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Modern Technology: Idol or Divine Gift?

Paul Marshall

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The topic of technique and technology is massive. Technique refers to 'how-to' do something—it is the science of 'how'. It encompasses all that we can do—from going to the moon to public speaking, from thermo-nuclear bombs to making love, from serving our starving neighbour to writing articles. All of these are included when we talk about technique.

The correlate of technique is technology, which is the reified, made, created, embodied structure of technique. Technology includes, in one form or another, all those things which are not *naturally* occurring, all those things which we shape and reshape. Technology infuses art as much as physics, families as much as engineering.

Hence, to talk about technique and technology is to talk in a particular way about all of human life, as all of human life has a technical aspect. This is obviously a big undertaking. So, in order to bring the subject down to size, I will talk about technology only in one way—a 'religious' way. This means I will not talk about what such things as computers (or communications technology, or nuclear fusion or fission, or cloning, or genetic manipulation, or oil sands plants) do or might do. Rather, I will focus on technology as a basic aspect of our lives. I will focus on our commitment and trust in it, on the vision of life it embodies, and the type of world and type of people we are making through technology.

VIEWS OF TECHNOLOGY

The word, technology conjures up thrilling visions: the brilliant illusions of ‘Star Wars’; pictures of men on the moon—beamed direct to the living room; computers; robots; lasers; heart transplants; cloning. Slightly more mundanely, we can fly the length of the country in a few hours, buy food from around the world in our local store, show movies on our own T.V., light and heat our homes at the flick of a switch.

Darker visions also come: assembly lines reducing the lives of men and women to the rhythms required by machines; poisoned rivers and stripped forests; complete surveillance of our lives; mammoth, distant organizations; Trident submarines to produce lingering deaths for entire continents. [p. 259](#)

Technology brings both promise and fate, blessing and curse. Those of us reading this article have been liberated from the life of a peasant, our working day has been reduced in length, the number of choices in our lives has increased. But the poor of the world have become poorer; the social world has become more massive and alien; and we do not know if the world we are re-creating is one which can or will Sustain healthy human (and non-human) life.

Our technical achievements come from us, and back to us, fraught with contradictions. Our own responses to this technology show the same contradictions. This contradiction is true also of Christian views of technology, which cover a bewildering range. There is, of course, the view that the Christian faith has nothing at all to say about, or to, technological development because the gospel is concerned with different questions entirely. Since we are already discussing the topic, I think we can disregard that view. But, if the gospel does speak to technology, what does it say?

On the one hand many Christians, particularly conservative ones, give uncritical praise for technological innovation. They are concentrated in, and are often the leading lights in, the physical sciences. Why? One reason is that these sciences are thought to be safer and more unproblematic—less likely than psychology or sociology to upset cherished beliefs. Another is that they are thought to be, without much further question, a way of following God’s command to subdue the earth. Such Christians are often in the forefront of technical developments in computers and the physical sciences.

On another hand we find Jacques Ellul, the brilliant French Christian sociologist. Ellul portrays technology and technique as demonic powers, determining an inexorable system which devours human life, destroys all intrinsically human relations, and drives human freedom into the gradually closing cracks and interstices of a technological monolith.

Ultimately I do not think we can follow either of these directions, not because I believe in moderation, or some sort of golden mean (I don’t), but because I think they’re wrong directions.

Ellul, I feel, still underplays the fact that behind all technology and technique still lies human act and decision. I do not mean an individual decision, as though we could decide one thing about technology today and another tomorrow. Individual decisions usually really are bounded by technical, external, shaping forces. But we can say that behind the pattern of technological developments still lies a deep-rooted, society-wide commitment, we may biblically say ‘a religious commitment’, to a certain view of life, a vision of progress, a [p. 260](#) hope of salvation through knowledge and expertise. This commitment underlies and shapes our decisions, choices, and programmes. And such commitments can be changed while the power of God’s Spirit yet touches us.

