



Science Fiction, Christianity, and Technic Civilization

IRVING HEXHAM

University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba

The original *Star Wars* movie came to a dramatic finale with the destruction of the Imperial Death Star. Against the advice of his commanders the hero, Luke Skywalker, had turned off his computerized guidance system and rejected the sophisticated technology of his civilization. Instead he relied on his innate skill plus the mystical power of the Force to guide his missiles and destroy the military might of the evil Empire.

At the close of *The Return of the Jedi* the first trilogy of *Star Wars* films comes to an end. A fitting conclusion is supplied when a force of Imperial Stormtroopers is overcome by a tribe of primitive, stone age creatures called Ewoks. These overgrown teddybears, resembling the science fiction writer Beam Piper's "Fuzzies," defeat the well-armed Storm troopers and make it possible for Hans Solo's small band of rebels to destroy the force-field which protects the second Death Star. Thus the ultimate weapon of evil is again destroyed, and the Empire is defeated.

In all three *Star Wars* movies courage and love prevail over power and hate. This conflict is made explicit at the end of *Return of the Jedi* when the wicked emperor urges Luke Skywalker to avenge the destruction of the rebel fleet and the death of his friends. But to do so would necessitate his taking the first step towards "the dark side of the Force" by turning to hate. Skywalker refuses and prefers a painful death to the renunciation of love. Thus evil is defeated and humanity triumphs.

Technology plays an important role in all three *Star Wars* movies. Not only are they themselves triumphs of technological innovation, but their theme is one of technological civilization. Apart from the human heroes, the androids R2D2 and C-3P0 play crucial roles in the films' success. Throughout the saga, good battles evil in unremitting struggle. Yet both sides utilize technology. Without technology neither the Empire nor its rebel opponents make sense. Nowhere in the films is technology, per se, depicted as evil. Indeed, the evil of the Empire is in the corruption of its rulers. Personal forces, not technology, are seen to make persons evil. Technology remains neutral.

These dramatic visions of their creator, producer George Lucas, encapsulate one of the major conflicts of our time: the tension between science, expressed through technology, and humanity, usually expressed as personal freedom.

I. SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND FREEDOM

For many people science is a dehumanizing force which destroys human freedom and enslaves humankind in a technological nightmare. The nightmare may resemble Orwell's ghastly

Spartan state depicted in his novel *1984* or the kindly but equally soul-destroying society of Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). But whatever its form, the terror of a future technological society, which destroys human values with nuspeak and soma, persists.

It is these frightening visions of the future which Lucas rejects. True, his vision begins "a long time ago," but its "distant" civilization is clearly a projection of one possible future for humanity. In this future, technology has become humanity's servant to be used for good or evil. Lucas clearly recognizes this and is reported to have said "I managed to make machines our friends" (*Winnipeg Free Press*, 28 May, 1983). Thus his vision creates a new synthesis which will undoubtedly affect the way our children see technology.

Behind Lucas' achievement lies a profoundly religious question: the nature of humanity. For almost two millennia Western society has not been troubled by this issue. The Judeo-Christian world-view placed humankind in a universe created and governed by the God of Abraham who made our race in his own image. Challenges, such as they were, came from lesser developed religious systems or from Islam which shared the essential understanding of Abraham's God.

Only at the beginning of the nineteenth century did the Christian worldview come into serious and widespread conflict with alternate versions of reality. The first and most effective was the challenge of modernity. Enlightenment philosophies—strengthened by increasing technological innovation, which seemed to vindicate the claims of Enlightenment science—created modernity. To be modern was to be scientific and to embrace the future as the hope of humankind. Progress and reason were seen as replacing religion and tradition as guides for living.

Other challenges to the prevailing Christian understanding of the world came from Eastern religions. In the nineteenth century Hinduism presented the strongest challenge. During the twentieth century Buddhism has probably overtaken Hinduism as a major alternative to Christianity. Yet, despite some serious students and occasional spells of general popularity, these traditions do not seem to have gained widespread support in the West. At the same time secularity has grown in Buddhist and Hindu countries replacing religious values with those of modernity, which, because of the faith it generates, may be seen as a religious world-view as pervasive as any of the world's traditional religions.

Until recently the religion of modernity remained a rather sterile faith. In it humanity was valued and the future seen in eschatological terms that were essentially rationalistic. Sometimes, as with Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking*

Backwards (1888) the triumph of modernity was seen as the dawning of a glorious new age. More commonly, following William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), which was written to refute Bellamy, technology meant the destruction of human hope. Yet until soma and Huxley's deliberate experimentation with spirituality few writers felt the need for modernity to express spirituality.

