

Religion & Liberty

FALL 2022

**Bodies Must
Worship**

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**Jacques Ellul
and the Idols of
Transhumanism**

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**The Digital
Economy
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in the Age of
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**The Screen Is
Not Your Master**

DAN CHURCHWELL

THE METAVERSE DOES NOT EXIST

BY DAN HUGGER



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The Issue This Time

I'm old enough to remember the cardboard 3D glasses you got free in the movies that made bad kung fu flicks worse for people like me who wore the prescription variety. Oh, and let's not forget the Sony Walkman, which long before Steve Jobs' 2001 reveal of the iPod allowed you to carry music in your pocket, assuming you dressed like MC Hammer. But the real technological breakthrough for the average Jane or Joe of my generation was the IBM desktop computer running MS-DOS 3.0.

Then the dinosaurs came.

Now we're being sold intimidating, bug-eyed headsets so we can convince ourselves we're not even here. George Jetson, born July 31, 2022 (and whom I can hear pleading with his wife to "Stop this crazy thing!"), would be proud.

Some call it progress. Others, a solipsistic hellscape in which we're trapped in our own head forever. We're here to tell you—it doesn't exist. *So calm down.*

Sure, there's this toy called "the metaverse," an artificial "reality," a virtual "world" (irony punctuation is cheaper in bulk)—only, again, unlike Kerplunk or Etch-a-Sketch, it's not real. And not just because it's *virtual*. It's also not real because it's as much a product of the imagination of Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg as the "thing" (loosely defined) itself. All the goods it's supposed to deliver, all the "good" that's being touted for it—*not real*. "It's about delivering a sense of presence like you're right there with another person," claims Zuckerberg, "and that's the holy grail of online and social experience." The holy grail. My, my, my. Such an unreal presence would make Ulrich Zwingli proud.

Look, I'm trying to red-pill you here. You remember that moment in *The Matrix* (also not real) when Neo is offered a choice between a terrifying swish of the veil—a revelation similar to that in the biblical one, in which another dimension, the one that counts, is suddenly visible and we're no longer in Kansas or the Promised Land or Best Buy anymore—between *that* and our comforting illusions of bourgeois ease followed by a Cheetos-induced coronary. But in this case, the red pill reveals that the masters of virtual, digital, and cloud-based realities have no more control over your life than what you choose to give them. OK, *fine*, one can opt out only so far. We're so extensively and intricately "wired" now that if we're not discoverable online, it can become uncomfortably disagreeable to fulfill the basic responsibilities that mark daily adult life. And that's no accident.

But it is a digression. The internet is one thing, after all, and the metaverse another. One is a mere network that connects you to your bank account, that church service you were too lazy to get to, and reruns of *Seinfeld*, while the other *is not real*. Ask Mark Cuban, entrepreneur and costar of a "reality" TV show, who cautions against buying real estate there, calling such an investment "dumb." Per CNBC.com: "In the physical world, real estate is valuable

because land is a scarce resource. However, that scarcity doesn't necessarily apply to the metaverse. In these virtual worlds, 'there's unlimited volumes that you can create,' Cuban said during the interview."

Unlimited volumes, like buying puddles in the Atlantic. Fun to think about ("I own part of an ocean!") but utterly meaningless. Unless of course some very wealthy "someones" decide to invest it with meaning.

Which brings us to cryptocurrency. Is it real? More than its evangelists think it is? Governments are now buying into it, which of course does little to affirm its dependability (think Solyndra and Crescent Dunes). But should the day come when we're forced to trade only with crypto, what would that mean for those without the savvy or technical resources to play the game—assuming it's more than just a game of "it has value only as long as someone is stupid enough to pay for it"? You know, like NFTs, cable TV, and Mondrian paintings.

I hope this jaundiced view doesn't cause you to unfriend me. Well, go ahead. I'm not on Facebook, anyway, so good luck with that. But what does it mean to be a friend to someone today? What does it mean to communicate on a "personal" level if technology mediates everything and you never know if some anonymous entity, biological or mechanical, is listening in? Alexa, Siri, Cortana: the new divinities of the digital age—anywhere, everywhere, all-knowing, all-seeing, but with a much worse end-of-life policy.

Speaking of God: "Worshipping in the metaverse is devoid of common sense—you are here, you are there, you are everywhere. In short, you are nowhere," writes Rev. A. Trevor Sutton. And if you are nowhere, are you, in fact, anyone? If you're not plugged in, does even God know your name?

Who will free us from our screens, which hold us spellbound like quack TV doctors hawking miracle jelly? "We have become increasingly aware of being 'owned' and conditioned by the big tech companies and billionaire CEOs. But a dim awareness is not to be confused with an insight into our state that will lead to action," warns Stefan Lindholm. Maybe Elon Musk? . . . Uh, maybe not.

I hope this issue of *Religion & Liberty* will startle you into some kind of new awakening. Perhaps you'll take Rachel Ferguson's advice and fast from social media or just reflect more frequently on how technology as tool has deformed into techne as ideology. As Dan Hugger writes: "Whatever perils or promises are realized should the metaverse emerge from the world of imagination into our reality—be they sinister, pathetic, or simply banal—each of us must make it a virtual vocation to discern the truth above mere appearances and ubiquitous fictions."

