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EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLY IN THE TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

(AN INTERVIEW)

Heinrich Ott is currently Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Basel, Switzerland. He has lectured frequently in the United States at places including the Yale Divinity School, Drew University, Princeton University, The Claremont School of Theology, and Fuller Theological Seminary.

Heinrich Ott rose to prominence in the late nineteen-fifties primarily on the basis of his strikingly original alignment of Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger. Influenced by both, but a significant theologian in his own right, Ott has inaugurated a remarkable programme in hermeneutics and ontology. In executing his programme, or as Ott might prefer, in undertaking his theological journey, his path has crossed, or at times run parallel, to Heidegger's path of thinking. Consequently, it's not that surprising when the *Journal of Dharma* met with Ott in Basel early last year, much of our dialogue focused on Heidegger's analysis of technology and Ott's account of what this means for the doing of contemporary theology.

J.D. Professor Ott, I'd like to talk about what role religions - religions like Christianity - will have in defining the role of technology in the twenty-first century. But first let's talk about the nature of technology itself. What do you mean when you say technology?

Ott: Technical ability, technical skill, has always been one of the characteristics of homo sapiens, the human race. But now I think modern technology is something to be distinguished from this general technical ability. This comes to the fore if we realize how slowly technology has developed until the last century. But then there was a massive acceleration in technological development. Indeed its acceleration has increased ever since and no one knows when it will slow down again. This, it seems to me, shows that

there is more to technology in the past two centuries than the simple refinement of human skills and technical abilities. Heidegger, I think, was right here technology has become a worldview.... it's an all encompassing phenomenon. Heidegger called it a new beginning.

J.D. So technology is more than the sum total of humanity's mechanical devices?

Ott: Yes, to be sure. Technology is an attitude which transforms reality into a means to an end or goal a goal not established by nature or by God

J.D. It sounds so managerial . . . like Nietzsche's will to power. . .

Ott: Yes, and that's the way Heidegger saw it too, In fact, Heidegger saw it as a kind of fate or destiny a fate in the history of western metaphysics that undergoes many transformations beginning with Plato and culminating in Nietzsche's will to power what he calls the will to will.

J.D. So technology, then isn't simply a human construction . . . it's a destiny or fate?

Ott: Yes, understood properly, it's a kind of fate, but it's not a fate that is totally deterministic. It requires some response humanity remains a responsible agent. In this respect, Heidegger's account of technology is not unlike his analysis of thinking. Thinking for Heidegger isn't simply a human creation. Heidegger writes, "we never come to thoughts, they always come to us". Technology like thinking is something that is given something like a destiny that requires human mediation. In this sense it's not simply fatalistic. And precisely for this reason, William Richardson - the well known Heidegger specialist - translates *Geschick* not as "destiny" or "fate" but as "mittence" instead in order to avoid a fatalistic interpretation.

J.D. I understand too, Heidegger believes that technology should not be understood as a neutral instrument?

Ott: Yes, Heidegger claims it would be very naive to believe that technology is merely a neutral instrument and that everything depends upon whether it is used for good or malevolent purposes. No, for Heidegger, technology has its own inner dynamic. To

vulgarize Heidegger a little, there's a saying that goes "what can be done will be done". The same holds true of technology ... what can be accomplished will someday be accomplished.

J.D. So there are no real limits that technology can establish ... to limit its own dynamic ... it just works itself out?

Ott: Yes, and I think this is closely related to the capitalist dynamic too something perhaps, Heidegger didn't take sufficient account of the Marxist analysis of the phenomenon of capitalism. Capitalism doesn't know any limitations. What brings profit will some day be done.

J.D. So it's fair to say Nietzsche's will to power that plays itself out in the entelechy of technology corresponds to capitalism's fetish for the accumulation of capital ... the accumulation of capital for its own sake alone?

Ott: Yes I think that's a very good parallel.

J.D. Okay, let's talk about the possible dangers that technology poses for human beings and creation at large.

