Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 8 | Issue 2

Article 5

4-1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Ferré, Frederick (1991) "Technological Faith and Christian Doubt," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil1991821

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol8/iss2/5>

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TECHNOLOGICAL FAITH AND CHRISTIAN DOUBT

Frederick Ferré

Technology, an object of little-considered but intense faith in our modern civilization, has long posed deep problems for Biblical thought. If technology is defined broadly enough, Christian attitudes toward it illuminate conflicting responses to culture itself. Should technology be regarded as liberating (Cox) or strictly in the domain of sin (Ellul)?

Christian thought needs more clear thinking about technology. What cognitive style, what fundamental values, ought "Christian" technologies to embody? Theologically informed technology assessment will not only help guide society toward a better future and but also give Christians the basis for making ethically sound practical choices today.

Some day historians may look back on the 20th century as an age of unusual faith. I am not now referring to the dramatic revivals of fundamentalism, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, in the latter decades of the century. Those revivals I take to be primarily reactions against the dominant faith of the century. That dominant faith itself has been an all-pervading and blissful trust in technology. There are many among us who still hardly recognize the degree to which technological faith has characterized our age, but this obliviousness tends to confirm the thesis, since ages tend not to be self-aware of the basic premises on which they stand.

Technological Faith

The gradual awareness of a ubiquitous faith generally emerges together with challenges to it. This was spectacularly true in Christendom at the time of the great Lisbon earthquake, for example, which was used by Voltaire in *Candide* as an occasion for satire against Leibnizian theodicy. Equivalent massive shocks to naïve technological faith have been administered to our culture recently by the epoch-marking events we remember as Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. How could these have happened? How could "they," the experts, have allowed such a breakdown in the order of things? The same sort of pain and searching, amounting to nothing less than a crisis of faith, is observed after major air tragedies, when the computerized efficiency of the air transport system betrays us. Above all, the agony of the *Challenger*

explosion before the horrified eyes of millions, with its still-continuing aftermath of recrimination and soul-searching, may stand as a symbol of the spiritual torment of our time, caught unwillingly as many are in recognition that a world-view is in jeopardy. The efforts of the priesthood of the established order, the parade of NASA officials and astronauts and the President himself, reaffirming the creeds of technological faith and urging the continuing validity of technological imperatives, have done little to provide needed balm.

So much has been staked on technological faith that the levels of anxiety produced by discovering that it has, indeed, been faith all along are inevitably high. It would be tedious and unnecessary to enumerate the ways. One obvious example, however, is the faith our society has shown in the ability of the technical experts to cope successfully with nuclear wastes that are now building up and have built up for decades without any really effective solution for the mind-boggling long run over which they need to be safely stored, insulated from the biosphere for tens of thousands of years. Despite warnings, we went ahead with nuclear technology, creating these wastes at an ever-accelerating rate, with the blissful confidence that "they" would come up with a solution—it did not matter that "they" themselves did not ("yet") know just how it would be done. What could be a more touching act of faith? Not only was it a *sacrificium intellectus*, it showed a readiness to sacrifice the future safety of all life on the planet on the blessed assurance that a technological fix would somehow, over more millennia than any civilization has ever been sustained, take care of us and our progeny to the end of time.

Other examples could be given, like the faith that environmental degradation, acid rain, the ozone hole, the greenhouse effect, resource depletion, food production, population control, protection from accidents of biotechnology, the answer to AIDS—all can be entrusted to technological providence. But more examples are not necessary. It is abundantly clear that our civilization is grounded deep on faith and has committed itself, far beyond lip-service, to its creed. When we think about death, our immediate recourse is to medical research, to organ transplants, to the deep freeze of a temporary cryogenic limbo while we await technological resurrection. When we think about sin, we turn to technologies of behavior modification and chemical cures. When we think about providence, we trust in technological progress. We even find evangelists for fusion energy competing with other cults in airports, our contemporary temples. The 20th century may indeed be remembered as an age of unusual faith.