Those who accept technological development as progress, and those who think it is ‘neutral’, make a similar mistake. They also miss the inescapable elements of human

responsibility in all technical developments: they treat it as if it were ‘natural’ and not a weighing of alternatives by human beings.

This element of human responsibility is always manifest to us in the Scriptures. The Bible shows the curse which is upon those who do evil, those who serve false gods; it shows us the blessing, the *shalom*, which comes to those who serve God and live justly, stewardly and faithfully. And this curse and blessing is also shown in technology.

THE BIBLE ON TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Goodness of Technology

In [Genesis 2](#) humankind is not created as some complete, independent being. We are created together with our earthly environment: space to live in, food, the injunctions to work, and to enjoy companionship. The Creator provides food, not as manna from heaven, but by telling man and woman to plant and to care for the garden in which they are set.

This contrasts strongly with common mythical views in which either good things were produced by the gods, who give them to man, or else men were taught to produce by cultural heroes—demigods. It is also in radical contrast to the Prometheus myth where fire is stolen from the gods, a myth which symbolizes that human freedom and creation must be wrenched free from a hostile divinity or, in the modern age, a hostile nature.

In the biblical account, the power of the Creator’s blessing enables us to grow up and grow into technical and technological activities. It is both the gift of God and the fruit of human work and thought. Humankind is empowered by God to work with the world and to create.

Humankind is made in the image of God. It is not clear what this image is. But, as the context points out in which God is creating, I would suggest that here the image of God, the way in which we are like God, refers to the fact that we are made creating beings.

The Scriptures show the drama of technical achievement as part of [p. 261](#) God’s dealings with us. Our life as humankind begins in the garden of Eden. Where does it end (as far as we can see)?—in the city, the New Jerusalem. This is God’s city, true, but it is God’s city, not God’s garden. The life of humankind through fall and redemption also involves shaping and forming the earth, moving from the garden to the city.

In Adam and Eve, we begin naked. In God’s city we appear clothed as a bride ([Rev. 21:2](#)). We become enclothed in the stuff of creation about us (see also [Hebrews 11:8–16](#)).

We are called to a city, a shaped environment, and so we cannot reject technology or technological development, for it is an essential part of what God has set us to do in and on earth.

The Evil of Technology

But the Scriptures also show the dark side of technology. The line of technical development is first followed through the genealogy of Cain, the first murderer ([Gen. 4:17–24](#)). It is Cain himself who builds the first city. Later the tower of Babel ‘with its top in the heavens’, the greatest architectural achievement of man, is portrayed as the culmination of sin. The fall of Adam and Eve—because they wished to be gods and no longer human beings—is replayed at Babel as a lust for power and greatness that overreaches human limitations. The result is that people no longer understand one another: they are driven apart, and hate one another.

This overreaching, this relying on achievement for recognition, security and power, is part of what Jesus criticizes when he says:

‘Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them ... do not be anxious, saying “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow for tomorrow will be anxious for itself.’ ([Matthew 6:25–34](#))

The prophets developed part of this theme. They always linked any achievement, artistic, cultural or technical, with the way it had come into being. They did not accept as beautiful that which had been created through oppression or injustice. Habbakuk says:

‘Woe to him who builds a town with blood, and founds a city on iniquity! p. 262 For the stone will cry out from the wall and the beam from the woodwork respond.’ ([Hab. 2:12, 11](#))

And Isaiah:

‘For thou hast rejected thy people,
the house of Jacob,
because they are full of diviners
from the east
and soothsayers like the Philistines,
and they strike hands with foreigners.
Their land is filled with silver and gold,
and there is no end to their treasures;
their land is filled with horses,
and there is no end to their chariots.
Their land is filled with idols;
they bow down to the work of their hands,
to what their own fingers have made.
So man is humbled,
and men are brought low—
forgive them not!
... For the Lord of hosts has a day
against all that is proud and lofty,
against all that is lifted up and high;
against all the cedars of Lebanon,
lofty and lifted up;
and against all the oaks of Ba’shan;
against all the high mountains,
and against all the lofty hills;
against every high tower,
and against every fortified wall;
against all the ships of Tar’shish,
and against all the beautiful craft.
And the haughtiness of man shall
be humbled,
and the pride of men shall be
brought low;
and the Lord alone will be exalted in
that day.’

