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## **TECHNOLOGY AND CHANGE IN RELIGIOUS BELIEF**

Does technology have an effect on religious belief? The answer seems to be clearly in the affirmative. It is obvious that, in western industrialized nations at least, people no longer believe in God as they once did, and the presumption of technology having such an effect explains the constant attempts on the part of believers over the last 400 years to show the compatibility of religion and technology (Goldman (1990): 49). The advancement of technology, then, appears to have been accompanied by a change in (if not an abandonment of) religious belief. But how, one might ask, does technology lead to change in religious belief and, more importantly, why? Furthermore, what should the response of the believer be to technology?

My interests here are primarily philosophical and, specifically, phenomenological. I wish to start, not from a set of particular religious beliefs (such as one might find in catechisms and creeds), but from the phenomenon of religious belief in general. It is in this way that one has the best chance at understanding the relation between technology and religious belief.

Of course, there are many different relations possible here; five readily come to mind. First, some claim that technology refutes claims made by, or in, religious belief. Second, technology is sometimes said to imply values that are inconsistent with religious belief. Third, some argue that technology provides additional grounds for, or confirms, religious belief. Fourth, one might note that technology contributes to a deepening or a maturity in religious belief. Finally, there is also the view that, strictly speaking, technology says nothing about religious belief—that they represent two independent and incommensurable ways of looking at the world.

Obviously, it would be impossible to address each of these options here. Still, by exploring one or two of them—the one or two that seem most to reflect the contemporary challenge to reli-

gion—we will have something of an answer to the question of how and why technology can be responsible for change in religious belief.

I

It may be useful to begin by clarifying what I *do not* wish to argue in this paper. I am not concerned with the issue of whether technology is a product of the Fall and, hence, inherently evil (see Ellul (1984)). Nor is my interest one of whether “technology” has come to rival or replace God as the object of our most fundamental beliefs (see Ferre (1991) and Ferre (1988): ch. 7). Rather, it is what it means for technology to rival or replace religious belief (or *how* it could), regardless of whether it has.

Second, it is important to say something about what I mean by “technology”. By “technology” I have in mind two things: first, what I call the artifacts of technology, second, what one might call the technological world view. These are distinct phenomena, though it has been suggested (by Ellul, for example) that they are not independent of one another. By “artifacts of technology”, I mean simply the products of modern scientific research and development (though the word “modern” here is not essential). Here, one would include not only objects such as television sets, space satellites and vehicles, and electron microscopes but also procedures such as carbon dating, the use of robots in manufacturing, and genetic manipulation. By the “technological world view”, I mean that which sees humanity as essentially discontinuous with, and master over, nature, and which generally adopts a materialist approach to describing reality.

To begin, then, how could technology lead to a change in, or a weakening of, religious belief?

One view is that technology refutes religious beliefs. Here, religion is seen as sometimes providing statements about (or explanations of) events, and technology is held to provide a counter explanation. One might argue, for example, that it was once a religious belief that the earth was at the centre of the universe, but that modern science (through the use of the technology of the telescope) was able to demonstrate the falsity of this belief. In

such cases, then, it appears that technology has enabled human beings to demonstrate the falsity of certain religious beliefs, and that it is only a matter of time before what beliefs still remain will suffer the same fate. One can think here of how stories found in the religions of classical Greece have been criticized and abandoned, so that we now speak of Greek mythology rather than religion.

