



## Technology as a Problem for Christian Ministry

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Technology is a problem for Christian ministry, not because modern technological innovation is fundamentally different from previous historical eras, but instead because it reflects intellectual and ethical changes which have displaced, but not replaced, traditional interpretive and moral paradigms. In short, technology is a problem for ministry because an interpretive and evaluative framework is not readily available. Consequently, the perception and moral judgment of technological change, as expressed in the practice of ministry, is accomplished on an ad hoc basis.

In exploring this thesis, I shall (1) briefly review the contemporary context by examining the relationship between ministry and secularity; (2) examine the problematic, but necessary, relationship between technological change and moral judgment; and (3) argue that if an appropriate interpretive and moral framework is to be recovered, technological change must be understood in relationship to the religious categories of value, symbol, and meaning.

### I. SETTING THE CONTEXT: SECULARITY AND MINISTRY

One of the most volatile and provocative theological debates in the twentieth century has been over secularity. Based on Bonhoeffer's assertions that we live in an age when humanity has come of age and that the church should strive to create a religionless Christianity, a variety of theologians have argued that secularity is the necessary and logical expression of Christian faith in the modern world.<sup>1</sup> It is within secular, rather than religious categories, that people express their quest for meaning and value. Harvey Cox defines secularity as:

the loosing of the world from religious and quasi-religious understandings of itself, the dispelling of all closed world views, the breaking of all supernatural myths and sacred symbols. It represents "a defatalization of

<sup>1</sup>E.g., see Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

history," the discovery by man that he has been left with the world on his hands, that he can no longer blame fortune or the furies for what he does with it.<sup>2</sup>

Cox goes on to state that "secularization simply bypasses and undercuts religion and goes on to other things. It has relativized religious world views and thus rendered them innocuous. Religion has privatized."<sup>3</sup> The benefits of secularity are pluralism and tolerance. Its principal symbol is that of "technopolis" which signifies "the fusion of technological and political components into

the base on which a new cultural style has appeared.<sup>2,4</sup> The secular world view produces an urban culture and civilization in which nature has been disenchanting, politics desacralized, and values deconsecrated.<sup>5</sup> Within such a framework humanity assumes responsibility for its own fate.

Although the theology of secularity no longer has an active contingent of advocates, it nevertheless exerts a profound, and largely unrecognized, influence on contemporary Christian ethics and ministry. The logical conclusion of secularity is moral autonomy and privatism. There are no reliable sources for hermeneutical and moral authority other than the self. Consequently, one understanding of the world and set of moral commitments is as good as any other. Within such relativism, moral judgments are not made within a theocentric or collective anthropocentric framework, but from the perspective of individual preferences, power, and prejudices. In short, the principal secular ethic is enlightened (and sometimes not so enlightened) self-interest.

Secularity has had an even more pronounced influence on the practice of ministry. If secularity is an appropriate expression of Christian faith, then the goals and practice of ministry must be articulated in secular, rather than religious, terms. Consequently, many ministers have developed what Don Browning describes as the movement toward ethical neutrality.<sup>6</sup> The performance of ministry is evaluated in terms of helping people to become secular—i.e., autonomous and private. When moral issues relate to technological change, such as reproductive alternatives (e.g., surrogate mothers or in vitro fertilization), the creation and use of artificial intelligence, or the destructive use of nuclear technology, a religious framework for ethical reflection and judgment is irrelevant because religious traditions and communities are not legitimate sources of moral authority. Ministers, therefore, find themselves in the uncomfortable position of confronting technological change without the benefit of an interpretive paradigm that is rooted in distinctly religious categories, and without a recognizable moral framework with which technology can be evaluated.

The effects of secularity can be seen vividly, for example, in Protestant campus ministry. The Danforth study identified four principal modes of ministry commonly performed by campus ministers.<sup>7</sup> They included (1) the

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 15-32.

<sup>6</sup>See Don S. Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 31-40.

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth Underwood, *The Church, the University and Social Policy* (Middletown: Wesleyan University, 1969).

pastoral care of individuals; (2) the priestly proclamation of the faith and the carrying out of ritual acts; (3) the prophetic judgment of the justice of the social order; and (4) the governance of organizations for the care of people through responsible corporate action.

