Is Technology the New Religion?

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Is technology the new religion? Well, yes and no. No, because technology per se is not ordinarily the direct object of religious devotion, worship, piety, and spiritual disciplines. Even the most enthusiastic proponents of using technology to transform human existence, such as the transhumanists, do not portray themselves as leaders of a new religious movement. But the answer is yes if religion is understood in less formal terms. As Martin Luther insists: "That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God." We can either have faith in the "one true God" or in false gods and idols, such as wealth, knowledge, and prestige.[1]

Following Luther, perhaps a better question to ask might be something like: Is technology the predominate faith of many, if not most, late moderns? Technology is certainly a ubiquitous feature of late modern life. Our lives are cluttered with machines and gadgets, and increasingly our bodies are monitored, repaired, and maintained with the aid of medical technologies. As Martin Heidegger contends, technology "enframes" the world,[2] or in George Grant's more vivid words: "In each lived moment of our waking and sleeping, we are technological civilisation."[3]

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[1]Martin Luther, "The First Commandment," in *The Large Catechism* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1959) 9.

[2]See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) xxx.

[3]George Parkin Grant, *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1986) 11.

Transhumanists and posthumanists are in the initial stages of mythmaking, and any mythology inevitably has strong religious connotations. In broad outline, the themes of this emerging myth are strikingly similar to those of its Christian counterpart. Through technology, humans will be saved from their finitude and mortality. The chief difference lies in reversing the linchpin of this narrative: turning flesh into data displaces the Word made flesh.

Faith in Technology?

But as late moderns do our hearts cling to technology? In effect, do we entrust ourselves to technology? Any sweeping or generalized answer to this question of faith must be resisted. Technological development has enabled unprecedented prosperity, greater comfort, improved health, readily accessible information, instantaneous communication, and easy transport to virtually anyplace in the world. None of these remarkable achievements is necessarily incompatible with Christian belief and practice, and to a large extent each may be regarded as blessing for which we should be grateful.

Moreover, technology helps the church pursue its mission and ministry. Beginning with the printing press, information and communication technologies have promoted a widespread proclamation of the gospel and dissemination of Christian teaching. Transportation technologies enable rapid delivery of services provided by relief agencies in response to various emergencies or disasters. Social media assist churches and individual Christians to stay in touch with one another around the world, and there are apps that help pastors and local church leaders to receive tithes, manage the budget, collect data about parishioners, and send them targeted messages.[4] As late modern Christians, there is no reason why we should not acknowledge the many material and spiritual benefits that technology helps to provide.

Various technologies, however, are becoming more deeply entwined in the fabric of daily life and religious practices, taking on a casual, taken-for-granted status. And herein lies the problem, namely, that we may unwittingly place an unwarranted trust and confidence in technology that is effectively, albeit unknowingly, idolatrous. It is in the mundane, common, and ordinary patterns of daily life that we demonstrate most clearly, yet often unconsciously, the things to which our hearts cling: the objects of our faith.[5] This faith in turn distorts and disorders our love of God and neighbor. In the remainder of this essay I examine how this subtle, yet pervasive faith in technology may disorder our perceptions, desires, and hopes.

A False Sense of Autonomy

Technology may reinforce a false sense of autonomy. Ironically, in a connected world it is easy to create solitude. Through the Internet a vast network of information and commercial opportunities is at one's disposal. I can, for example, consult reference materials, do my banking, and shop without encountering another human being. In short, I don't need to interact with other people to get my work done, except on those occasions when I am required to inflict my lectures upon luckless students.

[4]See Sally Davies, "Thou shalt be disrupted: welcome to the silicon church," *Financial Times*, August 28, 2014, at http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6e2944c4-2dc9-11e4-b330-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3Mdt163ks (accessed December 22, 2014).

[5]See Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

My perceived autonomy, however, is an illusion. In order to use the information technology (IT) that enables me to accomplish my work while blissfully sequestered in my office, I am utterly at the mercy of countless individuals who maintain the elaborate, underlying infrastructure. IT effectively hides or occludes the fact that my presumed autonomy is only made possible by my dependency upon others. When I purchase an item online, for instance, the dozens, if not hundreds, of individuals involved in maintaining the website, as well as those who designed, manufactured, transport, and deliver the product to my doorstep are rendered invisible to me.