Arguably, however, technology does not have this effect on all belief and, some believers would insist, it is rare that one can find cases where the two stand in direct conflict. Still, it does seem plausible to hold that technology has tended to make religious belief unnecessary. As Eric Hoffer once noted, "(w)here there is the necessary technical skill to move mountains, there is no need for the faith that moves mountains".<sup>1</sup>

Such an erosion of religious belief can occur in a number of ways. First, while technology does not explicitly refute religious belief, "a new invention . . . opens a door" and provides an occasion for us to "cross the threshold" into an alternative system of belief (Goldman (1990): 49). A second possibility is that technology changes the relation of humanity to nature. Humanity appears to be less and less in direct contact with nature; technology – the products of human artifice – has come to mediate the world for us. This, according to Jacques Ellul, is disastrous for religious belief. Since "the objects that inform our ordinary experience of the world are commonly objects of our own making", we no longer experience the world as truly other (Goldman (1990): 50). When we no longer become aware of anything as "other", the natural occasion for our awareness of the transcendent is removed.

A third way is that technology alters the discourse that underlies our belief. Consider, the statement that "God loves us as a father loves his children". The notion of God as father was, presumably, originally used to illuminate our understanding of God's nature through our familiarity with human paternity. But as Joseph Novak notes in another context, "The rise of in vitro fertilization, the creation of sperm banks, the possibility (actuality?) of a single individual being

1. In Rhonda TRIPP, *The International Thesaurus of Quotations*, 1970; from *The Passionate State of Mind*, 1954.

a 'father' to perhaps hundreds of children separated not only geographically but also temporally (perhaps by decades, even centuries, or eons?) makes one wonder what is the real sense of paternity" (Novak (1991): 8). One can now say that someone is a "father" without saying anything of the love and the caring that once was (at least, ideally) connected with biological paternity. So what does it mean, in our day, to describe God as "father"? With the change in our understanding of "paternity", our understanding of God as father must change as well.

Or consider the following example: upon the birth of a child, a religious believer may say that the child was "a gift from God". Now it is true that, when we know where children come from - when we understand intercourse, fertilization, the development of the embryo and so on, and particularly when this can take place inside a laboratory- we need not abandon the expression "gift from God".<sup>2</sup> But clearly, after a couple has "planned" to have a child, after the use of fertility drugs, sexual counselling and artificial insemination, what it means for a child to be described in this way is at least *different* from what it once meant.

A fourth way may be found when we consider how technology changes how we express or practice our belief. Think of how television, via "televangelism," has affected such elements involved in religious belief as the notions of prayer or of community. In fact, according to Marshall McLuhan, belief has changed because technology has changed, and continually changes, human consciousness. McLuhan holds that it was technology - specifically, the development of the alphabet - that led to the possibility of the private self, a notion central to Christianity. In our own time, however information retrieval - the almost instantaneous recall of "the most ancient, forms of awareness as contemporary" and the possibility of sharing that information without any particular geographical or ideological locus - has served to challenge that "private identity" (McLuhan and Hoskins (1989): 160). In such a world, a number of aspects associated with religion tend to lose their purchase on us.

Perhaps a stronger instance of how technology is said to lead to change in religious belief is not based on the results of technological

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2. See Hart and Nielsen (1990): 218, 227.

investigation or on the challenge to our metaphors or analogies, but on something implicit in the way technology leads us to understand the world. It has been argued that technology implies values "opposed" to religious belief—that it counsels dominance and objectification (Buber (1958)). Its method is the method of instrumental rationality, and it takes this as the model for all rationality. The relation of technology to religious belief is not one of falsification or of contributing to its erosion; rather, it provides an alternative belief. Indeed, Frederick Ferré notes that:

There are many among us who still hardly recognize the degree to which technological faith has characterized our age, but this obliviousness tends to confirm the thesis, since ages tend not to be self-aware of the basic premises on which they stand. (Ferré (1991): 214)

Of course, not all change in belief is negative. Arguably, technology also contributes to maturity in belief. It makes us aware that religious belief is not simply an empirical explanation of certain events or a rival to scientific belief, and it may remind us that, as adults, we cannot and ought not be satisfied with the level of religious belief that we had as children. The Last Judgement is not (just) an event that will occur at the end of life, but provides guidance for, and calls us to reflect on, what we do in our lives. The changing of water into wine at Cana is not (just) an illustration of the power of Jesus, but an allegory that speaks of Jesus's mission and our release from Mosaic ritual. And, similarly, technology involved in care at the end of life and in our treatment of the dead, leads us as adults to reflect on our religious beliefs about death (see Phillips (1970)). Surely this is as it should be. Recall Paul's remark that "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." (I Cor 13:11).