Since these ministry roles are performed within the context of the modern secular university, they have been understood and articulated primarily in secular categories. This has had a marked influence on both the style and perception of ministry. Prophetic ministry is largely synonymous with political denunciation or advocacy; in regard to pastoral care, ministers do not care for souls but counsel clients; the role of governance is virtually synonymous with management by objective; and the priestly function has been reduced to the creation of generic

forms of worship.

Ministry confronts an age largely characterized by rapid technological change without a clear sense of its own religious identity. Ministers are not certain whether they say or do anything that cannot be said or done by someone who is not motivated by religious belief. There is no distinctive religious framework with which to interpret and evaluate technological change. This is the result of a predominantly secular understanding and performance of ministry that cannot critically appraise the relationship between the dominant ethos (secularity) and dominant cultural symbol (technology) of our age. A critical self-transcendence needed for moral judgment is lacking in the present understanding and performance of ministry.

## II. TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE AND MORAL JUDGMENT

At this point I want to be clear about the relationship between ministry and ethics, and how this relationship relates to the problem of technological change. It can be argued that technology ought not to be a problem for ministry if ministry properly performs its limited task—i.e., ministry is concerned about spiritual matters, far removed from such temporal concerns as technology. Ministry should help people deal with the life of the spirit within the realm of religion. From this perspective, the confusion in ministry is caused by its invasion of a realm whose boundary it has no business transgressing. The problem is not technology, nor even secularity, but a mistaken perception that the secular world in general, and technology specifically, is not a proper context for ministry. Consequently, the moral concern of ministry is narrowly confined to professional ethics or reflection on the influence that religious beliefs have on the formation of values.

This argument is based, however, on a fundamentally false understanding of ministry. The division between “physical” and “spiritual” realms represents an artificial and arbitrary understanding of the world. This neat and tidy division breaks down precisely at the point where concrete possibilities (as seen in technological applications) intersect or conflict with values. Faith, knowledge, and practice cannot be kept separate. Ministry addresses the totality of existence, and since all human relationships include a moral dimension, the relationship between ministry and ethics is inescapable. Ministry is only intrusive or irrelevant if religious faith is completely divorced from morality. Technological

change is, therefore, a pressing, if not predominant, problem for ministry in the modern world. This can be seen in two instances.

First, technology is a dominant secular symbol. As a symbol it expresses something about our identity as a culture and the major problems we face. As a symbol, it is subject to interpretation, and its influence upon ethics is ambiguous. For example, technology can be interpreted as representing a proper human attempt to master nature in order to alleviate suffering and achieve a worthwhile life. The moral use of technology should be judged on its basis to enhance human welfare.

Or technology can be interpreted as a symbol of human arrogance which will result in environmental collapse and totalitarian regimes in a mad dash of materialistic greed. Technology should be judged in terms of its effect upon natural and human social systems.

There are, of course, a variety of other interpretations, but the point is that these different

interpretations exemplify the volatile mixture of faith, values, and knowledge. Moral discourse and dialogue becomes virtually impossible unless we are clear about our symbolic understanding of the role that technology plays in our cultural identity.

Second, specific technologies present concrete moral problems. For example, what are the moral and immoral uses of such technologies as in vitro fertilization, nuclear weaponry, genetic alteration of plant and animal life, or aerosol spray cans? Upon what basis do we make such moral judgments? At this point, the importance of our symbolic interpretations of technology is apparent. If technology is interpreted as a good or evil symbol, it will exert a significant but differing influence on our moral judgments regarding specific technologies. For ministry, the prior question is: what guides our symbolic interpretation of technology? This leads us back to the original problem of secularity.

Due to the prevailing influence of secularity upon them, the understanding and practice of ministry have been stripped of any particular religious framework to make symbolic interpretations of technology and the consequential moral judgments regarding specific technologies. Religious faith does not exert an interpretive influence because in a secular culture the only reliable sources of interpretive and moral authority are empirical facts and personal experience. Since the content of religious faith cannot be proven empirically nor can a variety of disparate personal experiences be adequately judged for their correspondence to “reality,” the minister has no particular source of moral authority to exert in the performance of his or her task. All the minister can do in this situation is to offer or clarify information.