[\(Isaiah 2:6-21\)](#).

Technical achievement is not autonomous. It can be evil and in the service of evil. The Scriptures call us to a technology rooted in the life of a people together, who serve one another. Technology itself is to be such a service. [p. 263](#)

THE STRUCTURE OF TECHNOLOGY

Modern Technology

The theme of blessing and curse is also revealed to us by God in the patterns of our own lives. This can be shown if we look at the structure of modern technology.

The important thing about modern technology is that no longer are we using a tool or a machine in some small area of an otherwise natural or personal world. We are not primarily using a plough or a tractor in the midst of a field. We are not using a technical thing in the midst of a non-technical world.

Rather, we now use technology within, among, as a part of a world which is itself shaped and made by past and present technology. We use a stove in the kitchen. We operate laboratories at the pinnacle of a technical education system. We have auto assembly lines, in the middle of a factory, served by technically trained employees, at the nexus of a network of roads, linked by the transport of raw materials, as part of an overall production process, linking other factories, and mines, and dealers, and drivers, carried on in the framework of technical laws and regulations and specifications developed to cope with it.

We live and act now within a technical world, one which in turn shapes and limits what we do. We decide and we act with the possible choices and options presented to us by a world which we (or others) have shaped, opened or constricted by our previous actions and techniques. When we use a tool, we shape a world which in turn shapes us, and which shapes not only what we do but also what we can do.

The Traps of Technology

The structure of modern technology shows that technologies are never 'neutral,—just tools happening to be lying around which we can use at will for either good or evil purposes. They become part of the structure of the world in which we live. Technologies always embody, promote and reproduce human commitments, beliefs and activities; they trap us by what we have already done; they can reduce our actions and our futures to mere extrapolations, extensions of our past (which is how most futurists make a living!).

This directional nature of technology can be shown in the example of a computer. Computers can be used for bad purposes—keeping track of political enemies, dehumanizing offices and banks, and [p. 264](#) causing unemployment by replacing people. Computers can also be used for good things—making word processing easier, keeping track of records, searching masses of data for key information, replacing boring, repetitive human work. Indeed many of our other new scientific and technological developments would be impossible without them.

Does this mean that the computer doesn't shape us and mould us? Does it mean that it's really only a question of how we decide to use it? Not at all—for a computer is much more than what it does. Consider:

(i) If we want to use computers, we have to be able to make computers. We need factories making silicon chips, factories to refine materials to a very high order of purity. We need metallurgical facilities, we need mills, we need mines, we need roads, we need electricity.

(ii) If we want to use computers, we need people who can work with them. We need high-level mathematical and engineering skills. We need trained graduates. We need universities and technical schools that can produce them. In turn, we need high schools to feed these, and grade schools to feed the high schools, and parents to encourage the children.

(iii) If we want to use computers, we need things to use them for. They need markets (even in a socialist country) which means many governments, firms and people have to use them. Patterns of business, work, research and communications need to be re-adapted for computer use. If we wish to use a computer, then we need more than one of them. We need to make them widespread throughout the society.

We can't just use a computer for worthwhile ends and so assume that nothing else matters. If we use a computer we have already dictated a large part of what our economics, communications, government, education and social patterns are going to be like. A decision for computers is inevitably a decision about what sort of society we are going to live in. The same is true with any technological development, even the very primitive. An archaeologist discovering a tool can tell you much of what a society was like, even of what it must have been like, to use that tool. When we use some technology we, in large part, determine what our world will be like.