It is clear, then, that technology does affect religious belief and that it affects it in the kinds of ways described above. There is, I think, little controversial in the preceding remarks. But two important questions may be raised here. First, *how* is such an effect possible? And, second, why is it that, in the presence of the same technology and given the same religious traditions, not all believers experience the same effects? In reflecting on this latter

question, one may be able to answer the former question on how technology is able to affect religious belief.

## II

Perhaps the most obvious reply to the question why believers respond in different ways to technology is that religious belief is essentially private and non-theoretical. Because of this character of belief, there can be no general statement of its relation to technology. Instead, there are as many possible relations as there are believers.

Yet such a response does not solve our question; it only delays it. To begin with, if religious belief is about the world, and if it is something in the world—in this case, technology—that leads to change in religious belief, the effect technology has on such belief cannot be entirely subjective or accidental. There must be an empirically testable and objective relation, even though it may be manifested in a distinctive way in each individual. Indeed, if the explanation of the differences in response to technology were purely subjective (e.g., psychological), there would be no more sense in asking what the relation is between religious belief and technology, than there would be in asking what the relation is between religious belief and shoe size.

In the recent philosophical literature, one finds two kinds of answers to the question of why not all believers experience the same effects when confronted with technology; each hinges on the nature of religious belief. First, there is the view—shared by both non-believers, such as Kai Nielsen,<sup>3</sup> and a number of Christian apologists, such as Robert Larmer (Larmer (1988))—that religious beliefs are on a par with other, scientific, beliefs and are subject, more or less, to the same criteria for proof. Those beliefs which clearly attempt to refer to or describe something must, Nielsen suggests, be open to some kind of verification. Although he would argue that no religious beliefs can be so established, on the issue that such beliefs must be open to such proof, both Nielsen and the Christian apologist agree.

Imagine, for example, a believer relating the story of the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1-11) and concluding that "Jesus turned the

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3. See, for example, his recent book *God, Scepticism and Modernity* (Nielsen, 1989).

water into wine". Nielsen's response to this might be that the believer is claiming that Jesus transformed one substance (and its attendant qualities) into another. And, if one were to treat the event as being more than a magician's trick, Nielsen would expect that the believer could, in principle, substantiate the event by doing it him or herself, or by pointing to some (often ignored or unknown) chemical process. Similarly, the Christian apologist would no doubt make an argument that the transformation of one substance into another is not impossible and that we might have good reason for believing that it occurred, even though we were ignorant of the precise means by which it occurred (see Larmer (1988)).

The nature of religious belief, then, is that it is something that is open to verification or falsification and that must, in principle, be verified if one is to be rational in accepting it. If technology demonstrates the falsity of certain beliefs, or if it provides a (simpler?) explanation of the phenomena underlying the belief, then it would seem that the only *rational* thing to do is to change one's belief.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Nielsen argues that for someone with "a good philosophical and a good scientific education," belief in God (and, presumably, all religious belief) is "irrational" and should be abandoned (Nielsen (1989): 3).

But why is it that perfectly reasonable and well-informed people continue to believe? Nielsen's reply seems to be that we all have our little irrationalities or unjustifiable emotional commitments, but that this need not drastically interfere with our ability to lead meaningful and productive lives. So we continue (as it were) to wear two hats - our "religious" hat for some things, and our "rational" hat for others (see Nielsen (1989): 240, 246). Differences between believers, then, would be explained by the fact that some individuals have an irrational or non-rational attachment to certain beliefs. Thus, despite the presence of the same technology, not all believers experience the same effects - though if they were fully rational, they would.

