is occasionally credited to an urge by early Mormons to make their temples “fortress-like” after experiencing so much anti-Mormon violence during the nineteenth century (Hawthorne 2002). The austere aesthetics of contemporary temple interiors—heavy on neoclassic furniture, realism-leaning oil paintings and mural art, with a reliance on shades of off-white and muted pastel colors—may at times convey a sense of the unworldly, but not of the

¹⁰See “Is It Possible to Trace My Lineage back to Adam and Eve?” <https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/article/is-it-possible-to-trace-my-lineage-back-to-adam-and-eve> (last accessed 15 July 2024).

unmaterial. As one Mormon friend described it, “The rooms basically look like a rich grandmother’s drawing room.”

The temple is not the only aspect of the apparatus that conveys a perduring materiality; counterintuitively, the digital part of the complex does so as well. FamilySearch does present its genealogical records as textual data, but wherever possible, it also provides a view of the “original document”; that is, the microfilm photographic capture of the genealogical document, presented in the language of unmediated access to the physical document itself.¹¹ So presented, it is the materiality of the original document that stands out: the faltering imprint of a manual typewriter, the yellowing of the parchment, the scratch-like lines of a fountain pen. This effect can be undone at times, when the document takes a moment to render or when there is a disconnect between the textual data and the microfilm image, but the “transition to digital” of genealogical data indexes the image’s material original at the same time.

There is another way in which a “transition to digital” is not quite what we find with the Mormon Genealogical archive. As in other cases of online media, where information specialists are anxious about the short lifespan of most forms of digital storage, in the Church, there is also an interest in creating and protecting hard copies of the Mormon genealogical archive. The digitized documents are, again, mostly from microfilm photographs of the original genealogical source material: birth, death, and marital records, baptismal books, ship manifests, military rosters, and the like. And it should be noted that when stored in properly controlled conditions, microfilm is one of the most inexpensive, reliable, and long-lived compressed information media. So, it is no surprise that the Church’s microfilm genealogical material was not disposed of after digitization but kept where it has been since 1963, in a “secure vault” that constitutes the “world’s largest collection of genealogical records” (Schuler 1981). This location, named the “Granite Mountain Church Records Vault” (often just referred to as “the vault”), is carved into the north face of Little Cottonwood Canyon, just 20 miles southeast of Salt Lake City, the same place where the stones used to build the iconic Salt Lake City Temple were quarried. Protected by a 14-ton door and some 700 feet of pure stone, it was described in a 1979 Church newspaper circular celebrating the site as the place “where a billion people ‘live.’”¹²

The physical microfilm stored in Granite Mountain Vault may not be foremost on people’s minds when they are viewing digital images of FamilySearch records. But the Church does little to hide its existence and in times past has actively publicized it. Most Saints I have spoken with on the subject are aware the vault exists, though they may be hazy on the details (or, alternately, believe that it also houses a large cache of guns, something that the Church has repeatedly denied). It is easy to see the heightened protection against extreme weather events, civil unrest, and war that the Granite Mountain Vault affords as a function of the Church’s belief that we are in the latter-days, and in a way that would be correct; the Church has basically admitted that several times in material it circulates about the vault.¹³ But it also should be noted that the Granite Mountain Vault is following the commercial industry standard for the protection of highly prized information set by the over 2,600 commercial data

¹¹For a history of Mormon use of microfilm for genealogical purposes, and the way that this technology is spiritualized, see Allred 2023.

¹²Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1979.

¹³See, for example, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1975; 1979; 1988; and also Allred 2023: 143–45.

centers in the United States. Many of the largest data centers are, like the Granite Mountain Vault, converted former mines.¹⁴ This secular practice of storing highly prized physical information in mines is also, in its own way, a function of a *secular* belief that we may be in the latter-days: Granite-Mountain-like commercial spaces, such as the former limestone mine that is now Iron Mountain's National Data Center, were created during the Cold War to protect the paper, microfilm, and digital servers that they house from atomic blasts (Murphy 2022).