In turn, when we determine what the world will be like, we also determine what we will be like. We are reshaping ourselves, our goals, hopes, fears, faiths and expectations. We live in a world that shapes what we think and do. For example, how many of us go home for lunch at lunchtime? Not many, right? How many of us even think [p. 265](#) about it? We don't think about it because it's not possible. It's no longer part of our world.

But, not too many years ago, many of us went home for lunch, and so did our children. We didn't take it for granted that the family must be apart for all the working day. But we've lost that, gradually and without noticing it. Now we know, without thinking about it, that we work too far away. The buses aren't convenient and the traffic is a problem. We don't even try anymore, we just face up to 'reality'—but it is a 'reality' that we have helped create both without realizing it and without counting its cost. We don't feel a loss of freedom for the new sense of reality has seeped even into our consciousness.

So, when we shape the world, we shape our own lives. We open up new possibilities for life, but we close down others. The world we are shaping and have shaped becomes what we now call reality, and, of course, we must be realistic, so we adjust and accommodate ourselves to what we have made and we do not know what we have lost. We begin to remake ourselves in the image of our technology and, where that is deficient or unjust, then we become deficient and unjust also.

IDOLATRY

Perhaps the best way of portraying the evils produced in modern technology is by means of what the Bible calls idolatry. In the Scriptures no one is an atheist; rather, if someone does not worship and serve the one true God, he will worship and serve another 'god'. These 'other gods' are things given in creation, or else the works of our hands, which we bow down before and worship.

Habakkuk says ([Hab. 2:18-19](#)):

'What profit is an idol
when its maker has shaped it,
a metal image, a teacher of lies?
For the workman trusts in his
own creation

when he makes dumb idols.
Woe to him who says to a wooden
thing, Awake;
to a dumb stone, Arise!
Can this give revelation?
Behold, it is overlaid with
gold and silver,
and there p. no breadth at all in it.'

Paul describes idols as: [p. 266](#)

'a representation by the art and imagination of man'

([Acts 17:29](#)).

And he condemns

'worshipping the creature rather than the Creator'

([Romans 1:24](#)).

The worship of idols was and is not a formal, purely liturgical matter; worship is always a matter of the ultimate commitments we have, of the deepest choices that we make (cf. [Col. 1:5](#)). To worship an idol is to trust it concretely as a god for your salvation. To worship an idol is to trust the work of your hands, to rely on it concretely in your day-to-day life. And, in turn, as the Psalmist says ([Psalm 135:15-18](#)):

'The idols of the nation are silver
and gold,
the work of men's hands.
They have mouths, but they speak not,
they have ears, but they hear not,
they have eyes, but they see not,
nor is there any breath in their mouths.
Those that trust in them are like them!
Yea, every one who trusts in them.'

We become shaped by our idols—we start to become like them. They become the touchstones of our lives. We, in turn, become captive to them, and frozen and rigid like them. But they are dead and cannot liberate us.

MANIFESTATIONS OF IDOLATRY

We should understand the modern fixation on technology as a definite form of idolatry. We rely on technology for salvation—we hope in it to bring us prosperity; we worship it—we trust in it to solve the world's problems; it is the work of our hands which holds us captive; we become like it.

Is it too strong to call modern attitudes to technology a form of idolatry? I don't think so. Consider the following:

The sciences have set one of their goals as prediction. If we were to succeed in this, then we would know what will happen; we will become fated creatures, locked into a predetermined treadmill as our heavy paces bring us, willing or not, to the predetermined end.

Or consider that the control of nature always implies the control of some people by other people by means of nature. As the Director for science and Technology of the U.N. Department for Economic and Social Affairs said: p. 267

‘In recent centuries, however, the world has been increasingly dominated by a dualistic world-view in which the distinction between man and his environment has been particularly stressed. This view accepts as a virtual axiom that man’s foremost task consists in the progressive establishment of complete mastery over all of non-human nature. But, in recent times, man has tended to become so dominant on earth that he is now approaching a position where he constitutes one of the principal aspects of his own environment and in which environmental mastery would require the subjugation even of human nature by man.’