But if bingeing TikTok or skydiving in your living room by means of Oculus Quest keeps you from finishing *R&L*, don't worry.

It'll be online soon enough.

—ANTHONY SACRAMONE

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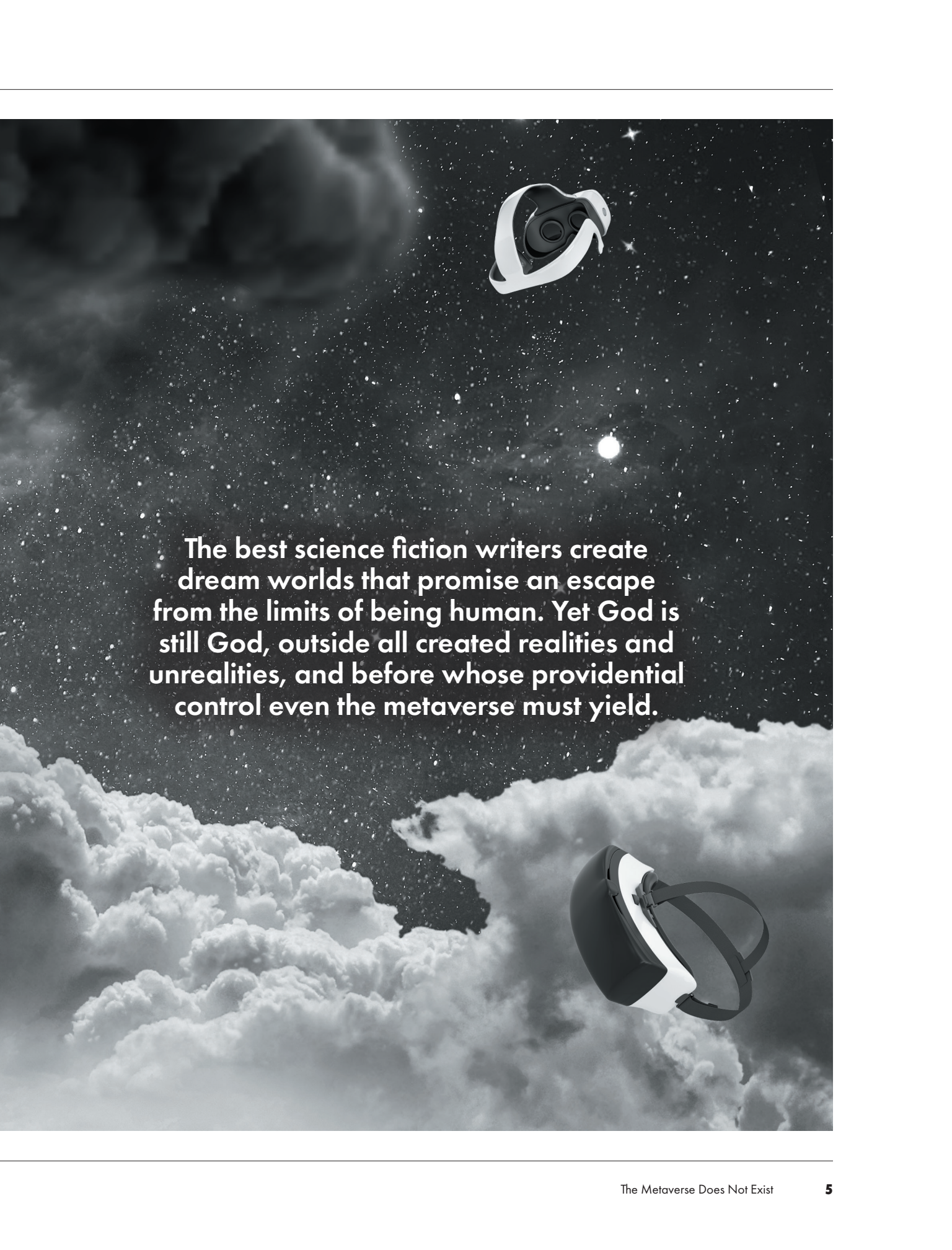
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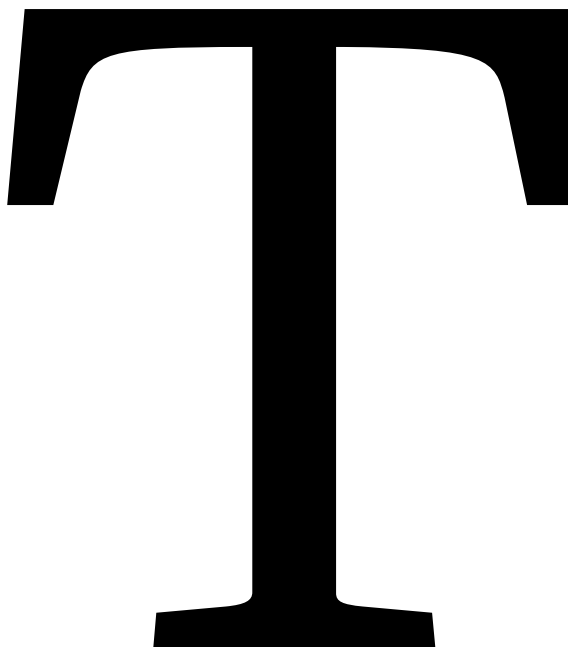