But fears of secular or religious apocalypses may not be the only religious elements that give the temple-industrial complex and the archive that it is centered around a sense of solid substantiality. That is because Mormonism is a post-Copernican, post-Newtonian religion that affirms materialism as an ontology. According to doctrine, everything is material, including spirit (which is simply a more refined form of matter rather than being matter's antithesis). Even God has a material body, as well as a specific dwelling place that having a material body necessitates, located near the star or planet "Kolob." Kolob has never been astronomically identified, though proposed locations include the Galactic Center (also called Sagittarius A), the pole star, and the "Great Attractor," the name for the center of gravity for the galactic supercluster that includes the Milky Way (see Bialecki 2020).

The point to be made here is that there is a mirroring between the religious imagination and physical media that ends up shaping a complete vision of what counts as real, how the real is divided and organized, and what powers the various aspects and divisions of the real have. This is neither an instance of a top-down imposition of a sensibility or an apodictic technological determinism. "Ontology, whatever else it is, is usually just forgotten infrastructure," as John Durham Peters has stated (2020: 38), though it would perhaps be better to describe the archival aspects of the Church we have just discussed as not so much *forgotten* as *habituated*, more along the lines of "ready-at-hand" in the sense that Heidegger used it. Religious concepts drive the choice of technological media and how that media is exercised, and that media, in turn, tweaks the articulation of religious concepts while giving those concepts new life.

In this particular case, the archive has a religious association not just with death but also with resurrection, inasmuch as it is access to the archive that transforms the status of those beyond the veil, resituating the status they will enjoy when they rise from the dead when Jesus returns. This privileging of the archive also conflates the records of individuals with the individuals themselves; a specific manner of recording is the key component of a proxy baptism, and (with the exception of those dead who explicitly reject these ordinances) what is recorded in this world has effects in the eternities. We can also see this in the language the Church uses: the digitization of the microfilm image of the genealogical document in the archive is presented as viewing the original document itself, and the microfilm archive in Granite Mountain Vault is referred to as a place where the individuals "live," even if that life is just a physical trace on a microfilm record. While there will always be complications such as doubled records or individuals who have had the same proxy ordinance performed for them multiple times (this usually being the result of earlier, pre-fully rationalized proxy baptism practices), effectively, the record is the actuality. The database that

¹⁴Paranthetically, the relative absence of mines in Utah may be in part a function of Brigham Young's hostility toward mining as an industry.

FamilySearch is integrated into *is* now the record spoken of in Doctrines & Covenants 127 and 128 (see Mehr 2019: 25). Finally, during all this, the sense of the archive's *materiality* is essential, due to doctrinal reasons such as the concreteness of the temple as a ritual space, to the manner of the presentation of the genealogical material, and finally to the consciousness of the mountain-housing of the microfilmed genealogical material records FamilySearch relies upon.¹⁵ Unlike much of the internet's infrastructure, which remains hidden (see Farman 2015), the infrastructure supporting this whole complex is insistent.

We can now finally pivot back to this paper's opening question about transhumanism. There will be a high degree of continuity as we shift our gaze from the Church's history, or the present day, to the speculative future imagined by many Mormon Transhumanists. There are important differences, of course, especially in the nature of the friction that technology produces. When discussing transhumanism, we are contemplating speculative technologies, extrapolating not from concrete affordances of actually existing practices but from architectonic imaginings about how such future engineering *could* function.¹⁶ This is not to say that we have entered a dream time; plausibility is still a desideratum, at least when imagining the bridging technologies that are seen as gateways to some of the more expansive transhumanist visions. But religion will also matter.