In *Brave New World* Huxley experiments with spiritual values under the shadow of the technological benefits of "the year of our Ford." However, the savage commits suicide and human values cease. Other science fiction writers of the period took a similar view of spiritual issues. In Asimov's classic *Foundation* series (1942-44) the only role assigned to religion is as a

means of social control over primitive peoples invented by the ingenious mayors of the Foundation.

II. THE NEW WAVE: FANTASY, MYTH, AND SPIRITUAL VALUES

Throughout most of the twentieth century science fiction meant hard science and space operas. But all of this began to change in the 1960s. Suddenly a new wave of science fiction writers found the importance of fantasy, myth, and spiritual values. Some of these writers were older hard science authors, like Poul Anderson, who changed their styles and introduced new values. Others like Ursula Le Guin brought new visions to their work from the beginning.

These changes in science fiction writings exhibit major cultural changes and a new understanding of modernity. The works of Carlos Castaneda, which Lucas acknowledges as a major influence on his thinking, began to appear in 1968. Other writings supported by drug experiences and then the practice of meditation opened many to the possibility of alternate realities. These realities found ready expression in science fiction and provided the basis for reinterpreting modernity.

The first wave of reinterpretation reflected the longings of an older generation influenced by left-wing politics and romanticism. Thus Kenneth Rexroth's *The Alternative Society* (1970) reflected an interpretation of the counter-culture through the lens of his own radical politics. At the same time, closer to counterculture realities, Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1970) showed the literary-romantic bias of its author. Both of these observers, however perceptive, failed to see the new synthesis which was emerging between spirituality and technology. Both represented an older generation socialized to see the spiritual and scientific in tension. But in fact, as *Star Wars* so vividly illustrates, that tension was becoming a thing of the past.

From the dawn of history humanity has reached for the stars. Yet such a voyage has remained a dream. Wandering the earth humankind's physical limitations have driven the human spirit to soar towards the stars only to be repelled by the reality of bodily existence. Escaping the body therefore became a major theme in religion, art, and literature.

III. TECHNIC CIVILIZATION

To reach for the stars is natural. To walk among them demands the adoption of technic civilization. This new mode of life is born through the union of the in-

tellelectual reflection which created science and practical invention. Together science and invention produce technology. This new technological civilization sets its society apart from all past societies.

To a degree all past civilizations have had a form of technology. What makes our civilization different is the rational application of technology to create more technology and to recreate society itself. Modern society is therefore the first truly technological society. Describing this society as "technic society" focuses on the continual interaction between society and technology. Technic society is a society in which the fundamental social substructure is the conscious utilization of technology. Past societies have been based on hunting, herding, and agriculture. Our society is the first to revolutionize its productive base technologically.

Traditional societies have been guided by archetypes as old as humankind. Butter and oil,

Cain and Abel, Apollo and Dionysus, and the nomad and the cultivator all summarize the dichotomies which divided traditional societies. These and a host of other traditional mythologies served to erect protective walls around the social fabric. They also provided individuals with means of protecting their psychological natures from the harsh and threatening realities of life.

Through ancient archetypes humans come to accept and understand the limits of their existence. The archetypes channel the emotions and guard the ego. They enable individuals to interact socially and resolve the ever present conflict between the individual and society. Consequently they are essential elements in the successful functioning of society.

But technic civilization is a synthesis of all past societies. Its productive base is neither that of the nomad nor the cultivator. Yet its citizens are both nomads and cultivators of technological growth. Thus technic civilization transcends the divisions of the past in a majestic sweep which takes the city to the stars. Cain and Abel are laid to rest.

Old archetypes which have protected humanity's psyche for centuries are shattered and new ones have yet to be created. Naked humanity stands alone on the shores of an unknown and uncharted sea. The universe lies before our race, its heat and cold threatening to engulf humankind in cosmic death. In desperation many curse the civilization which frees them from the bonds of their past. Some fly to the Buddha for refuge. Others seek salvation in the myths of Hindu deities. Christianity is cursed by such people as the source of technic civilization, and the East is praised for its spiritual salvation.

Reacting to such criticism, a growing number of Christians also repudiate technic civilization and call for a return to a "Christian" world. They claim that it is not Christianity but capitalism which created technic civilization, and that by returning to a truly biblical perspective, whatever that may be, humankind can escape the inevitable tensions of technic civilization.