THE METAVERSE DOES NOT EXIST

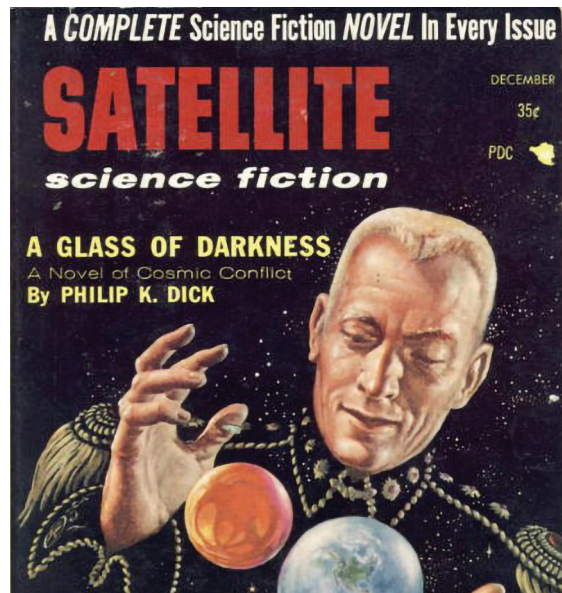
by DAN HUGGER



The best science fiction writers create dream worlds that promise an escape from the limits of being human. Yet God is still God, outside all created realities and unrealities, and before whose providential control even the metaverse must yield.



THE METAVERSE DOES NOT EXIST, yet we've been talking about it for 30 years. This should not surprise, as its first appearance in the English language is in a work of fiction. The term's precursor, "cyberspace," is the invention of American-Canadian writer William Gibson, who introduced it in his 1982 novella, *Burning Chrome*, and popularized it in his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*. But "metaverse" itself was first minted by the American science fiction writer Neal Stephenson and released into circulation between the pages of his 1992 novel, *Snow Crash*. *Snow Crash* is the most fitting analog to what is being proposed by the dreamers of contemporary Silicon



Philip K. Dick's novel *The Cosmic Puppets* originally appeared in the December 1956 issue of *Satellite Science Fiction* as "A Glass of Darkness"

Valley: a virtual-reality-based internet navigated by digital avatars—graphical representations of its denizens—mediated through headsets worn by consumers in the real world.

In 2021, Facebook—famous for its eponymous social media platform as well as Instagram and WhatsApp—renamed itself Meta to “reflect its focus on building the metaverse.” When Stephenson was originally planning what would become *Snow Crash*, he conceived of it as a sort of modest metaverse, a computer-generated graphic novel, but abandoned it due to technical limitations and completed it in more conventional novel form. Now some of the world's most successful companies are giving it a go with 30 additional years of technological development and considerable investments of financial, human, and reputational capital.

That what is a dream today may soon be a reality should not surprise us, for as T.E. Lawrence observed, “The dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, and make it possible.” What is surprising, and deeply troubling, is the prospect that the new reality long incubated in dreams may give birth to a world in which dreams increasingly displace reality, for dreams can be nightmares.

This terrifying possibility animated the writing

of someone many would consider the greatest of American science fiction writers, Philip K. Dick, who spent his entire career preoccupied by two questions: *What is reality?* and *What constitutes the authentic human being?* These perennial questions became particularly urgent given the technological context of the information age, and he believed science fiction writers were uniquely well suited to answer them

because unceasingly we are bombarded with pseudo-realities manufactured by very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms. I do not distrust their motives; I distrust their power. They have a lot of it. And it is an astonishing power: that of creating whole universes, universes of the mind. I ought to know. I do the same thing.

Philip K. Dick first spoke these words, appropriately enough, at a science fiction convention in a talk titled “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later.” The year was 1978 and the “sophisticated electronic mechanisms” were the technologies utilized by the entertainment and mass media industries of his day. Of those, especially troubling for him was television:

Words and pictures are synchronized. The possibility of total control of the viewer exists, especially the young viewer. TV viewing is a kind of sleep-learning.... Recent experiments indicate that much of what we see on the TV screen is received on a subliminal basis. We only imagine that we consciously see what is there. The

bulk of the messages elude our attention; literally, after a few hours of TV watching, we do not know what we have seen. Our memories are spurious, like our memories of dreams; the blanks are filled in retrospectively. And falsified. We have participated unknowingly in the creation of a spurious reality, and then we have obligingly fed it to ourselves. We have colluded in our own doom.

Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Meta, promises that the metaverse will be an even more immersive experience: “You’re really going to feel like you’re there with other people. You’re not going to be locked into one world of platform.” While Philip K. Dick did not speak directly to the metaverse as imagined by Stephenson in the 1990s or Silicon Valley today, he did return throughout his career to the possibility of similarly immersive alternative realities, pointing primarily to their potential peril but also to an often ambiguous promise. A recurring feature of Dick’s imagined realities was, like Zuckerberg’s vision for the metaverse, a feeling of being “with” others.

CAN-D AND THE NEO-CHRISTIANS

The most vivid and terrifying visions of alternative realities in the works of Philip K. Dick appear in his 1965 novel, *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. It’s set in a future world affected by climate change in ways even teen climate activist Greta Thunberg couldn’t begin to imagine. During daylight hours,



you will be incinerated walking down the street if you aren't wearing cumbersome cooling equipment. To ease the burden on a rapidly deteriorating planet, the United Nations conscripts much of Earth's population into the colonization of nearby planets. Conditions on these planets are so underdeveloped and hostile that the now cursed earth is by comparison a garden of delights.

To cope with their miserable existence, colonists escape into endemic drug use. Their drug of choice? Can-D. Can-D is a hallucinogenic with both unusual paraphernalia and a twist. The paraphernalia? Perky Pat Layouts. These consist of miniature apartments, furnishing, cars, etc. Think Barbie Dreamhouse except, instead of Barbie and Ken, the sole occupants of this alternative reality are Perky Pat and her boyfriend, Walt. Now for the twist. Users of Can-D chew it together before the layouts and share an experience of this simulacra of the Earth prior to its ecological collapse.

Many colonists, like Sam Regan, begin to believe the shared hallucination is real:

He himself was a believer; he affirmed the miracle of translation—the near-sacred moment in which the miniature artifacts of the layout no longer merely represent Earth but became Earth. And he and the others, joined together in the fusion of doll-inhabitation by means of Can-D, were transported outside of time and local space.

Philip K. Dick (1928–1982)



What began as an escape, a fiction, becomes a religion of sorts with theological controversies about the precise nature of the “translation,” complete with discussions of accidents and essences! Colonists speak of the experience as one of putting on “imperishable bodies” and of its being “eternal” in some sense. Meanwhile, their hovels are falling into disrepair and all work terraforming their hostile environment is abandoned. The only colonists who offer any resistance are the Neo-Christians, who see clearly the idolatry involved, a grotesque parody of the Faith, and its spiritually destructive consequences. Many of them give in to temptation nonetheless.

Can-D presents a nightmare vision of just how terrifying an alternative world where “you’re really going to feel like you’re there with other people” can be. In short, a simulated community can have disastrous consequences in the real world as people retreat from it into their dreams.

THE PROMISE OF ETERNAL LIFE

There is another vision of the metaverse, however, one described by Matthew Ball, author of *The Metaverse: And How It Will Revolutionize Everything*:

I describe it as a massively scaled and interoperable network of 3D-rendered, real-time virtual worlds, which can be experienced persistently and synchronously by an effectively unlimited number of users, each with an individual sense of presence.

What I am effectively describing is a virtual plane parallel to the physical world, which, in addition to being able to do many things that we can't do in the real world, replicates it. We all participate at the same time, with no cap to what we can do, and why we can do it, and how many people can participate.

This is a vision of the metaverse that is not merely an alternate reality within which simulated communities exist but parallel virtual realities unburdened by the constraints of creation itself. It is analogous not to Can-D as described in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* but to its competition, Chew-Z, whose slogan is “Be choosy. Chew-Z.” The industrialist Palmer Eldritch returns from a neighboring star system with the new alien hallucinogen and rapidly brings it to market.

Chew-Z does not require the use of external layouts and thus is completely separate from reality itself. As Palmer Eldritch claims: “It will only be after

a few tries that they realize the two different aspects: the lack of time lapse and the other, perhaps the more vital. That it isn't fantasy, that they enter a genuine new universe." The experience of Chew-Z is near instantaneous within our reality. "When we return to our former bodies—you notice the use of the word 'former,' a term you won't apply with Can-D, and for good reason—you'll find that no time has passed." Chew-Z is a gateway to "a virtual plane parallel to the physical world" with "an effectively unlimited number of users, each with an individual sense of presence." The tension within this description is noted by Leo Bulero, chairman of the board of Perky Pat Layouts, who rages, "But the worst aspect of Chew-Z is the solipsistic quality. With Can-D you undergo a valid interpersonal experience."

While Can-D offers a grotesque parody of religious transcendence, Chew-Z advertises itself with the boldest of blasphemies: "GOD PROMISES ETERNAL LIFE. WE CAN DELIVER IT." There is, of course, a catch, as there always is when promises such as these are trusted. There's always a cost to attempting to circumvent the order of creation and seeking to free ourselves of "caps to what we can do, and why we can do it." New worlds offered to us are always tethered to their authors; lurking behind each is its own Palmer Eldritch.

THE BANALITY OF BEING YOURSELF

There is, as we have seen, possibilities for both pathetic and sinister metaverses: alternate realities both escapist and solipsistic. What will perhaps come first, however, is the banal.