Christian Doubts

Against this faith, however, there has been a long tradition of Christian doubt. Sometimes it appears in amusing ways, as in the earnest debates

experienced by my father as a young man in Minnesota over lightning rods. Was it a sin to put lightning rods on one's house and barns? Should God's threat from the skies be deflected by the work of human hands? The theological depth of a position that worries about omnipotence being hindered by a piece of metal and a grounding wire may be questioned, but the general doubt about placing one's faith in technology comes through loud and clear.

This perennial worry is dug deep into the biblical tradition. We find it vividly in the story of the Tower of Babel. There human technological prowess is depicted as a challenge to God. The tower, which was to have its "top in the heavens" (Genesis 11:4, RSV), was just a sample of what human beings could do if they should remain united on a technical project:

And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6, RSV).

Such prowess was clearly not permissible, so clearly that no reason is thought necessary to be given for its impermissibility.

More generally, the technologies of civilization itself—the word "*civil*" itself coming from the Latin for "city"—are deeply suspect in the early stories of scripture. Who, after all, is responsible for the first city? It was the major artifact of the murderous Cain.

Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, east of Eden....and he built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch (Genesis 4:16-17, RSV).

Thus civilization itself bears the mark of Cain. The theme of the wicked city—Sodom, Nineveh, Babylon—runs as a deep pedal point through the biblical saga. We are situated by these stories just outside the urban technological enterprise, positioned with the viewpoint of a suspicious desert nomad looking askance at the corruption brought about by too much ease and by too much fancy know-how.

My honored professor of Old Testament, Philip Hyatt, extended this viewpoint still further, arguing that the "knowledge of good and evil" against which Adam and Eve were warned in the Garden of Eden could not have been knowledge of *moral* good and evil, since to have been able to know that it was "wrong" to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree required prior *moral* comprehension of exactly the same sort. Instead, the forbidden fruit had to be a kind of knowledge that both characterizes God and might be considered wrong to fall into human possession. This double criterion rules out the silly notion that *sexual* knowledge was at issue, since such knowledge could hardly lead to becoming "like God" (Genesis 3:5, RSV). If not sexual and not moral, then perhaps the essence of the forbidden fruit

was *technical* knowledge—*how* to do “good and evil” things, as God only properly should know how to do. The original sin, on the Hyatt hypothesis, would be technical hubris.

This is, of course, highly speculative. It is an interesting speculation, however, despite its variance from the received tradition in which moral, not technological, innocence was lost in Eden. It does cohere well with many other biblical themes, and with myths of other cultures, like the Prometheus story in which fire, the symbol of technological capacity, was stolen from heaven at great cost for human benefit. If it is at all correct, it would place biblical religion on an unalterable collision course not only with technological faith but also with technology itself.

The Great Debate

Christian doubts about technological *faith*, as a rival religious commitment, have not always led Christians to reject the technological *enterprise* as such. On the contrary, there are among recent articulators of Christian faith strong defenders of the legitimacy of, even the theological mandate for, technology.

One of these voices was that of Harvey Cox. Though Cox himself has become more cautious since *The Secular City* was published in 1965,² the book stands as a reminder that Christians may not always feel obliged to stand aloof from the technological world—what Cox calls the “technopolis”—to which they have contributed so much. In fact, if Cox’s reading of scripture is correct, biblical spirituality was the key factor in freeing the human spirit from domination by local goblins and allowing the full technological expression of human intelligence to get under way. In the Hebrew-Christian scriptures it is made perfectly clear that God, the only proper object of worship, is not nature but is the transcendent creator of nature. This liberating realization of the transcendence of the sacred had the effect of “desacralizing” the natural resources needed by technological society. God’s clarion call to humanity, that we “subdue the earth,” made Christianity the primary spiritual vehicle for the coming of the present age.