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4. At minimum, if technology could duplicate such an event as the changing of water into wine or if it could establish that the chemical transformation involved was not particularly unusual (such as the transformation of wine into vinegar), the distinctively religious character of the event might well seem insignificant or non-existent.

This approach supposes that what counts as conclusive evidence for or against a religious belief is something on which all reasonable individuals could agree. Moreover, such a view can easily account for change in belief – by claiming, for example, that reason and argument show that certain propositions expressing religious belief are false. Thus, according to Nielsen, there is a relation between religion and technology – i.e., both attempt to provide an explanation of phenomena that occur in the world – and change in belief occurs because of the “evidence” that technology provides – i.e., it provides the means of refuting certain religious beliefs. Differences in the responses of believers to this evidence are, as noted earlier, accounted for by the non-rational attachments to some beliefs.

Still, this account fails to do justice, on the one hand, to the role of evidence in change of belief and, on the other, to the reasonability of commitment in spite of “evidence”. (I would also argue, though do not do so here, that it misunderstands the nature of change of belief.) Admittedly, a religious believer may be said to be irrational if she affirms something which she admits to be clearly inconsistent with other beliefs she might have. But suppose that the believer claims that there is no inconsistency, or that what “evidence” she has *is* not only good evidence, but conclusive. And suppose, too, that the individual is a member of a community where these beliefs play an important role and that, in all other respects, the individual *does* appear to be “rational”. Here, it seems far too easy to attempt to explain the difference in religious belief by simply insisting on there being some psychological problem or irrationality in the individual.

Again, do religious believers relinquish belief on account of “sufficient empirical evidence” alone? While people sometimes speak of changing a belief on the basis of evidence, they often draw on what normally wouldn’t count as good *empirical* evidence, and what counts as “conclusive” for one may not be relevant at all for another.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, even when empirical evidence does seem relevant, it is doubtful

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5. Suppose I say that I believe in a Last Judgement after having had a vision. Some might say that this is (to say the least) poor evidence, others might very well grant that it is evidence, and yet others say that it is no evidence at all. (Compare this to my giving such a reason for my belief in the possibility of cold fusion.) See here Wittgenstein (1966): 61.



whether it alone is "decisive". Thus, it would seem that religious belief is not on a par with other (e.g., scientific) beliefs and that, if religious beliefs can be verified, the way in which such a verification takes place is unlike empirical demonstration and may vary from believer to believer.

As an alternative to this approach, consider the view suggested by Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>6</sup> and developed in the work of D.Z. Phillips and others.<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein provides us with the following situation:

Suppose someone were a believer and said: "I believe in a Last Judgement," and I said: "Well, I'm not so sure. Possibly". You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said "There is a German aeroplane overhead," and I said "Possibly I'm-not so sure, "you'd say we were fairly near. (Wittgenstein (1966): 53)

In the latter case, the conversation is not over belief in the event, but whether the thing that both see is a German aeroplane. Both interlocutors are looking at the world in the same way, and the reader can imagine one or the other pointing to features of the phenomenon in question that would establish whether there is a (German or a British) aeroplane flying over head, or whether the object is a bird or a child's kite.

In the first case, however, Wittgenstein suggests that there is no "dispute" - in fact, there does not even seem to be contact between the two. The issue is not whether one has good reasons for the belief, but whether one believes. The two parties do not share the same way of looking at the world. One believes - "the man risks things on account of it which he would not do on things which are far better established for him" (Wittgenstein (1966): 54); the other doesn't.