In 2017 the retail giant Walmart, working with Mutual Mobile, designed a demo of "an immersive VR simulation that gave users an idea of a smart shopping experience." The demo was designed under a tight deadline for the South by Southwest (SXSW) festival. It featured a poorly rendered shopping cart that the user pushed down poorly rendered aisles as they filled their virtual shopping cart with virtual milk and wine. While doing so, a floating virtual clerk, or rather the clerk's head and torso, assisted by providing recommendations and reminders to the virtual shopper. How this was an improvement over now ubiquitous online grocery shopping and delivery remains a mystery to this day.

A similarly banal, but vastly more useful, innovation lies at the heart of Philip K. Dick's 1966 short story "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale." The

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**WHAT BEGAN AS AN
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DISCUSSIONS
OF ACCIDENTS
AND ESSENCES!**
”

story is more widely known through director Paul Verhoeven's 1990 film *Total Recall* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. (The less said about the 2012 remake the better.) In both the story and film, the working-class protagonist dreams of going to Mars, but his wife continually dissuades him. He decides instead to visit ReCall, a firm that implants artificial memories of popular vacation destinations, to fulfill his desire while avoiding confrontation with his wife. In the 1990 film, the recall virtual travel agent makes a successful upsell by asking the following question: "What is it that is exactly the same about every vacation you've ever taken?" The protagonist is flummoxed but bemused. With the hook set, the salesman seals the deal:

You. You're the same.

(pauses for effect)

No matter where you go, there you are. Always the same old you.

(grins enigmatically)

Let me suggest that you take a vacation from yourself. I know it sounds wild, but it's the latest thing in travel. We call it an "Ego Trip."

This “vacation from yourself” involves selecting a new, exciting identity and a new, attractive romantic partner. An unforgettable vacation otherwise impossible in the real world, in your real life.

These imagined worlds, these science fictions, show us possible metaverses that arise out of the desires of persons. In so doing they provide fertile ground for pondering the meaning of the metaverse in general.

The Wachowskis’ 1999 film, *The Matrix*, has proved an enduring source of inspiration and speculation on the philosophical questions that often arise when considering alternative and simulated realities. In its most famous scene, the leader of the resistance, Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne), offers the protagonist, Neo (Keanu Reeves), a choice between two pills: red to reveal the truth about his known reality, and blue to return to it without such knowledge. The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek sees this as a fundamentally false choice:

Of course, the matrix is a machine for fictions, but these are fictions which already structure our reality. If you take away from our reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you lose reality itself. I want a third pill... a pill that would enable me to perceive not the reality behind the illusion but the reality in illusion itself.

THE UNREALITY OF ARTIFICIAL REALITY

The metaverse, as of yet, does not exist. It’s a fiction built upon science fiction. A dream with dreamers of the day dreaming it who, if anyone can, will make it possible. The meaning of the metaverse is thus the meaning of the desires for the metaverse. Where does one find the reality in illusion itself? In the alluring hopes and haunting fears of the science fiction from which it first arose. In mass-market Ace paperback doubles.

There is a fundamental disjunction, however, between the mood of our greatest science fiction writers and our dangerous dreamers of Silicon Valley on the “meaning” of alternate realities, even as the sense often overlaps.

Philip K. Dick, for example, knew more than our technological visionaries. He had the wisdom that came only from experience:

And—and I say this as a professional fiction writer—the producers, scriptwriters, and directors who create

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”

these video/audio worlds do not know how much of their content is true. In other words, they are victims of their own product, along with us. Speaking for myself, I do not know how much of my writing is true, or which parts (if any) are true. This is a potentially lethal situation. We have fiction mimicking truth, and truth mimicking fiction. We have a dangerous overlap, a dangerous blur. And in all probability it is not deliberate. In fact, that is part of the problem. You cannot legislate an author into correctly labeling his product, like a can of pudding whose ingredients are listed on the label . . . you cannot compel him to declare what part is true and what isn’t if he himself does not know.

Many artists and writers have a famously tenuous relationship to reality. This may be a product of temperament or a powerful imaginative capacity. Philip K. Dick was no exception. Throughout his life he struggled with both mental illness and substance abuse. In the very speech in which he acknowledged the “dangerous blur” between truth and fiction in “How to Build a Universe that Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later,” he related several improbable quasi-mystical experiences. His Christianity was, charitably speaking, highly idiosyncratic. His wisdom

consisted of knowing that this was the case. He never stopped looking for reality, knowing that “For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Philip K. Dick also never stopped asking, *What constitutes the authentic human being?* This is a question we all must ask if we are to live as free persons oriented toward the good. Whatever perils or promises are realized should the metaverse emerge from the world of imagination into our reality—be they sinister, pathetic, or simply banal—each of us must make it a virtual vocation to discern the truth above mere appearances and ubiquitous fictions. Dick, himself so often bedeviled by these questions, saw reason for hope in people’s capacity to do so:

The power of spurious realities battering at us today—these deliberately manufactured fakes never penetrate to the heart of true human beings. I watch the children watching TV and at first I am afraid of what they

Moses with the Tables of the Law by Guido Reni (c. 1624)