But knowledge, in and of itself, does not provide an adequate basis for moral judgment.. The reason for this, as Roger Shinn points out, is that although we live in the age of a knowledge explosion, its consequence is an ignorance explosion. The more we know about something or some topic, the less we know about other subjects. If moral judgment is based solely on knowledge, then there are fewer and fewer issues that individuals can make adequate decisions about, and yet in practice such a scheme is untenable because our inability or refusal to decide is itself a moral decision. This is the logic of “forced option.”

A forced option, says James, is a decision that allows no escape. Any efforts to delay it for long, to sit it out, to compromise indefinitely are themselves decisions—as surely as is the deliberate choice of one of the alternatives.<sup>8</sup>

If moral judgment is predicated solely on knowledge, then the result is a series of implicit moral decisions by omission. I am not suggesting that knowledge does not play an important role in moral judgment, but it is inadequate as the sole basis of moral authority. There are a variety of religious considerations, for example, which influence and inform morality that require careful and serious scrutiny particularly for those engaged in ministry. Paul Saltman, a biologist at the University of California, San Diego, is correct when he insists that the “ten principles of physics can’t replace the ten commandments”<sup>9</sup> in the search for meaning and value.

The response by many ministers to this situation is the use of an implicit ethic that, though cloaked in religious terminology, is in fact dependent on the primary sources of secular authority: public knowledge or personal experience. On the one hand, a dependence on public or empirical knowledge is seen in the attempt to develop a morally neutral practice of ministry. A

“religious” statement or principle is offered that nearly anyone can agree with, and moral implications are drawn from this premise. This is accomplished by defining religion in such broad terms (e.g., that faith is a synonym for an “ultimate concern”<sup>10</sup>) that everyone possesses a “religious devotion” about something. Since the various objects of devotion cannot be known in a public sense, discussion about religion is confined to sociological or psychological description. Ministry directs its attention toward identifying and responding to universal patterns or stages of moral and faith development.<sup>11</sup>

Ministers, therefore, cannot properly direct their attention toward formulating normative judgments of technologically related issues, but are confined to facilitating the moral development of individuals. What is at stake here is the value of development itself, while the content of that development is virtually ignored. Consequently there is no overtly religious framework with which to judge technology because ministry must properly direct its attention to what is publicly known—i.e., the developmental stages of values and faith. Any attempt to advocate a particular moral appraisal of technological change is dismissed as moralizing, or worse, sermonizing.

On the other hand, dependence on personal experience is seen in a morally aggressive style of ministry. What one personally experiences becomes the authority for moral action. In its crudest form, this is seen in the attitude that “God told me.” Consequently a superior or exclusive ethic based on personal experience is advocated which does not consider the possible validity of other perspectives. A morally aggressive ministry insists that it has an exclusive understanding of truth, and the moral judgments it offers on technology are ir-

<sup>8</sup>Roger Shinn, *Forced Options* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982) 3.

<sup>9</sup>Paul Saltman, “Humanists and Scientists Must Try to Give Us a New Mythology,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 8, 1982.

<sup>10</sup>See Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row).

<sup>11</sup>See James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); and John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

refutable. Ministers are oracles who deliver moral pronouncements which are simply true and not subject to interpretation. From this perspective, the moral judgment of technological change is based on its coherence with this personal experience, and the role of ministry is clear—to advocate or oppose technological changes which either support or threaten the experiential basis of authority.

These are admittedly crude characterizations of ministry and its relationship with ethics, but the point is that both utilize ethical frameworks that are based on secular categories of authority rather than on religious categories. There is nothing intrinsically “religious” about either public knowledge or private experience. Rather, religious categories reflect a dialectical relationship between public knowledge and private experience that avoids the use of morally neutral or aggressive styles of ministry. Neither style is acceptable in a pluralistic world because the former prevents a discussion of normative concepts and the latter engages in moral imperialism. Both ignore the central role that hermeneutics (interpretation) plays in ethics. Hence, there is the need for an interpretive and evaluative framework in ministry which openly and critically addresses the religious categories of value, symbol and meaning.