So-called "Wittgensteinian fideists" would argue, then, that it is in just this latter way that one can understand why, when confronted with the same technology, religious believers respond differently. The individuals involved do not see the issue to be one of determining

6. See Wittgenstein (1966) and (1969).

7. E.g., Phillips (1988) and (1986) and Dilman (1975).

whether it is technology or religious belief that provides "the best explanation of the world;" they simply have different beliefs or world views. For some, the technological world view has a central role; for others, the artifacts of technology are understood through the world view provided by one's religious beliefs. Thus, depending on the role of these beliefs in a person's life, the effects of technology will be felt in different ways. Indeed, in the case of some believers – unlike the model suggested by Nielsen and by Christian apologists – it may even happen that religious belief can be entirely independent of empirical belief and, by extension, of any putative refutation or confirmation by the results of technology.

The Wittgensteinian alternative removes the warrant for describing a believer's belief as "irrational". What counts as evidence, or as conclusive evidence, for one person or in one domain, need not (indeed, cannot) for that reason alone constitute a standard for another. In short, what relation there is between religion and technology is entirely "internal" to the individual; there is no general statement possible on how technology affects religious belief. In response to the question of how one accounts for believers reacting differently to technology, this view can say that, given the nature of belief, this is precisely what would be expected.

But, to begin with, this strategy seems to eviscerate the public dimension of belief altogether. Most religious believers hold that there is a "neutral starting point" from which some fundamental aspects of religious belief can be discussed with non-believers. Again, if, for example, the Son of God did not "dwell among us" and if Jesus did not die and was not resurrected, the Christian believer's faith is – as Paul said – "vain" (1 Cor 15:14). Thus, for the Christian, an "empirical" component is required for such beliefs as the incarnation and the resurrection.

Consequently, this approach goes little way in accounting for the relation between technology and religious belief. There is no general statement that can be made concerning the effect of technology on religious belief or, for that matter, on whether there is anything that believers *in general* must do in response to technology. All one can say is that change in belief depends on the role of religion and technology in a believer's life. Moreover, this does not explain

*why* change occurs in the presence of technology - it only affirms that it does - and it is clearly incapable of saying whether change ought or ought not to occur. Finally, this ignores the fact that the effect of technology on religious belief (or vice versa) does not seem to be purely subjective. While it is true that technology does not necessarily lead believers to abandon religious belief, it is surely no coincidence that this has been the result in the lives of many.

Still, the Wittgensteinian view seems correct in noting the incommensurability between the technological world view and that of the religious believer. The religious believer's view is not - or, at least, cannot be shown to be - a more (or less) complete account of that found in the technological view. The nature of belief, of "proof" and of the relevance of empirical evidence all preclude the assimilation of one by the other.

There is also something clearly correct in Nielsen's analysis. Religion is affected by technology. Artifacts of technology change the world and change our relation to the world. Nevertheless, what change in belief occurs is not due simply to technology making the world less alien (see McLuhan and Ellul) and, therefore, less likely as an occasion for an experience of "otherness". Nor is there any good reason for claiming that religion is decisively refuted by technology.

But how is it, then, that the presence of technology has resulted in the religious world view losing its hold on believers? What is it about technology that makes believers "cross the threshold" to a technological world view? I would argue that this occurs because religious belief is about the world and also because it is about how one *understands* the world. If we look at religious belief in a different way than that suggested by Nielsen and Wittgenstein - as operating on two distinct, though connected, planes - then we can see how religious belief and technology are related (e.g., that is, how the latter can affect the former without necessarily falsifying it), and also why, when in the presence of technology, not all believers experience the same effects.

### III

Let us go back to the questions raised at the end of the first section. It is clear that technology does affect religious belief and that it affects religious believers in different ways.

But what is religious belief? As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>8</sup> religious belief can be understood as having two dimensions or sources of meaning. One is descriptive and empirical; the other is not. First, as noted earlier, religious belief is about the world and occurs in the world. Hence, changes in "the world" will inevitably affect belief. It is also clear that religious belief involves to some extent facts about the world (e.g., the existence of certain individuals or the occurrence of certain "events"). Indeed, it is precisely because religious belief is about the world that discussion is possible between believers and non-believers.