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A similar pattern pervades contemporary religious belief and practice. There is a strong, perhaps growing perception that religion is what people do in their solitude. Attention often becomes fixated on an inward or personal spiritual journey. This tendency is reflected in the burgeoning number of books, websites, and blogs devoted to giving guidance on spiritual self-help. Again, this stress upon spiritual solitude hides or occludes an underlying interdependence. Spiritual self-help gurus, for instance, could not be gurus without followers. Moreover, although there is nothing wrong with taking care of one's soul through such practices of prayer, meditation, or personal reflection, the idea that this can be accomplished exclusively or predominantly on one's own does not sit well with the Christian tradition. Christianity has had its hermits over the centuries, but there has always been an emphasis on fellowship; on being a part of Christ's body on earth.

A Dissipated Sense of Community

Reinforcing a false sense of autonomy leads to the next problem: a dissipated perception of community or association. Increasingly, late moderns tend to define their relationships in terms of shared interests rather than physical proximity. IT and communication technologies are used to create and maintain virtual spaces that are not constrained by the physical limitations of being confined to a particular place. I spend more time, for instance, conversing or exchanging information with professional colleagues and friends at remote locales across the world than I do with fellow faculty members at the seminary where I teach or with my next-door neighbors. Oddly, it does not seem strange now when friends are together in a room busily texting away.

To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with technologies enabling quick and easy communication with other people at distant locations. But the increasing use and dependence upon these technologies tends to promote two troubling perceptions that are often unacknowledged. First, strangers are becoming effectively invisible. A public place, for instance, may be filled with people who are talking or otherwise pass-

ing the time, but not with each other. Rather, their attention is fixed on their mobile devices, creating personal or shared virtual spaces. There is simply no need to ac-knowledge, much less engage, strangers sharing a locale.

Second, there is a tendency to believe that a virtual space is an adequate substi-tute for a physical place. As we devote more time to virtual spaces, and as more people have grown up with the Internet,[6] virtual reality may steadily become the preferable environment in which to conduct interpersonal relationships and interactions.[7] This preference is exhibited in the explosive growth of social media. People are now united around the world in response to various events and concerns through texting, tweet-ing, and posting. It is doubtful, however, if social media can maintain voluntary asso-ciations or enable concerted corporate action for an extended period of time. Niall Ferguson, for example, notes that when he bought a new seaside home he was dis-mayed by the amount of rubbish on the beach. Each day when he took a walk he filled a trash bag, but this did little to solve the problem. He recruited a few volunteers to clean up the beach, but even collectively they were not up to the task. It was only when the local Lions Club "got involved" that the beach was cleaned up and kept cleaned, and he doubts if the "new social networks of the internet are in any sense a substitute for real networks."[8]

THE EFFECTS ON RELIGION

Again, there are similar issues in respect to religious practices. First, technology may inadvertently promote a moral vision that is improvident and impromptu. Peo-ple around the world are aware of disasters, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, literally minutes after they have occurred. Additionally, celebrities may attract wide-scale pub-lic attention to particular issues such as poverty or inadequate healthcare. In response, many Christians donate generously to relief efforts or organize mission trips to build schools or clinics. These efforts are certainly commendable, but they may also unin-tentionally divert attention away from pressing concerns that are more immediately proximate. American Christians focused on the needs of distant neighbors, for in-stance, may fail to notice the plight of the hungry and homeless a few miles, or even blocks, away from where they live and work.[9]

Second, some Christians are increasingly discounting the significance of physical place in favor of creating virtual space in living out their faith. Admittedly, Christianity has never been a territorial religion, for the church is constituted wherever two or three

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[6]In the US, for example, around 90 million people have been born since the first website was launched in 1991.

[7]See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

[8]See Niall Ferguson, *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die* (New York, Pen-guin, 2013) 111–113.

[9]For various assessments of the ethical obligations to near and distant neighbors, see *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy*, ed. Douglas A. Hicks and Mark Valeri (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), especially part I.

are gathered in Christ's name. But traditionally they have gathered in a particular physical place. Today there is a growing array of websites and apps for posting and organizing prayer requests, and online virtual churches where people, through their avatars, gather to worship or engage in other religious activities. To what extent virtual spaces can or should be offered to proclaim the gospel, worship, celebrate the sacraments, and provide pastoral care is now hotly debated, and I anticipate that the temperature will rise in the future.[10]

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More expansively, technology promotes the impression of mastering nature and human nature. Various technologies have utilized natural resources in ways that promote human flourishing, and there is no reason why contemporary Christians should not be grateful for the material abundance that many more people now enjoy than did so in the past.[11] Additionally, advances in medicine and biotechnology have helped many people to live longer and healthier lives than would otherwise have been the case. And again Christians should rejoice whenever the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, and the sick are made well—or even better if these ailments are prevented from occurring.