What we see here in the religious aspect of Mormon Transhumanist thought is a return of the archive as central in resurrection, both in its materialized aspects but also in the sense of the archive as determining, collapsing any gap between representation and reality. Let us take the resurrection of the ancestors first. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) is FamilySearch's for-profit cousin. It was started as a business venture by two Brigham Young University graduates who sold copies of Church publications on floppy disks out of the trunk of their car. A few changes in business models later, the venture incorporated and shifted focus to becoming a for-profit genealogical site offering much of the same service that FamilySearch does, including a degree of interoperability between their records and free Ancestry membership for those belonging to the Church. There are other ways Ancestry mirrors FamilySearch, including having its own archive of GPS-identified burial sites, but what is unique to [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) is that their genealogical information and other necrologies are supplemented by a service that reads DNA to identify not just other Ancestry users that one might be related to but also the likely sites of origin and ethnicity of one's distant predecessors. This information is perhaps problematic since it ends up offering a rather essentialized view of pure ur-ethnic groupings rather than the churn

¹⁵It should be noted that while in 2017 the Church stopped distributing microfilm to the local FamilySearch centers/Family History centers as they transitioned entirely to digital scans of microfilm copies of genealogical data, the original microfilms remain protected in Granite Mountain, and the data at the centers also come accompanied by image captures of the original documents. See <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-completes-major-microfilm-digitization-initiative> (last accessed 17 July 2024).

¹⁶The line between speculative and actually existing technology is less clear than one might imagine because continual experimentation and advancement means that the divide is ever moving, because existing technology is the imaginative seed for more speculation, and because of the way that speculative projects serve as the impetus for actually existing technological initiatives (see, e.g., Bernstein 2019; Boss 2021; Cohen 2020; 2021; Farman 2016).

and indistinction that has characterized human demographic history. Still, it has allowed for striking achievements, such as a partnership with Calico, the Alphabet subsidiary focusing on life extension. Still bolder, though, is Ancestry's reconstruction, through nothing more than the genetic samples of descendants and their genealogical data, of a partial genome for nineteenth-century individuals for whom there is no extant direct genetic sample.¹⁷

This latter achievement has led to a specific line of speculation among both Mormon Transhumanists and some [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) programmers (groups that, in recent times, have overlapped considerably). They speculate that this wealth of information could be deployed to quite other ends. There is talk not just of the reconstruction of ancestors but of their *simulation*. They imagine that through some technology like virtual reality, one could walk among and converse with one's ancestors, and perhaps even experience what their world is like. What is striking about this notion is that these *simulated* ancestors would in some way have status as not just "actual" people but as continuities of the original ancestors. This is because many Mormon Transhumanists endorse the simulation hypothesis, the idea that this world is a computer model of some kind. That hypothesis, after all, allows for an intuitively graspable non-supernatural technological creationism; it also is a model for how, once technological theosis is achieved, they themselves will be able to create "worlds without end," to quote a popular Mormon hymn. This makes simulations as real to them as is the world they inhabit, rather than making this world as unreal, as most people would judge a simulation. As some Mormon Transhumanists have pointed out to me several times, the simulation hypothesis also suggests some kind of ethical and ontological parity between humans on this stratum of the simulation and the conscious simulations that humans would create.

So, by Mormon Transhumanist lights, a simulated ancestor is a resurrected ancestor. Some Mormon Transhumanists have even suggested that through technology such as three-dimensional printing, simulated ancestors might be transferred from the simulation to this world, effecting a resurrection of the dead that would be almost scriptural. One thing that I have noted is that Mormon Transhumanists tend not to object that any entity created in this way would merely be a simulacrum of an ancestor and not the ancestor himself or herself. This lack of anxiety about this seemingly core question of identity, I would argue, is yet again another instance of the greater Mormon tendency to see the archive as the determinant of what is true, a tendency that goes back to the remarkable privileging of recording over presence seen in Joseph Smith's instructions regarding proxy baptism.