Ott: First let me put the issue into a theological perspective. Creation means that human beings and non-human beings have an inherent value and dignity by virtue of the fact they are created by God. It's this account which is threatened by technology. Technology considers both human and non-human beings as mere resources it tends to deny the inherent value of all that is created. This is typical of the technological way of thinking and it's something with which the natural sciences are also closely aligned. To be sure, technological thinking may be very sophisticated but it fails to think reality at its very deepest levels. It only establishes the most efficient means for reaching certain goals. To put it another way, technological thinking and scientific reason only think in one dimension. They can't reflect on their own basic premises. Chemistry, for example, can't establish what matter really is and physics can't establish what energy really is. Similarly technology can't define its own real nature despite the fact technology can be used for any kind of goal to understand technology we have to move beyond it. We have to move in a philosophical direction in order to disclose what remains hidden technology can't be "solved" by technological means.

J.D. This brings us to a major theme in your own theology. You argue that scientific and technological thinking have tended to exclude a significant dimension of reality . . . something you've called "primary experience" or the sphere of the "non-disposable". Can you tell me a little about this?

Ott: Yes, there are certain regions of primary human experience that can't be explained or even touched by technological thinking. Take, for instance, our experience of moods. Heidegger says that we're thrown into the world and always experience some kind of mood. Even when I'm experiencing a very dull mood . . . a grey and boring one . . . I experience the fact that "I am and that I have to be."

J.D. So in these moods I experience the fact of my own responsibility?

Ott: Yes, responsibility is clearly implied. I have to be my very own being. Heidegger uses the verb "to be" here in a transitive state, like I have to do something. So my freedom and my responsibility can't be explained away by a scientific or technological model. We as persons always remain non-disposable always more than a scientific-technological construct.

J.D. You speak of thought as being non-disposal too . . . that the thoughts of great thinkers and our greatest poets are never self-generated . . . not are they reducible to mere information . . . something you say that is merely technical.

Ott: Yes, it seems to me that I can never translate a poem or an essential thought into mere information information that this or that state of affairs is the case. Of course, the sphere of personal existence is difficult to define because it doesn't enter the framework of mere information that which is calculable and manageable. But that being said, there are segments of reality which are at our disposal. Human beings are also homo faber. But the artisan or smith doesn't represent the basic characteristic of human existence or what I call primary experience. That's just a segment. The primary and all encompassing reality is not of this kind. We are essentially dialogical creatures . . . we suffer experiences and respond to claims that are directed towards us as persons. This model of reality is of quite a different type from the model of homo faber where we have to deal with things that we make, where we're subjects dealing with objects. So perhaps we

shouldn't say that reality as a whole is not at our disposal but rather we should say that the reality of our life; the reality of history; and reality of our social life,; are not at our disposal. Another way of putting it is that the smaller segment where reality is at our disposal is embedded in wider horizon that is not at our disposal. I've compared this dual aspect of reality with Martin Buber's notion and I-Thou and I-It relationships.

J.D. Is the non-disposable level of primary experience . . . is this the level where God speaks? . . . where the world religions try to articulate their different experiences of God?

Ott: Yes, if you want to look for a place where God is speaking or where the dialogue is truly going on, it happens primarily in that sphere of reality that is not at our disposal. Nor, I guess, it this really surprising. God addresses us in our very beings as responsible and listening persons. In fact, Karl Rahner's philosophy of religion is centered on the notion of listening to the Word. Humanity, he says, in its primary being, is created to be a listener. Before God speaks, we are already constituted as virtual or possible listeners. But I want to emphasize that the other spheres of reality like those of the artisan the homo faber, are not excluded as such. This segment of reality - albeit smaller - is still included in our being responsible persons. An architect, for example, may build a church and an artisan may sculpt a crucifix. But this process of making and shaping is ultimately embedded in the broader reality of the architect's piety and the artisan's own faith both of whom feel this should be a temple to the living God - a symbol of the mystery of their own belief.

J.D. Okay, let's shift our focus somewhat. What do you think Christianity and other religions can tell us about the role and nature of technology? Presumably they tell us something about its limits.

Ott: Well first there must be a discourse in apologetics. The world's major religions represent the kinds of realities that are not at our disposal. They show us significant dimensions of reality which lie outside the technological viewpoint which only deals with a small segment of the real. Religions like Christianity, for example, show us that the sphere of ethical behaviour something that belongs to everyday experience - lies outside the technological domain. The same holds true of aesthetics,

art, and poetry all of which remind us that the calculative sphere of technology is comparatively small indeed. Religions show us this, so to speak, a fortiori

J.D. Religions like Buddhism say something similar especially with regard to all sentient beings. Take, for instance, the whole idea of ahimsa or non-injury....