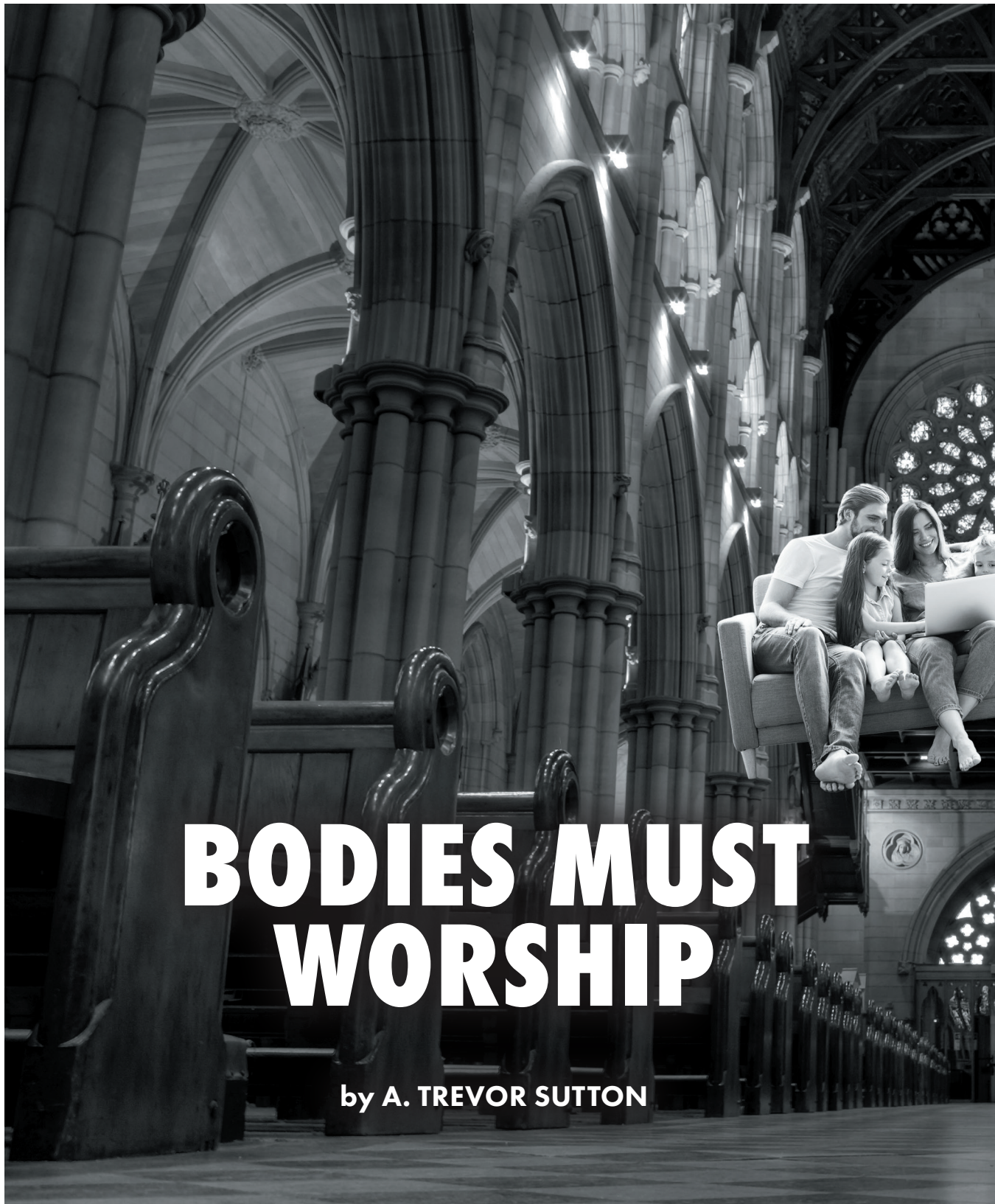


are being taught, and then I realize, They can't be corrupted or destroyed. They watch, they listen, they understand, and, then, where and when it is necessary, they reject. There is something enormously powerful in a child's ability to withstand the fraudulent. A child has the clearest eye, the steadiest hand. The hucksters, the promoters, are appealing for the allegiance of these small people in vain. True, the cereal companies may be able to market huge quantities of junk breakfasts; the hamburger and hot dog chains may sell endless numbers of unreal fast-food items to the children, but the deep heart beats firmly, unreachd and unreasoned with. A child of today can detect a lie quicker than the wisest adult of two decades ago. When I want to know what is true, I ask my children. They do not ask me; I turn to them.