Such reactions are prompted by a fear of change. Technic civilization is the culture of the modern nomad. What is applicable today will be obsolete tomorrow. Training for a profession today will not guarantee life-long employment. People's expectations are constantly changing. Classes which have long been held in respect, because of their learning and financial power, are in

decline. New groups are rising, and the social fabric is being rent apart. No, wonder many seek to return to a secure past.

In such a dynamic situation romantic visions of a static and ordered society are bound to appeal to those threatened by impending change. Like the bewildered detective in Isaac Asimov's *Caves of Steel* (1954), people fool themselves into believing that they can live in a world that has been lost forever. In his future city the detective sits in a room with a view of open countryside. Yet the view is an illusion. It is the creation of the very technology the detective claims to deplore. His longings for a pastoral existence are based on pure emotion unrelated to reality. His true world is the world of the city. He lives in a "cave of steel," and as the story develops we realize that in fact he is afraid of the outside world and open places. When the opportunity arises for him to venture out of the city, into the world he claims to love, the detective refuses. His artificial office window is all he really knows about a rural existence.

In this perceptive novel humankind has become earthbound through a fear of technic civilization. Cities have become human hives encasing their populations in secure steel walls. But it is not technology which has trapped humanity. Rather it is fear itself. The repudiation of

technology has become an excuse to mask a fear of change.

What the modern Luddites, who reject technic civilization, fail to realize is that humankind no longer stands on the edge of an abyss beyond which lies a technic future. Rather our race has hurled itself over the edge. Now there is no hope of return to a secure past. The past is lost forever. Our technology has destroyed the world of our forebears. It is impossible for us to return to a past form of society. Resources which once sustained the earth's population have been depleted beyond restoration. The choice is simple: either humankind soars onward through the continued recreation of technic civilization, or all human cultures, save the most elementary, plunge to destruction.

All past societies have reached the limits of their environment. Again and again humanity has multiplied and filled the earth, threatening life itself through the constant depletion of natural resources. But at each crisis point new techniques have arisen to enable the race to continue. Yet always the earth has had limited human potential.

Technic civilization is unique in that it is not limited by earthly resources. By its very nature technic civilization reaches beyond the earth to the stars. It is the civilization of the city and the stars. The challenge of such a situation, with the demands of life and the human need for security, is well illustrated in Arthur C. Clarke's novel *The City and the Stars* (1956). Here the hero sees the pathos of the human condition and recognizes that human cultures which cling to past modes of security are doomed to deny the truly human.

Nomadic culture bred a restlessness which struggled with the stability of agricultural lifestyles. Yet time doomed the nomad. Today the majority of nomadic peoples live on the fringes of civilization, clinging to a tenuous existence at the whim of others. For thousands of years agricultural and urban living moulded the thinking of humankind. Here settled ways and civil order created a stability which destroyed the nomad. Yet technic civilization introduces the instability of nomadic existence into the heart of the urban environment. Hi-tech

creates rootless people willing and able to move as their desires and the market propel them to ever new ventures. At the same time it gives birth to urban nomads who enjoy all the facilities of urban life. Cultural amenities and the comforts of city living are prerequisites for the creators of technic civilization. Stability has gone but its benefits remain.

For thousands of years "civilized society" has become accustomed to fixed boundaries. In land area, in custom, in social order, class, education, and the arts, humans have sought and valued stability. Change has been seen as chaos to be avoided. Our myths, folktales, and childhood rhymes and stories all inculcate the value of stability and order. Behind them all stands the archetype of the eternal return.

But technic civilization is the realm of continual change. Technic civilization is truly revolutionary. It is the order of repeated disorder—the revolution which continually revolutionizes itself. Technic civilization breaks all boundaries without creating new, lasting, frontiers. The sacred becomes profane, and humanity faces an uncertain future.

With such an open vision, no wonder many shudder in the shadow of time. The old curse, "may you live in interesting times," has come true. Standing on the edge of uncertainty persons educated for pre-technic civilization react with fear and long for the security of past worlds. Yet this security is lost forever. Unless our earth is destroyed in an atomic holocaust, technic

civilization is almost certain to triumph.

IV. SEARCHING FOR MEANINGFUL RESPONSE

If this analysis is correct, what have Christians to say to the world of today and tomorrow? To appreciate the reaction of Christians we must be honest in admitting that over the last hundred years Christians have come to fear science and have very often taken anti-scientific and anti-technological stands. There have, of course, been exceptions, but scientific progress has been associated with secularism, and Christians have tended to equate the two. As a result there exists a predisposition among many religious people to reject technic civilization as anti-spiritual.