Ott: Yes, I think Christianity has much to learn here. It wasn't so long ago that books like Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* celebrated humanity's mastery over nature and saw it as consistent with the biblical message. Cox celebrated humanity as humanity come of age a humanity responsible for disposing over reality. But books like this are no longer written, since mainstream Christians have clearly changed. And yes, religions like Buddhism have a wider view of reality by including all sentient beings. There is a solidarity not only among humans but among all beings in the cosmos. This, of course, is connected with the doctrine of re-incarnation which goes beyond the boundaries of anthropocentric thinking. All sentient beings are essentially bound together. Animals can become humans and humans can become animals. This is the kind of universalist kernel that can be picked up by Christians.

J.D. That's very interesting. So teachings like ahimsa can help to remind Christians of traditions like those of St. Francis of Assisi who speaks so beautifully of his relationship with nature in his *Canticle to the Sun*. Here, it seems, something gets retrieved at the very heart of the Christian faith.

Ott: Yes, it's truly biblical, particularly when you think of Psalm 104 and other parts of the Bible. It belongs to the Christian heritage, but for a while we've lost sight of this truth. The encounter with Buddhism and other religions has served to remind us of this heritage again.

J.D. This is very interesting, but some forms of Protestantism, particularly fundamentalism, have aligned themselves with a view of progress which appears sympathetic to the technological viewpoint. These forms of Protestantism interpret mastery of nature as a divinely legitimated fact....

Ott: Yes, but this view is far too narrow . . . it's a poor interpretation of the mastery of earth and the mastery of creation. But let's be clear here: this attitude isn't merely an expression of Protestant fundamentalism. It has also been associated with some forms of liberal theology- a theology which assumes that humanity has come of age. This kind of theology was a big fad in the nineteen-sixties. Indeed many of its exponents appealed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But one should remember that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was an enthusiastic reader of a very famous book by Walter F. Otto on the Greek gods. Otto argued that the Greeks' relationship with the gods - the gods in nature - was a sounder relationship to nature than the dualistic and metaphysical relationship that we have in Christian piety. In fact, Otto believed that the Greek gods still existed as entities and powers in the natural world. But today, of course, our technological age is blind and deaf to these powers.

J.D. So what we've been left with is a disenchanting nature?

Ott: Yes, nature is disenchanting but the gods are still there. When I think of the Bible with all its references to angels and superhuman powers in the Old and New Testaments . . . that's not a disenchanting universe. To be sure, it's a universe, where you should only trust in the one God but not the non-existence of other superhuman powers. Certainly people like Paul Tillich in the Christian tradition have interpreted nature in a sacramental way. Tillich spoke of technical reason as divorced from its own depths . . . as being self-contained and calculative . . . as divorced from the Logos in the primal depths of nature.

J.D. But to retrieve this sense of depth . . . a sense of brotherhood with all sentient beings . . . shouldn't we be renouncing the technological viewpoint? Or to put the question differently: how do we get beyond it?

Ott: By thinking through it and thinking beyond it without thereby abolishing it. Clearly Heidegger wasn't of the opinion that we could just decide to renounce technology . . . return to nature and forget about everything. This would be far too simplistic. Heidegger was a realist, not an antitechnical romanticist.

J.D. So in your own theology, when you think through technology, are you're trying to rob technology of what you call its fate? . . . to situate technology in the higher context of Christian freedom?

Ott: Well, Heidegger said we can't overcome it, but that we can live through it and situate technology in a larger integrated whole. If, for example, I lose my father, I can never overcome this loss. But I can learn to live with it; it can even become a fruitful experience, enabling me to grow. The same, I think, is also true of living through technology.

J.D. So from the religious point of view we still have reason to be hopeful?

Ott: Yes, we can still be hopeful. Technology's power to exclude primary experiences - experiences expressed in the world's major religions - is never total or complete. Technology tries to objectify reality and turn it into an object, but this objectification is never totally successful. What we have to do, then, is to minimize the mentality which reinforces the technological viewpoint something being done by the world's major religions.