IDOLS FOR DESTRUCTION

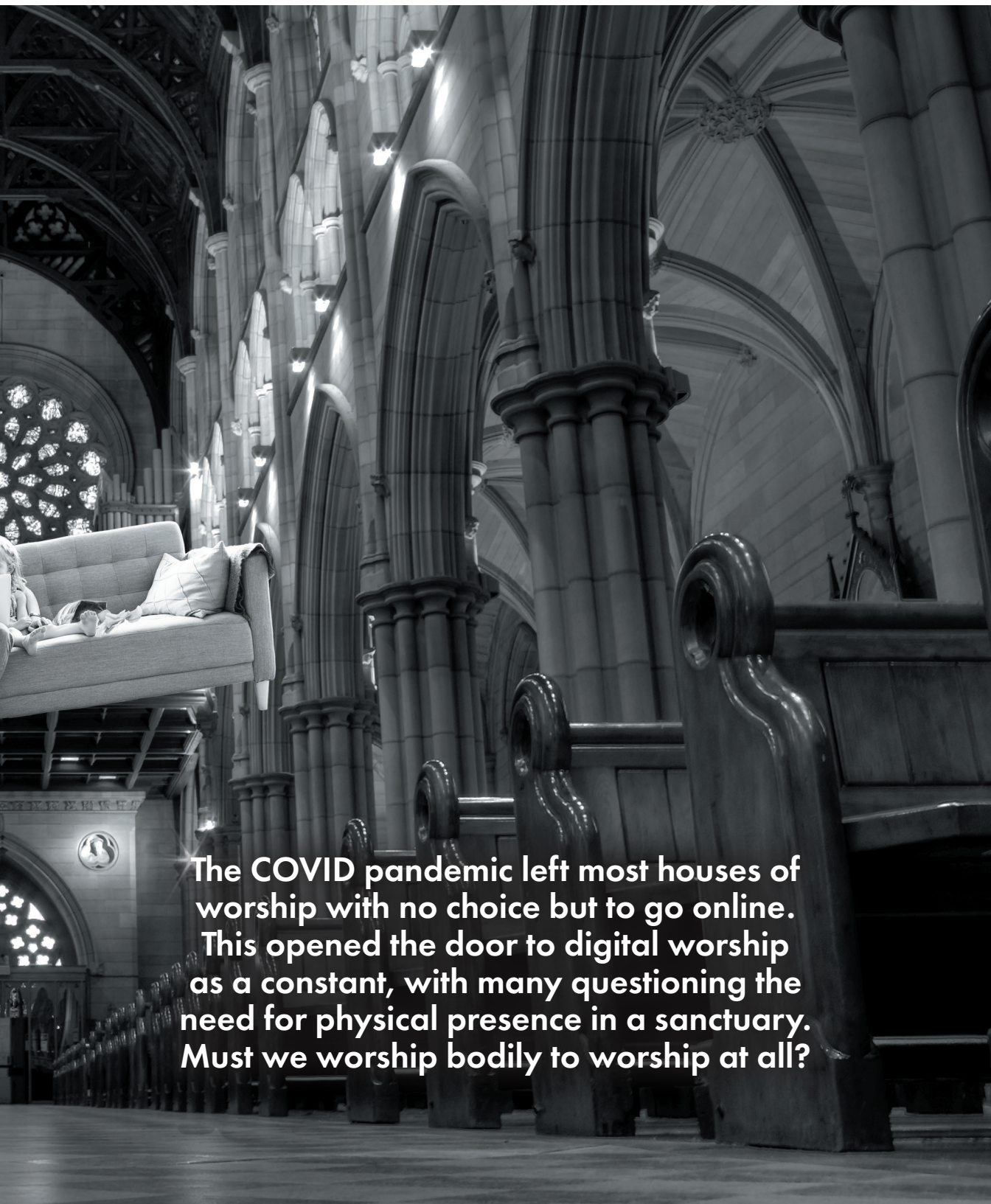
The first commandment given to Moses on Mount Sinai was “Thou shalt have no other Gods.” In his *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther gave a concise explanation for this commandment, stating simply: “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” Science fiction writers explore alternate realities in the realm of the imagination but rarely trust them. Faith placed in the metaverse to emancipate us from the constraints of creation and providence is a faith misplaced, one built on the shifting sand of the whims and capacities of those who fashion them. Looking to the metaverse for love, community, and solidarity outside our service to neighbors in the real world violates our duty to both them and their Creator. To fear the metaverse is also wrong, as God provides all we need even in this oversaturated information age. Philip K. Dick famously defined reality as “that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away.” The ultimate reality, God himself, is with us always, “And the Lord, he it is that doth go before thee; he will be with thee, he will not fail thee, neither forsake thee: fear not, neither be dismayed” (Deuteronomy 31:8). **RL**

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BODIES MUST WORSHIP

by A. TREVOR SUTTON



The COVID pandemic left most houses of worship with no choice but to go online. This opened the door to digital worship as a constant, with many questioning the need for physical presence in a sanctuary. Must we worship bodily to worship at all?

“

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS FOREVER ALTERED OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN BODY AND THE WAY THAT OUR BODIES RESPOND IN WORSHIP.

”

While walking with resurrected feet, Jesus used resurrected vocal cords to talk. Days prior, those vocal cords cried out, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). Yet Jesus now spoke of how Moses and all the prophets foretold the events that had just passed.

