

Steve Bishop asks the key question about religion and technology

The Religious Dimension of Technology

What has technology to do with religion? I want to say that inherent within technology is a religious dimension, and technology has, in our materialistic western society, become a religion. Before examining these assertions, I will examine the claim that technology is neutral. This is perhaps the major objection to the religious nature of technology.

The neutrality fallacy

This myth of neutrality, though prevalent in philosophical circles several decades ago, has been seriously questioned by many contemporary philosophers. Unfortunately, it is probably the most dominant paradigm in schools.

The argument for a neutral technology, baldly stated, goes something like this: 'Technology is only a tool, it is a benign instrument. Misuse of technology, not technology itself, is to blame for any ill effects.'

This is a fallacy. The impact of

technology on society is evidence enough of this. All technological design is laden with the values of the designer. If Technology were a neutral tool it would be independent of culture.

But a technological artefact such as a car presupposes certain things: the need to travel, roads, oil, and oil industry, mechanics and so on. Technology cannot be divorced from culture.

Technology shapes society: the

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development of stone, bronze and iron all had cultural and political impact on society. So much so we use those terms to describe specific periods in history. We only have to compare a decentralised solar-powered society with a nuclear-powered one, to see that technology is not merely a benign tool.

To accept nuclear power also determines the kind of society that will exist in the future: one that has the technological capability to store and keep and secure radioactive waste.

For the Christian, technology is a human activity that is to be done with the exercise of freedom and responsibility in response to God. It involves both the forming and transforming of creation. It can be performed obediently or disobediently - there is no neutral ground in God's kingdom.

The religion in technology

Hand in hand with the desire to develop technology is the idea that nature is to some extent to be controlled and/or developed. Cultures and religions that place a high value on wilderness do not crave the latest technological developments or devote much time, effort and money to obtain them.

While Europe was in the Dark Ages, China had knowledge of many technological artefacts, such as

water-wheel clocks (AD 1088), fireworks (AD 1103) and explosives (AD 1200); and much earlier the Chinese used the abacus, rope (2800 BC), kites (1000 BC) and paper (200-100 BC). However, I would claim that because their religions did not have a concept of the development of nature, technological development was stillborn. Religious worldviews have a direct impact upon technology.

Different views of technology are the product of different worldviews. These worldviews are inherently religious; they rest on presuppositions that are the equivalent of faith commitments. A secular, materialist worldview will place a high emphasis on technology. An animist, nature-worshipping culture will not. The former places technology above nature; the latter nature above technology. Religious factors affect technology. Examining how different religions such as scientific materialism, Christianity and Buddhism view technology provides a good starting point for an RE topic.

The morality of technology

The question 'Who do we design for?', also reveals a moral dimension to technology. Is it for the poor, the old, the handicapped? The new design of jug kettles is a classic example of this. They may save a little energy but for elderly or disabled people they are harder to handle than the previous generation of kettles.

Implicit within this design change is a range of values; among them the notion that only those who have economic utility are worth designing for. These values are rooted in worldviews, which are at heart religious.

Technicism: the religion of technology

As with most good God-given gifts, technology can be exalted to a place it does not deserve; consequently it can become idolised. This idolisation of technology has been called technicism. Given enough time and money technology will provide the key to all our problems; technology is the panacea for all our ills; we can control the future through technology. This is the creed of those that worship at the altar of technicism.

The issue of technicism can be tackled in the classroom by examining advertisements. Advertising provides us with a rich source of illustration of technology as religion. I have spent several lessons discussing current TV and magazine adverts; this also has the useful side-effect of making the pupils think more critically about what they are being fed by the media.

The UK is the only country to include technology as such in a compulsory National Curriculum. This is symptomatic of a society that has elevated economics, science and technology to the status of idols.

The fact that our society is described as 'technological' is tantamount to admitting we worship

technology: the psalmist wrote that what we worship we become like - dehumanised (Psalm 115, verse 8). Humans are becoming like computers and computers like humans. The research of sociologist Sherry Tuckle, in her book *The Second Self*, has shown how young children's thinking has been affected by computers. Computers shape their whole development: their personal identity, their personalities and even their sexuality. It is now a fact that computers and artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping

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psychology. One such example is the work of Marvin Minsky. In *The Society of Mind*, he argues that human minds are complicated machines. Is the mind merely a complex computer program? Or is this a case of reshaping ourselves in the image of our gods?

It is not only our perception of ourselves that is changing. The theoretical physicist Paul Davies writes:

‘ . . . some scientists have proposed we regard nature as basically a computational process. The music of the spheres and the clockwork universe have been displaced in favour of the “cosmic computer,” with the entire universe being regarded as a gigantic information-processing system.’ *The Mind of God* (p.97). Evidence enough that technology shapes our view of the world even as our worldview shapes our view of technology! It seems to me that these are just the kind of issues we need to raise when RE takes a look at technology.

To read

- Charles Arthur, 'Design for the third age,' *New Scientist* (June 1992)
- Steve Bishop, 'Towards a Christian view of technology', *Spectrum* vol 23 (1991 p. 9-5)
- Paul Davies, *The Mind of God, Science and the Search for Ultimate Meaning* (Leicester: IVP, 1990)
- Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: William Morrow, 1978)
- Marvin Minsky, *The Society of Minds*, (London: Heinemann, 1987)
- Stephen V Monsma (ed), *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986)
- Sherry Tuckle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (London: Granada Publishing, 1984)
- Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1984)

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