There are, of course, limits to this mastery. For example, although we can build better structures and machines to mitigate the unwanted verities of the weather, we cannot control it to everyone's (particularly farmers') satisfaction. Likewise, medicine can extend longevity, but it cannot give us immortality. Nevertheless, there is often a subtle, largely inarticulate, but pervasive perception held by late moderns that given enough time and ingenuity, technology can go a long way in satisfying almost all of our needs and wants. To a large extent this quest for extensive mastery over nature and the human is a secularized version of the biblical teaching to exercise dominion over and stewardship of creation. Unfortunately, dominion is often distorted into a consuming domination, and stewardship is reduced to matching supplies with insatiable demands. In their more hubristic moments, late moderns entrust their well-being and place their faith in unending technological development.

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[10]For an argument favoring the church's virtual presence, see Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009); for a more critical appraisal, see Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

[11]See John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence: Seeking God in a Culture of Wealth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Unfortunately, many people are not afforded opportunities to produce and enjoy such abundance. For an overview of some more prominent issues related to global poverty, see William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); see also, Michael Mandelbaum, *The Road to Global Prosperity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

To Whom Do We Turn?

This trust and faith is manifested in a variety of ways, a few of which can be briefly noted. Late moderns tend to believe that technology can fix virtually any problem. We routinely turn to engineers (as well as financiers, lawyers, and politicians) to fix such problems as communication, transportation, hunger, scarcity, and poverty, and increasingly to address the unanticipated consequences of previous technological innovation. In the early twentieth century, for instance, the newly invented automobile was hailed as the solution to the terrible pollution problem plaguing cities across the globe, namely, the daily production of millions of tons of horse manure. "In 1894, the *Times* of London estimated that by 1950 every street in the city would be buried nine feet deep in horse manure."[12] Today, we are trying to solve the problem of pollution caused by fossil fuels by developing alternative sources of energy, and undoubtedly future generations will need to resolve the unintended consequences of going green.

Similarly, health care has become increasingly expensive due, in part, to the success of modern medical advances. Declining infant mortality rates and increased longevity were achieved initially through improved sanitation and nutrition, safer and more efficacious surgical techniques, the development of antibiotics and inoculations, and more recently the advent of more sophisticated preventive measures such as stents, statins, and other drugs. The benefits of these interventions were widespread and relatively inexpensive. The number of individuals with chronic conditions requiring prolonged and expensive care, however, has increased due, to a large extent, to an aging population. Dementia, for instance, is now more widespread because it tends to be a late-onset illness. In short, many innovative medical treatments that solve one problem may in turn create new ones.

Late moderns appear to have an enduring faith and confidence that technology can be used to solve their most pressing problems, even those created by prior technological development. Consequently, human well being becomes increasingly predicated and dependent upon unending technological "progress." As George Grant argues, when deliberating on almost any moral, economic, or political issue, the "outcome is almost inevitably a decision for further technological development."[13]

Closely related to the idea that technology can fix nearly every problem is the notion that it can also enhance the quality of human life. Genetically modified seeds and livestock, for example, have greatly increased agricultural productivity, helping alleviate hunger. IT and the Internet have made the creation, storage, and communication of information easily and instantaneously accessible; distant locales are no longer remote. Again, there is no reason to deny the benefits of these enhancements, but they have come with a price. More productive methods of agriculture have driven many small farmers out of business, adversely affecting rural communities. The Internet has also become a convenient source for committing fraud, identity theft, bullying, and downloading pornography.

[12]Eric Morris, "From Horse Power to Horsepower," *Access* 30 (Spring 2007) 2.
[13]Grant, *Technology and Justice*, 33.

Although enhancing the quality of human life is often motivated by humane intentions, the results are usually mixed. This is due, in part, to the fact that we do not know fully what constitutes the ultimate good or purpose of being human. Therefore, there is no obvious reference point against which our attempts at enhancing the quality of human life can be assessed in advance. Moreover, even if we could acquire a reliable approximation of such an end, our attempts as finite and mortal beings would remain partial and imperfect.