Ancestor simulation is not the only form of resurrection that Mormon Transhumanists discuss. Many of them intend to be cryonically preserved when they die, and several have purchased "family plans." Cryonics, they understand, is a risky proposition. Indeed, despite the heightened levels of respectability that cryonics has enjoyed due to increasing interest in it from Silicon Valley, it is still, to a degree, a pariah among scientists working on low-temperature preservation and treatment of living tissue. One reason for this disfavor is that, while technology is still advancing, contemporary freezing almost always necessitates some kind of seemingly unrepeatable trauma to the cell wall. Cryogenicists respond that future engineering

¹⁷See Diep 2014.

techniques, such as nanotechnology, might be used to undo this damage. Recently, another response has started to receive prominence: the idea that the frozen body exists more as a backup, constituting a wealth of information that could be relied upon to rebuild a new body for the cryopreserved individual.

Here, the body itself becomes the archive of the person. This move again mirrors advances in archiving information technology, with increasing interest in practices such as using DNA as an information storage medium. One use of DNA being investigated by researchers is having “nanoscale biological devices” use it to “record ... biosignals.” Such devices would become the ultimate medical information tracker, allowing an unparalleled view of biological processes. But this would also constitute an almost ontological shift in how the body relates to the archive. To quote Brian Michael Murphy again, “Such technology would make a body the storage space for data about that very body, resulting in a completely seamless merging of the biobody and the databody, a reconfiguration of genes so that they record and store data about themselves, turning every human body into a paradox, a redundancy, a backup of itself” (2022: 194).

Once again, in the idea of body as archive, we have a thought that stresses the materiality of the archive, the connection of the archive to resurrection, and a conflation of the archived recording of the person and the person itself. So, it is perhaps unsurprising that the notion of body as archive has been popular with Mormon Transhumanists, even if it is not strictly a Mormon Transhumanist idea. But there is an additional wrinkle. When I ask Mormon Transhumanist interlocutors what the ultimate fate of the cryopreserved body would be after the information necessary for reconstruction is extracted from it, I have more than once heard that the newly created body would likely incorporate material from the cryopreserved body. This would be done, not due to any technical necessity, but to create a sensation of “continuity” with one’s prior instantiation. Here, the Mormon materialist framing and the identity of archive and person collapse into each other yet again—another way in which the biobody and databody are merged, this time with the physical remains serving not as information, but as an index, pointing to and thereby performatively creating a material and subjective continuity.

What we also have is a break from the logic of secular transhumanism. The resurrection of ancestors is not a driving concern among most secular transhumanists. There are exceptions: famously, transhumanist pioneer, author, and inventor Ray Kurzweil has amassed an archive of material by or pertaining to his late father, from writings to musical composition to DNA, all with the intent of creating an artificial intelligence that would effectively *be* his father (Bialecki 2020: 227–31). But this is not the same thing as the aspiration towards a universal resurrection of all of humanity that animates Mormon Transhumanism; Kurzweil, for instance, has expressed ambivalence about bringing even his own mother back (see 2023: 156–57). Speaking generally, when secular transhumanists do speak of ancestor simulation as a universal project, these simulations are referred to not as a concrete activity that is an interim step in the resurrection the dead, but as a simulation-hypothesis explanation as to why possible simulators would run simulations in the first place; they are equally likely to propose simulations as tests of counterfactual histories or entertainment, as well. Few secular transhumanists, though, display much enthusiasm for focusing their time and attention on creating such ancestor simulations. This is different from saying no secular transhumanists advocate universal resurrection, of course (see, e.g., Jones 2017; Koehler 2019), and

Cosmism, a still-existing, mystically inflected precursor of transhumanism deeply influenced by Russian Orthodox theology, has also advocated the physical resurrection of all of humanity (Bernstein 2019; Young 2012). But these instances are the exceptions, and in the case of Russian Orthodoxy, it is not entirely clear that “secular” is even the proper category for the movement. In short, with some exceptions, discussions of ancestor simulation are mostly invoked as evidence for a favored ontology rather than as an overriding ethical imperative. And to my knowledge, no secular transhumanist has advocated for the incorporation of material from cryo-preserved bodies into any subsequent iterations of that person.