To Cox’s Protestant position can be added the Roman Catholic views of Norris Clarke. Clarke chooses a different theological starting place. He does not begin with the “disenchantment” of nature but with the story of the creation of Adam and Eve in the “image” of God. If humanity is to live up to its status, reflecting in a lesser way the character of God, then the human mission must include God’s aspect both as contemplator and as creative worker. As Clarke writes:

...God is at once contemplative and active. He has not only thought up the material universe, with all its intricate network of laws, but he has actively brought it into existence and supports and guides its vast pulsating network

of forces. God is both a thinker and a worker, so to speak. So, too, man should imitate God his Father by both thinking and working in the world.³

The lesser human role is indicated by the fact that we do not, like God, create *ex nihilo*. Our materials must be found and simply refashioned. But the analogy between our technological work and God's making and doing remains valid. Moreover, Clarke points out, the biblical story of creation includes the human vocation to co-create with God. The first humans—significantly, before the Fall—were given a garden to “till and keep” (Genesis 2:15, RSV). The incarnate God-man, too, was depicted as a tool-user.

Thus the labor of the young Jesus as a carpenter in Nazareth already lends, in principle, a divine sanction to the whole technological activity of man through history.⁴

Clarke is conscious of the tendency of humans to abuse technological powers and to exploit them for selfish advantage. Cox, too, mentions this tendency but sets it aside as just immature, “essentially childish and... unquestionably a passing phase.”⁵ Clarke, in contrast, takes a darker view, acknowledging that theological interpretation of technology must not omit warnings against sin. Christians cannot be naive. Every aspect of human life and practice is subject to distortion and abuse. This is the sad legacy of the Fall. But, Clarke argues, such a warning is properly against the *misuse* of technology, not against the technological enterprise as a whole or in principle. A proper balance needs to be struck, he argues, so that

the alert Christian, alive to the full implications of the Christian vision of man, will look on technology with a restrained and carefully qualified optimism, seeing it as at once a great potential good for man by nature and yet in the hands of fallen and selfish human nature an almost equally potent instrument for evil.⁶

A forceful theological counter-attack against any sort of technological optimism, “carefully qualified” or not, comes from Jacques Ellul, who founds his wholly different evaluation of technology on a different rendering of some of the same scriptural passages noted by Cox and Clarke. Ellul, a Calvinist, makes much of the radical break that entered history with the Fall. In paradise, before the estrangement that forced us to survive by the sweat of our brow, there was no laboring, no use of tools. It is impossible for us now, with sin-laden minds, to think back across the bottomless chasm of Original Sin to imagine how Adam and Eve “tilled and kept” the Garden of Eden. But Ellul uses a *reductio ad absurdum* argument to show how wrong it would be to imagine Adam and Eve working with tools in the Garden, as Clarke seems to suppose. “Keeping” or “guarding” Eden (different versions translate this word differently), could not—certainly not in *paradise*—have involved the use of swords or spears or other weapons. That much is ruled out by the total inappropriateness of armaments in God's pre-Fallen, perfect environment.

But if "guarding" allows of no weapons, then "tilling" allows of no farm machinery. If one is absurd, so is the other. If Paradise is to be even gropingly thought about as a true Paradise, Ellul concludes, we must resolutely omit technology from the picture.

No cultivation was necessary, no care to add, no grafting, no labor, no anxiety. Creation spontaneously gave man what he needed, according to the order of God who had said, "I give you..." (Genesis 1:29).⁷

Technology, then, is *tout court* in the domain of sin. It had no place in Paradise and arose only because of the Fall. To think of human efforts as "co-creating" with God, Ellul holds, is blasphemy. God's creative activity before the Fall was not in need of completing or perfecting. We must not, in our pride over our human technological abilities, forget that "creation as God made it, as it left his hands, was *perfect and finished*."⁸ We put on airs when we tell ourselves that we are "working along with" God. If it had not been for human sin, there would have been no need for technology, because "God's work was accomplished,...it was complete,...there was nothing to add."⁹ Ellul's theological condemnation of the technological imperative is complete. In his well-known sociological analyses he makes further important distinctions between the tools of the craft traditions and the all-devouring efficiencies of modern "technique." The former are less objectionable, though by no means theologically mandated; the latter are demonic and out of human control. Both as sociologist and as theologian, Ellul provides no comfort and gives no quarter to the defenders of technology.