### III. VALUE, SYMBOL, AND MEANING

The categories of value, symbol and meaning provide an appropriate basis for an interpretive and evaluative framework because they combine a dynamic and necessary interaction between public knowledge and private experience. This interaction can be seen in brief definitions of each of these terms.

*Value.* Value is the expression of loyalty or fidelity. Each of us is committed to things, people, or ideas that provide us with a sense of purpose and define who we are. To be disloyal to such a value would be a denial of who one is and the reason for living. In short, values are what makes life worth living, and the object or objects of such loyalties are quite specific; “we never merely believe that life is worth living, but always think of it as made worth living by something on which we rely.”<sup>12</sup>

*Symbol.* A symbol represents both an interpretation of our condition and the values which are used in the interpretive process. In this sense, the element of time is quite important. Symbols simultaneously express who we have been, are, and hope to become. As such, symbols possess evocative power which stretches far beyond knowledge—i.e., a symbol that is meaningful to an individual or group of people says something far more than they can describe with words, and evokes from them a much stronger reaction or response than from those who do not share a similar perception.<sup>13</sup>

*Meaning.* Meaning represents a search for purpose and responses to symbolic interpretations of our condition. The search for meaning does not take place solely within a world that is publicly known but it also depends on an interpretive and evaluative process. One cannot find meaning, for example,

<sup>12</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) 119.

<sup>13</sup>See Howard L. Harrod, *The Human Center* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 19-20.

within a family if spouse and children are merely the objects of intellectual curiosity. Family life becomes meaningful as it develops shared evocative symbols and nurtures appropriate loyalties.

Knowledge plays a role in this interaction because loyalties cannot be directed toward (and symbolic interpretations offered in behalf of) purely subjective fantasies in a quest for meaning. There is a descriptive element of purposeful existence, and on the other hand, the descriptive nature of knowledge is not itself an object of fidelity. There is an interpretive and evaluative element of meaningful life.

Value, symbol, and meaning are each affected within this dynamic relationship. Loyalties help shape and are in turn shaped by symbols. Symbolic interpretations mold values and present unexpected twists and turns in the search for purpose. The quest for meaning is itself changing within the flux of changing values and symbols. This is a distinctively religious interpretive and evaluative framework because the practice of religion is itself a symbolic process which expresses ultimate loyalties and statements of meaning. The problem which we now face is whether it provides a satisfactory framework for ministry in light of the problem of technology.

I propose at this point that the dominant influence of secularity upon ministry is not due to its being the logical expression of biblical faith in the modern age, but that many uncritically inherited religious symbols and values are ill equipped to address the most pressing issues raised by modernity. This can be seen vividly in the problem of interpreting and evaluating

technological change.

For much of the history of Christianity it has been nature, not human manipulation of it, which has presented the fundamental challenge requiring a religious response. It was capricious natural events which were most life threatening. Consequently, religious symbols and values were used that explained the cruelty of nature in moral terms—e.g., the plague was God’s punishment for evil behavior, and there would be an eventual respite for the faithful from the threats of natural existence in life after death. The principal symbol was a powerful and sovereign God which expressed humanity’s powerlessness to determine its own fate.

With the modern age, however, the most life threatening circumstances are no longer natural but humanly produced through the introduction of new technologies. Granted that from time to time natural disasters and diseases do remind us that our mastery of nature is far from complete, nevertheless, by and large death or debilitation usually confronts us in the form of war, automobile and airplane accidents, or lifestyle related diseases.

The religious quest for meaning no longer takes place within a context of human victimization by natural processes but in one in which the principal dilemmas and threats are the result of human design and calculation. Within such a situation, the religious symbols and values represented in the saying “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away—blessed be the name of the Lord,” no longer has an explanatory, much less moral, power which can be used by ministry. And the paraphrase, “the Pentagon gives and the Pentagon takes away” is not an adequate substitute. The problem is, instead, a paucity of

religious symbols and values that can assist people in interpreting and evaluating the threatening and ambiguous nature of our modern circumstances.