But what is more, with Mormon Transhumanism, even as there is a privileging of information ranging from the use of archival data in resurrection to viewing the body as its own backup, we have a break with secular transhumanist informatics, at least to the degree that it is functioning as an aesthetic, and also, I would argue, with informatics as secular transhumanism’s ontology. For the religious transhumanists that I have been speaking about here, it is not so much that the world is comprised of nothing but information but rather that information is thought of or comes in the form of the archive, and the archive that matters in multiple senses: it is determinant, constitutive of, and necessary for the resurrected person, and is itself a material entity interlaced with a multiplicity of other markedly material processes. This is not to say that this is an ontology without fractures or internal contradictions. The free agency that stands at the center of the Mormon eschatological imagination (see Bialecki 2023b), to a degree, runs orthogonal to the performative and controlling power of inscription. However, it should be noted that the particular variant of this ontology that animates Mormon Transhumanism undoes this tension to the degree that it makes the archive not a list of what is happening in some other scene—the spirit world—but instead it makes the moment of inscription in the archive and the execution of free will the same immanent, immediate act.¹⁸

Some may question whether the act of identifying a materialist Mormon transhuman vision of the archive that cannot be reduced to that of informatics is enough to suggest that secular transhumanism is not religion. Again, this is a question that, despite its strange insistence, is somewhat uninteresting, at least if this is undertaken as nothing more than a classificatory exercise, some kind of social science crypto-Linnaean hyper-scrupulousness. However, asking this question does let us know what difference religion as a marked category makes—both in its presence (Mormon Transhumanism) and its absence (in transhumanism’s primary mainstream secular expression). The peculiarities of Mormon Transhumanist ontology support Abou Farman’s claims that secular transhumanism, for all of its seemingly spiritual trappings, is operating in a techno-scientific mode, even if it is a speculative one oriented to a certain spirituality. When religion enters the picture, or at least when *this* religion enters the picture, transhumanist ontology changes, and informatics gains a materiality that is otherwise antithetical to its definition.

There are ramifications that go beyond this particular test case. Transhumanism is generally presented as monolithic, with a focus on the Anglophone secular variant of secular transhumanism. As is its wont, though, anthropology and other ethnography

¹⁸Note that, according to Mormon Transhumanists, living in a simulated universe does not negate free will; our ability to make independent choices persists, whether we inhabit a computer-generated realm or the physical universe we perceive.

centered social science investigations have pluralized transhumanism now: we have had analyses of Russian variants, medical-therapeutic variants, and anti-capitalist/anti-corporatist variants, and the ethnographic study of transhumanism is just beginning (Bernstein 2019; Boss 2021; Cohen 2020; 2021). Moreover, internal variations within secular transhumanism are starting to be charted, including forms of transhumanism that eschew the title of “transhumanism” altogether (see Eriksen and Dawley n.d.). Identifying the role played by ontological imaginings (and the communications infrastructures that both shape and are shaped by those imaginings) may well have a vital role in theorizing the workings of the geographic, economic, and demographic engines of difference that create these multiple expressions of transhumanisms.

But this discussion also does something else. It helps shine a light on the trajectory of Joseph Smith’s restored gospel religious movement. Mormonism is a religion that is deeply challenged by the unfortunate fact that its origins and history have been fully documented. Further, it has over and again been subjected to social and governmental opprobrium and violence, though the latter has significantly weakened since the beginning of the twentieth century. But Mormonism has also managed to reinvent itself several times during its short, two hundred-year history, all while retaining a strong sense of identity and continuity, at least among the set of Mormons in the inter-mountain West who make up the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. While what I have presented here cannot be considered a core rumination on the question of simultaneous continuity and change among Mormons, I think it does suggest how a few ontological and ethical commitments can not only adapt in the face of institutional growth and technological innovation but catalyze these changes to work to intensify those commitments.

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