Such an uncompromising prophetic voice seems to harmonize well with the Hyatt hypothesis and the chorus of suspicious or negative biblical attitudes we noticed earlier. But there is one serious defect in Ellul's position from a Christian standpoint: there is no final word of good news, no balancing affirmation of redemption to match the stern warnings of judgment and sin. A more balanced position is sought by Egbert Schuurman, another from the Calvinist tradition, when he argues that Ellul leaves us with despair, but that despair is not biblical. As Schuurman puts it:

It is a constant consolation to know that man on his own and by himself cannot make the meaning of creation, the Kingdom of God, impossible. On the contrary, the fact that the Kingdom of God is already on the way means that at any moment people may be converted and led once again to seek the Kingdom—even in a technological society.¹⁰

Refining the Issues

This swift survey of differing Christian views on the proper Christian stance toward technology and the technological society makes clear how urgently we need to develop our thinking in this area. Theologians can hardly set themselves a more potentially fruitful task than thinking deeply, in a

sustained way, about the technological phenomenon from the standpoint of ultimate commitments. Christians seem unable to live comfortably with the technological dimension; but, equally, Christians today are certainly unable to live without it.

A generally acceptable definition of the concept of "technologies" would help this thinking process. To some, the concept seems self-evidently associated with the "high tech" of the 20th century, entailing that all before the industrial revolution be relegated to "crafts" instead of "technologies" proper. To others, the concept seems self-evidently associated with tools of any kind. To the former, technologies are indissolubly linked with science, with all the attitudinal ambivalences this linkage carries. To the latter, technologies are more pervasive, for better or for worse, in the character and typical expressions of the human species.

Without attempting to go into the arguments in any detail here,¹¹ perhaps a reconciling suggestion may be offered as follows: When we speak of "technologies" in general we must include all the ways in which intelligence implements practical purposes. To include less would be to create a conceptual bifurcation between past and present ways of implementing our purposes that would be insupportable by the evidence on objective reflection. Modern automobiles are different but not absolutely different, after all, from horse-drawn carriages or chariots. On the other hand, it is neither ethnocentric nor myopic to insist on recognizing the vast changes introduced into our practical means by the rise of modern science. A radio bears some but not much similarity, for example, to a jungle drum. Therefore the *genus*, "technology," will stand for all practical implementations of intelligence; the *differentia* will be the kind of intelligence involved, whether habitual-traditional, on the one hand ("craft" technologies), or analytical-scientific ("high" technologies) on the other.

Having a definition that firmly roots the technological phenomenon in human purposes and intelligence helps make it clear to the theologian that technology is nothing alien to the categories of theological discipline. Indeed, looked at in this way, coming to terms with technology is part of the age-old task of Christian faith coming to terms with culture itself. Christianity, and more generally biblical religion, has yet to complete the long process of defining itself unequivocally with respect to the works of human hands. The prophetic tradition, standing outside culture and thundering against its perceived defects, contrasts with the priestly tradition, serving inside culture and seeking to relate the ideals of religion to the realities of social life. Both are part of the fabric of biblical faith. How shall Christ be related to culture? What has Jerusalem to do with Athens? Sharply varying answers have long been given over culture in general, and varying answers should likewise be expected over technological culture, embodying, as it does, the characteristic values and knowledge of human beings at a given time and space.