This can be seen, for example, in the problems which the introduction of various technologies present. A specific technology is often justified by the claim that its use will provide a greater mastery over natural processes or control over social structures, thereby providing people with greater opportunity to determine their own destinies. Yet various technologies present threats and dilemmas that are as capricious as those posed by natural processes. Neither traditional religious nor secular symbols and values can provide adequate explanatory and evaluative frameworks in a paradoxical situation of control and yet no control. Statistical explanations of the probability of an automobile accident or contracting cancer have little, if any, symbolic significance, and the claim that a sovereign God is somehow causing these technological dilemmas to occur is both empirically and morally difficult to explain. From the standpoint of ministry, neither secular nor traditional religious symbols provide an adequate basis for interpreting the modern condition and offering appropriate moral responses.

If ministry is to develop a religious interpretive and moral framework vis-à-vis technology, it must reconceptualize values and symbols that both embrace the ambiguity of a control/no control situation and provide a basis for finding meaning in such a situation. The proper starting point for such an endeavor is a ministry which represents and is empowered by a faith community.

By “community” I am referring to a historic body of people who share a common set of values and symbols. The values reflect the loyalty or loyalties which the community expresses in its moral life and which its participants can draw upon in evaluating and choosing various moral

options. The community also possesses a set of symbols which express the changing character or interpretation of these loyalties over time—i.e., symbolic interpretations are not immutable and reflect the evolving character or tradition of the community. The values and symbols of the community, therefore, perform a paradigmatic function in the community's attempt to understand what is occurring in its life, and formulate fitting or appropriate moral responses.<sup>14</sup>

The community exists in the tension between public knowledge and private experiences. But this tension is creative rather than debilitating because the community possesses a tradition and vision of the future against which interpretations and moral judgments can be compared and checked. A community-based interpretive and evaluative framework avoids both moral relativism and a morally aggressive style of ministry. There is simultaneously both a loyalty of conviction and affirmation of pluralism; a rootedness in tradition and an openness to new knowledge and experiences. In short, a community-based interpretive and evaluative framework has an open character in which its values and symbols are not fossilized relics but evolving expressions of a community's quest for meaning within changing circumstances. This is particularly relevant in the difficult task of making moral judgments, as Browning argues, in regard to a community's response to moral issues:

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<sup>14</sup>See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York; Harper & Row, 1963).

Its activity or practice is interrupted by some problem, issue, or crisis that forces the community to start thinking or reflecting about its practice. The issue could be one involving its educational practice, its care practice, its mission practice, or its maintenance practice. In reflecting, the community reexamines and reinterprets its history, its major symbols, its past commitments, and other aspects of its life in order to come up with a hypothesis or theory about the right way to proceed with its action. If this community exists in a pluralistic society, and if part of its problem involves a conflict between its agenda and that of another community then its reflection may also have to entail appreciative interpretation and criticism of the other community's history, major symbols, and basic commitments.<sup>15</sup>

The implication of Browning's thesis is that ministers can use overtly religious symbols and values in a manner that critically embraces public knowledge and private experiences, and avoids moral neutrality or aggressiveness.

For example, in addressing biomedical issues, ministers can utilize public information, private experiences and religious tradition to inquire about our understanding and interpretation of what it means to be (biologically, sociologically, theologically, etc.) in relationship to natural and social systems, and offer necessary evaluative responses.

The list of examples posed by various technologies (e.g., nuclear arms, the production of energy, transportation systems, etc.) as problems for ministry could, of course, be expanded. But the point I wish to conclude with is that unless ministers formulate more overtly religious interpretive and evaluative frameworks, ministry will be unable to function in an age characterized by rapid technological change, or will be forced to adopt morally neutral or aggressive styles that will make public moral dialogue in a pluralistic culture increasingly difficult.



This is simply to say that without a clear and critical sense of religious identity, the contextual flux created by technological change will continue to be a problem without possibility of solution rather than an opportunity to inquire into the meaning and moral consequences of religious faith in the contemporary age.

<sup>15</sup>Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*, 50.