Or consider the increasing problems we face. Certain vital raw materials and energy reserves are being used up at a rapid rate. The number of species of plants and animals is decreasing rapidly. The fundamental chain of life in the oceans is being threatened. Pollution of the environment is still accelerating—not only in the sense that the beauty of the natural world is being destroyed, but that its fundamental ability to reproduce itself is under basic attack. We drive on to massive energy projects even when we know a quiet methodical conserving is cheaper and healthier. The psychical pressure of life in our times causes frustrations that border on shock. In society, the technical possibilities determine what we will do; governments in the West merely play ‘catch up’. We replace persons with machines to boost production, but we increase structural unemployment—people who are surplus, discarded, wasted. Most surveys in Canada show that those in ‘undeveloped’ regions are happier than those in ‘developed’ ones. Clearly, therefore, we are not creating an environment designed for real human wellbeing.

In the face of these problems—problems which, at least in part, are due to our technical accomplishments—our response is invariably a technical one, a ‘know-how’ solution (let us increase this, decrease that, install machines, retest, advertise, invent, replace). We resist, or scoff at, or label as ‘idealistic’ or ‘unrealistic’, responses which at their core call humans to responsibility—scientifically, politically and personally. We act as if the manipulation of things external to us, or the manipulation of other people as if they were external to us, will solve our problems, even though it is clear that this externalizing is itself at the root of much of what we face.

We might rightfully claim that we did not intend these results, that they were side effects and unforeseen. But we must heed the words of Northrop Frye: ‘In what our culture produces, whether it is art, philosophy, military strategy, or political and economic development, there are no accidents: everything a culture produces is equally a symbol of that culture.’ p. 268

This is the world we are making by the technical transformation of our environment and of one another. If it produces things we did not foresee or want, then it shows that in our heart of hearts we are out of touch with reality, basically out of touch with what God’s creation is actually like.

All these manifestations are clearly symptoms of what the Bible calls idolatry; we are being led astray as we set false goals for ourselves. Hence, in answer to the question with which I began—‘Is technology out of control?’—I would answer yes. It has become an idol, and like all idols it now controls us.

COMMITMENT TO BREAK WITH THE IDOL

How are we to respond to this situation? By rejecting technology? Certainly not, for, as I have tried to show, God has made us creatures who refine, who shape, who create. We

need technical developments—even if we sought to reject them we would make them anyway.

But what we must do is to break with the idol of technology—the idea that we can achieve what is good—health, wealth, happiness and security—through the manipulation and control of our human and non-human environments. We must break with the idea that expertise is the key to problems, and the idea that human freedom comes from human control. We must break with the urge which drives us to accept the more sophisticated as the better; the vision that identifies progress with technical accomplishment; the vision that says humans can be brought to fulfilment by manipulating them as we would manipulate objects.

Breaking away from such an idol is different from and much more than ‘finding new values’—as if we could just decide, out of the air, to want something else instead. We cannot ‘make’ new values or ‘find’ them as if they lay about us just waiting to be picked up. An idol is fundamentally religious, and we truly need, both as persons and as a society, a religious conversion. We must search out our most fundamental beliefs and commitments—what we really believe human life is all about, what God calls us to. We must be prepared to live a life where we do what the Lord requires of us—‘to do justice, to show mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.’ We must believe, day by day, in factories, workshops and laboratories, that the kingdom of heaven is to the poor in spirit, that it is the pure in heart who shall see God, that the meek shall inherit the earth. These are not moral norms for some transcendent realm; they are touchstones for the development of technology. [p. 269](#)

Within such a commitment we will ask how we may serve our neighbour, particularly the poorest; we will not ‘externalize’ effects, but will explore and accept responsibility for the consequences of what we do. In so doing we will no longer be driven by the work of our hands. And in so doing, we can rejoice in and will need all of our technical skills and expertise. We may liberate technology even as we are liberated from it.

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The Right to be Human

Pablo Martínez

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INTRODUCTION

*You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created and have their being.*