From both fundamentalist and sacramental groups there has been a tendency to glorify the past while depreciating the present. Fundamentalist groups, like the Plymouth Brethren, have sought to recreate the early Church. Sacramental groups, like the Oxford Movement, have idealized the Middle Ages. Some Calvinist groups, like the Anti-Revolutionary Movement in the Netherlands, have seen the seventeenth century as a golden age. All of these religious reactions share a common romanticism. The past is idealized by them, and the belief that it is possible to recapture its glories inspires their actions..

But more important than either the fear of science or the glorification of the past is the symbolism used by the Christian Church. The Bible and the Christian tradition are the repository of a rich storehouse of symbolism and mythology. But over the last two hundred years certain aspects of that symbolism and mythology have come to be emphasized as the only possible way of understanding the Christian tradition. As a result the Christian religion has been in-

terpreted by both radicals and conservatives in terms of Christologies which have emphasized the personal elements of the tradition. At the same time, and in the face of social problems created by industrialization and urbanization, pastoral care has centered on the family. The result is a highly personal religion which idealizes the nuclear family and takes a romanticized version of love as its sole virtue.

This essentially modern theology is incapable of dealing with the problems of today's world and the aspirations of its people. Instead of offering guidance for contemporary life, it encourages escape into individual piety and social withdrawal. Even social movements produced by modern theologies share its basic flaws. On both left and right we find a rejection of industry and technological society.

The left seek salvation in communalism and a return to pre-capitalist values. The right endorse individualism and the values of capitalism as it existed before the advent of technic civilization. What both fail to realize is that technic civilization is neither capitalist nor socialist, communal nor individual. It is a synthesis created by new technologies which make old social models obsolete.

The greatest problem we face as Christians is the continued use of language and symbolism that emphasizes values and attitudes which are past. For a while these symbols may attract the older generation and even some young people. But over the long run their continued use will only doom Christianity.

This fact is clearly seen by the way both old and young embrace technic civilization in practice if not in theory. Radical theologians who deplore technology, environmental pollution,

and multinational corporations fly to simple lifestyle conferences on technologically sophisticated aircraft which consume resources and pollute the atmosphere. At the conferences they stay in multinational hotels and use telecommunications created by the companies they attack. Fundamentalist churches rage about evolution and show overt hostility to science. But they are in the forefront of computer use by religious groups and the leaders in the use of modern communications for proclaiming their religious message.

What the people who do these things fail to recognize, or if they recognize it fail to act upon, is that their use of the conveniences of technic civilization places them firmly within its orbit. The irony of the radicals' behaviour is obvious. The fundamentalists' weaknesses are more subtle. What the users of computers usually fail to recognize is that by using a computer and buying into a high-tech world one inevitably changes one's perspective.

At first the change may be undetectable. But in time the technology will shape its users. Perhaps this does not always occur with low levels of involvement or the first generation. But as use increases and a second and subsequent generation emerges, their ways of understanding the world and their place in it will change. In this situation symbols of family and rural pre-technic civilization become increasingly meaningless as ways of understanding humanity's relationship to the world.

The family will remain. But as a symbol for understanding work and the workplace or educational institutions it will become increasingly irrelevant. Yet

at present both radical and conservative groups continue to apply this symbol in areas where its use can only create confusion. A modern business cannot be run like a family. To attempt to do so simply creates feelings of injustice and perpetuates frustrations.

Similarly talk of religion in purely personal terms helps create expectations about the way the world works which for most people do not exist. Our society has personal aspects. But it is also a highly bureaucratic and impersonal society. To cope with social reality in a technic civilization individuals need to recognize the balance between personal and impersonal modes of relationship. Anyone expecting the personal to define all relationships will become increasingly frustrated with the workings of the world as it really is.

In this situation a theology is needed which produces symbols of transcendence as well as immanence. Ontology as well as Christology needs emphasis. Theologies which speak about creation and providence make more sense than those that merely stress personal commitment. Similarly talk about covenant relationships rather than family is better suited for making sense of modern society. Only if the message of the church resonates with the social realities of its members will that message continue to make sense in the future.

If, as Lucas states, machines have become "our friends," then the failure of the church to recognize this and a continued use of anti-technic symbolism will only alienate the majority of society and attract the socially discontented. In such a situation new religious movements more in tune with the realities of technic civilization will thrive, and traditional churches will continue their downward trend. What is needed therefore is a revitalization of the Christian tradition based on resources within that tradition that recognize the spiritual dimensions of technic civilization. An existential theology which boldly accepts the challenges of technology is what we must strive to create today.