Asking the question in a new way, however, and with a new sense of urgency, may elicit fresh degrees of clarity. When the question is put today in terms of perennial Christian doubts and modern technological faith, some things newly emerge. Above all, it becomes evident that the extremes will not hold for Christian thinkers. First, Christians cannot, without grave danger to their own faith, embrace the pagan quasi-religion of "technologism." Its anthropology is uncritical; its soteriology is unidimensional; its cosmology is reductionist. Placing unqualified confidence in the works of human hands is technolatry¹² unworthy of Christian conscience. But, second, Christians cannot, without abandoning vital aspects of their faith, participate in wholesale gnostic rejection of intelligent methods for dealing with the material order. Gnostic rejection of materiality is tantamount to the rejection of the reality of incarnation. Gnostic absolute dualisms of good and evil are tantamount to despair over the redeemability of all creation. Somehow the balance for Christians, between remembering human disobedience and trusting in divine redemption, between acknowledging the Fall and accepting the mandate to till a garden and fill a world, must be maintained. Anything less lacks something of the warnings—and the promises—of the full Christian message.

Toward Christian Technologies

A deeper, sustained meditation on the relationship between Christianity and technology, however, will need to press theologians and Christian philosophers to go beyond merely refining their reactions to the actualities of contemporary technological culture. Though no individual or group deliberately makes a culture, yet cultures are not given once and for all but are shaped and reshaped. Though the complex and integrated technologies of our era are not simple voluntary tools, to be picked up and set down at will, yet technologies evolve—sometimes quickly—as knowledge and values change. Is there meaning in the thought that Christian styles of knowledge and Christian fundamental values could inform the technologies of a future culture so pervasively and characteristically that it would be possible to speak of "*Christian technologies*" as well as "modern technologies" or "high technologies"?

The question rings oddly at first on our ears. We have no logical place for phrases like "Christian mathematics" or "Christian physics." How, then, could there be a use for an expression like "Christian technologies"? And yet all technologies, as the practical implementations of intelligence, embody characteristic *values* that always go before and define practical aims. Every artifact is the incarnation of some value, positive or negative. The value may be obvious and widespread, like a preference for protection—from weather and predators—and the embodiment of that evaluation in housing technologies. Or the value may be more esoteric, like appreciating a certain level of sonic quality and embodying that value in digital recording technologies. Every technological item

is the implementation in this way of some aversion or adversion. The mere fact of it shows that someone, at some time, considered those values permissible and pursuable. By studying classes of technologies in this way we can discover what values are characteristic of a given culture, what sorts of things are at least not taboo. The food-related technologies of a vegetarian society, for example, will be quite different from those of a society of meat-eaters.

Values are one necessary condition for technologies, but values alone are obviously not sufficient to account for them. Simply valuing something will not automatically give us a means to its achievement. Every artifact is the embodiment not only of some value or values but also of some level of *knowledge*, if only the knowledge of an inherited tradition or rule of thumb. The style, what I have come recently to call the "epistemic norms," of such knowledge shows in its technological embodiment. Scientific knowledge, especially, with its emphasis on precision, on quantification, on analysis, may be seen incarnated in the high technologies of our time.¹³ These technologies have tended to be powerful and efficient ("efficiency" is itself a concept and a value that reflects the style and norms of scientific knowing), pursuing a clear, often quantitative, objective with singular focus. Our high technologies, invented with Cartesian logic, have thus tended to produce "side effects" unanticipated by the linear methods of knowing that were used in designing them. These effects, in turn, require still more technological solutions, reminding us of the familiar way in which scientific answers lead endlessly to further unanswered questions. They have also tended to be justified by the "bottom line" of quantifiable, material considerations—often measured in money, sometimes in ever-higher speeds or in comparative megadeaths.

If Christianity is truly a distinctive way of thought and life, then what is wrong with Christian thinkers attempting to imagine together what technologies might represent the practical embodiment of characteristic Christian cognitive styles or epistemic norms, and of distinctive Christian values? This, perhaps, is the sense in which it might after all be meaningful to speak of possible "Christian technologies."