But there is more to religious belief than this. One's basic beliefs serve as a means by which one interprets experience and expresses it. Religious belief reflects how one understands the world, and one's particular religious beliefs are rooted in this understanding. In fact, it is because of this that the religious believer's beliefs about the world have their distinctively religious character. It is this latter dimension of religious belief that both enlivens and deepens the former. To understand a religious belief at only the descriptive or empirical level, is to leave the belief "unfulfilled". This second "dimension" of a religious belief "conditions the first, in the sense that the descriptive meaning, for the believer, is taken up into it" (Sweet and O'Connell (1991)).

Such an understanding of religious belief allows us to see how and why, in the presence of technology, change in belief occurs. To begin with, since religious belief occurs in the world, the language of religious belief is rooted in ordinary discourse and this discourse is one that overlaps with the discourse of technology. As our ordinary discourse changes (e.g., the notion of "father"), so will the discourse in which we express our religious belief. But there is, of course, more to the influence of technology than this. For religious belief is also about the world, and it is clear that, since technology is part of that world and since the advance of technology changes the world (i.e., as that world comes to include more of the artifacts of technology), there not only will be, but *ought* to be, some change in religious belief.

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8. Sweet and O'Connell (1991)

Now change here may go deeper still, for the products of technology (often) reflect the technological world view. It is not surprising, then, that as this occurs and so far as such a world view is incompatible with religious belief, these artifacts may lead to the erosion of the world view of the believer.

Admittedly, there is a certain incommensurability between religious belief and technology for, while both are rooted in the world, both are more than this; both offer independent ways of understanding the world. But one should not insist too much on this incommensurability. For technology to weaken, or lead people to change, their religious belief, it can do so presumably only so far as both meet at some point within the same world view or discourse. If this were not the case, then it is difficult to see how religion and technology could possibly affect one another.

Consequently, in answer to the question of why religious belief changes in the presence of technology, at least this much must be true. If there is any effect, direct or indirect, of technology on religious belief, it is because religious belief is about the world, and technology (specifically, the artifacts of technology) is part - in our time, an essential part - of that world.

Yet there are, obviously, differences in how believers react to what occurs in the world; this is due to the dimension of religious belief referred to above - that one's religious belief serves as a means by which believers are able to understand the world. So far as one person's religious (or other basic) belief differs from that of another, the way in which that person sees the world may differ and the weight that technology has on belief will vary. But this does not mean that the relation between religious belief and technology is purely subjective, since religious belief not only occurs in community but implies both public practices and public criteria for the acceptability or correctness of belief. Moreover, religious belief is about the world and rooted in experience, and if the world changes, ultimately there must be an effect on a person's religious belief.

So what, exactly, is the relation between technology and religious belief? What should the response of the believer be to technology? To ignore it or to deny it does not avoid its challenge, and the

products of technology are here to stay. To begin with, attempts to accommodate specific religious beliefs within a technological world view can only fail because, in doing so, we exclude what is distinctively religious about religious belief and submit such beliefs to a standard of assessment that is antithetical to religion. Similarly, to accommodate a technological world view within religious belief would only evacuate what is distinctive about the technological approach. By attempting to extend it to cover the non-empirical and the spiritual, one robs it of whatever sense it has.

But the inability to assimilate the technological and the religious world views is not to return to the "two solitudes" of religion and technology. There is clearly a difference between the threat posed to religious belief by the technological world view and the occasion for change in belief provided by the artifacts of technology. While the two aspects of technology are related – while the former implies the latter and while the latter has led to the former – the latter need not necessarily entail the former. Consequently, so far as we are able consciously to separate these "artifacts" from the world view they reflect, the products of technology may be able to be "redeemed" and reconciled to religious belief. This does not mean that religious belief will not change – and, indeed, it is just at this point that we can speak of occasions for the maturation of one's religious belief – but it does mean that we need not abandon our religious belief in a world formed (or informed) by technology.

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