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The penultimate act of faith in technology, then, is to use it to overcome finitude and mortality. This is precisely the goal of transhumanists and posthumanists, namely, to progressively and significantly extend longevity, and in the process to greatly enhance the physical and cognitive performance of individuals.[14] This goal will be achieved through a combination of anticipated developments in biotechnology, nanotechnology, bionics, and digital technologies. The hope—the Holy Grail, so to speak—is to achieve immortality. The combination of flesh and machine will progressively enable humans to overcome finite, and eventually mortal limits.[15] More radically, there is the prospect of uploading the underlying binary information constituting one's personality or identity—mind, will, and soul, to use antiquated vocabulary—and then downloading the data into robotic or virtual reality hosts. Presumably the process can be repeated indefinitely, achieving virtual immortality.[16] Technology, nature, and human nature meld into a singular reality or singularity.[17]

TRANSHUMANIST AND POSTHUMANIST MYTHOLOGY

Transhumanists and posthumanists are in the initial stages of mythmaking, and any mythology inevitably has strong religious connotations. In broad outline, the themes of this emerging myth are strikingly similar to those of its Christian counterpart. Through technology, humans will be saved from their finitude and mortality, the old enemy death overcome in achieving the eschatological end of personal immortal-

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[14]For an overview of transhumanist literature, see *The Transhumanist Reader: Critical and Contemporary Essays on the Science, Technology, and Philosophy of the Human Future*, ed. Max More and Natasha Vita-More (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); for a critical assessment of transhumanism, see Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006).

[15]For a more detailed description and critical assessment of this transhumanist strategy for overcoming finite and mortal limits, see Brent Waters, "Whose Salvation? Which Eschatology? Transhumanism and Christianity as Contending Salvific Religions," in *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement*, ed. Ronald Cole-Turner (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011).

[16]See Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), and *Robot: Mere Machines to Transcendent Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[17]See Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

ity. The chief difference lies in reversing the linchpin of this narrative: turning flesh into data displaces the Word made flesh.[18]

Transhumanists and posthumanists admittedly place their hope in technological developments that may very well prove infeasible or preposterous. But simply dismissing it as a fanciful venture will not do, for the power, and therefore danger, of a myth does not necessarily correspond to its practical efficacy but lies in its ability to shape the moral imagination. And in this respect transhumanism and posthumanism have already made great strides in capturing public attention.[19] Consequently, this emerging myth should prompt sustained theological reflection upon such key themes as anthropology, soteriology, eschatology, and most importantly the incarnation. Christians do not place their hope in the immortality of endless time, but being resurrected into eternal fellowship with the triune God. In order to counter the undeniably attractive promise of living forever, Christians must be able to affirm finitude and mortality as crucial conditions of being the human creatures with whom God was pleased to dwell. To invoke Luther again, God is the only true or proper object of faith, and technology should therefore be a means for ordering this faith and not the object of our hope and confidence.

To return to the initial question: Is technology the new religion? Not quite yet, at least in any formal way. Despite the religiously freighted rhetoric of many transhumanists, they have not yet followed the lead of some atheists in forming their own churches.[20] There is, however, an organization called Terasem, which asserts that "God is technological" and "death is optional." This self-proclaimed "transreligion" offers its members the opportunity to store their "mindfiles" (digital information about an individual's physical appearance and recorded memories) in satellites with the hope that in the future they can be reconstructed by more technologically advanced humans or benevolent aliens. The storage and updating of mindfiles is overseen by one if its "pastors."[21] If this is a harbinger of a new popular movement, then I will need to rewrite this essay. ⊕

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[18]For a more detailed assessment of this move, see Brent Waters, "Flesh Made Data: The Posthuman Project in Light of the Incarnation," in *Religion and Transhumanism: The Unknown Future of Human Enhancement*, ed. Calvin Mercer and Tracy Trothen (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014).

[19]See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); see also Christina Bieber Lake, *Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology, and the Ethics of Personhood* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

[20]See, e.g., Stephanie Embree, "Atheist Churches Provide a Community for Dallas Nonbelievers," *The Dallas Morning News*, August 8, 2014, at http://www.dallasnews.com/news/religion/20140808-atheist-churches-provide-a-community-for-dallas-nonbelievers.ece (accessed January 11, 2015).

[21]See Jessica Roy, "The Rapture of the Nerds," *Time*, April 17, 2014, at http://time.com/66536/terasem-trascendence-religion-technology/ (accessed January 11, 2015); see also Terasem Movement, Inc., at http://www.terasemcentral.org/ (accessed January 11, 2015), and Terasem Movement Foundation, at http://www.terasemmovementfoundation.com/ (accessed January 11, 2015).