Is there a characteristic Christian cognitive style? The question is debatable, since there are so many strands of thought woven into the Christian tapestry. But it might be argued that Christian knowledge, whatever else might characterize it, would at least be *respectful of the integrity of the object known*. This entails that the ways of knowing used by the intensely committed officers of the Inquisition were not Christian. If this is a paradox, so be it. But if it is correct, the normative Christian cognitive style would be compassionate and warm, not remote and cool as has been the approved paradigm for modern knowers since Descartes. It would also, in consequence, be reluctant to cut up wholes in an effort to know the parts out of their relationships. We might call this cognitive style *compassionate holism*.

Is there a distinctive dominant Christian value? Again, debates may be expected, since visions of the essence of Christianity differ. But one long tradition, to which I adhere, has held that *agapé*, self-forgetful concern for the other, is the one norm by which all the rest are to be measured. If this stress on *agapé* is accepted, the technologies of a Christian future would be very different from those of Europe and America in the last three hundred years. Private profit as a motivating value would be replaced by community well-being; synthesizing concern for the interlocking multiple effects of technological interventions on society and on the natural environment would replace linear, analytical solutions; qualitative rather than quantitative considerations would rule decisions; the unquestioned dominance of the "bottom line" and of efficiency would be balanced by other concerns.

These thoughts are not predictions of anything likely to come about—surely not without a miracle or a catastrophe or both. They are, rather, designed to suggest the sort of criteria that Christians might well use today and tomorrow in assessing the technological society of which they are, willy-nilly, a part. The technologies that surround us are not all of a piece, cognitively or valuationally. Values embodied in one artifact or system may not at all resemble values incarnated in another. Christians may—should—be selective and discriminating in their evaluations and participations. The powerful technologies of *eros* are today in the ascendent; but if it is not impossible to imagine future technologies of *agapé*, we may by the same standards be able to identify and strengthen present technologies of compassionate holism. If a "cup of cold water" can be laden with ultimate significance (Matthew 10:42, Mark 9:41), then support for a community's water purification system can be given also in Christ's name. Technology is not remote from religion. It is where we live and breathe and have our worldly being. It is the present practical meeting place for the perennial dialogue between faith and reason.

Christian doubt of technological faith in our time is justified. Such faith represents an overweening and frighteningly shallow approach to life and reality. Christian doubts of technolatriy are grounded in a much older alternative faith: trust in a divine *Agapé* that does not scorn embodiment in matter or in historical praxis. Thus sensible Christian doubt of technolatriy does not need to lead to despair of all technology. Much human intelligence has, we know, been implemented for purposes that are ego- and pride-driven, offenses to community and abuses of creation. No Christian, aware of the powers of sin in ourselves, will find that distorted outcome surprising. Equally, and on the same grounds, no Christian is likely to suppose that a utopia of Christian *agapé*-technology awaits us in any realistic historic future. But technology, like human intelligence, is not an all-or-nothing matter. Compassionate holism is a standard Chris-

tians can use to measure the technologies of our culture. Then, by combining Christian love with persistent Christian intelligence, it may be possible to look toward a modified technological future with chastened Christian hope.

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NOTES

1. Revised after discussions following presentations at the Eastern Division meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, Wofford College, Spartanburg, South Carolina, in April, 1988; at the Western Division of the American Academy of Religion, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, in April, 1988; and at the annual meeting of the American Theological Society, Princeton, New Jersey, March, 1989.

2. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965, rev. ed., 1966).

3. W. Norris Clarke, "Technology and Man: A Christian Vision," in *The Technological Order*, ed. Carl F. Stover (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1963). Revised version reprinted in Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey, *Philosophy and Technology*, pp. 247-58.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

5. Cox, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

6. Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

7. Jacques Ellul, "Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis," in *Theology and Technology: Essays in Christian Analysis and Exegesis*, eds. Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1984), p. 129.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

10. Egbert Schuurman, "A Christian Philosophical Perspective on Technology," in Mitcham and Grote, *Theology and Technology*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

11. See, however, my *Philosophy of Technology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1988), Chapter 2.

12. See my *Shaping the Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), especially Chapter 3, "Limits of Technolatriy."

13. See *Shaping the Future*, *op. cit.*, especially Chapter 2.