Along with feet and mouths, other parts of the body appear in this account: Resurrected ear-drums that had once heard “Crucify him!” (Mark 15:13) were now met with the flummoxed inquiries of Cleopas. Later in the narrative, Jesus broke bread with resurrected hands as eyes opened, hearts burned, and mouths were set agape in awe and worship.

The feet, mouths, ears, hands, eyes, and hearts make it clear: Worship and the wonder of the human body come together in Luke’s Gospel. This post-resurrection account combines salvation and the senses, faith in Christ Jesus and the fleshy promises of the empty tomb. The resurrection of Jesus forever altered our understanding of the human body and the way that our bodies respond in worship. Because the Divine Physician is risen, our organs cannot remain silent—they cry out in worship with hope and rejoicing.

An emerging technology—the “metaverse”—has the potential to alter this understanding of the human body and worship. While it is difficult to arrive at a single definition for the metaverse, it is generally understood as a 3D version of the internet. The metaverse is an immersive virtual world that is accessed by means of a virtual reality headset. The digital world that is the metaverse is beginning to transform how people live, work, play, meet, and worship. The last on this list—worship in the metaverse—is our focus here.

HEALTH IS THE SILENCE OF THE ORGANS. When one’s bodily organs function as they should, there is a relative silence within the body. A pancreas is neither heard nor felt as long as it is functioning properly. A malfunctioning pancreas, however, cries out with pain and discomfort. And so the normal functioning of the bodily organs goes on largely unnoticed.

Luke the Evangelist, a physician and author of the Gospel of Luke, wanted his readers to notice the body—especially in the final chapter of the text. Anatomy abounds in the account of the resurrection as Luke invites his readers to meet Jesus on an Emmaus-bound road with Cleopas and his nameless companion.

The Oklahoma-based megachurch Life.Church recently began offering worship services in the metaverse. Others are sure to follow. Bringing Christian worship to the metaverse raises many questions: Does this sort of worship accord with God's plans for worship? What are the implications of merging digital media and the divine service? Which specific technologies should or should not be used for worship? Which aspects of worship can or cannot be mediated? What might the metaverse do to Christian congregations? Are some ecclesiologies or Christian traditions more or less congenial to worship in the metaverse?

Answering all these questions is beyond the scope of this article. However, this article will seek to clarify the opaque world of worship in the metaverse, enabling interested readers to investigate further with an enhanced vocabulary.

WORSHIP: AN ASSEMBLY AROUND WHAT?

Across various Christian traditions, the topic of worship is highly discussed and widely divergent. Although corporate worship is a feature present in all Christendom, there is tremendous diversity in both the theology and practice of worship. From an ecumenical perspective, defining worship can be very difficult.

Is there anything commonly held about corporate worship across the majority of Christian traditions? At the very least, agreement exists that corporate worship by its very nature involves assembling for worship, transcending differences of theology and practice.

Scripture even depicts corporate worship as an assembly. While the New Testament uses several different words to talk about worship (*latreia*, *threskeia*, *leitourgia*), the word *ecclesia* expresses the essentially corporate nature of worship. At a minimum, corporate worship involves coming together, convening, or assembling in some way (1 Cor. 11:18, 20; 14:23). Gordon W. Lathrop, in his book *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology*, argues that assembling is the most basic feature of Christian worship: "Assembly, a gathering together of participating persons, constitutes the most basic symbol of Christian worship. All the other symbols and symbolic actions of liturgy depend upon this gathering being there in the first place."

Yet, almost immediately, this simple assertion runs into problems. Does this assembly have to be in person within the same physical space? Or can this

assembly be in a digitally mediated space such as the metaverse? Can it be a hybrid of the two, with some people gathering in person while others livestream at home? Unfortunately, Scripture is silent on these questions, since the churches in Corinth and Philippi, existing in a pre-scientific and pre-digital age, knew only in-person gatherings. This means that contemporary Christians must develop some more nuanced understandings regarding worship, digital media, and how they relate to the human body.

Whether in person or in the metaverse, assembling for worship assumes there is a center around which the assembly coalesces. What is at the center of this corporate worship? Worship is an assembly around what?

Avery Dulles, in his classic ecclesiological text *Models of the Church*, explores the distinct emphases within worship. Dulles' five models of the church—Church as Institution, Church as Mystical Communion, Church as Sacrament, Church as Herald, and Church as Servant—all coalesce around different centers. According to Dulles, various ecclesiological models place different aspects of the worship service at the center of worship. For instance, the Church as Sacrament model identifies the Eucharist as being the centerpiece of worship, while the Church as Herald model recognizes the Word of God proclaimed and heard as being the centerpiece of worship.

Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin by Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1435)





Dulles makes it clear: Different Christian traditions place different things at the center of corporate worship. While this insight may not immediately help us make sense of the church in the metaverse, it will play an important role as we explore a framework for a balanced understanding as the church looks to the future of worship in the metaverse.

WORSHIP: AN ASSEMBLY OF WHAT?

While different Christian traditions may disagree on what is at the center of worship, there is agreement that worship is an assembly of people gathered for a common religious practice. Approaching worship from this perspective shifts exploration toward topics such as creatureliness, embodiment, and what it means to be human.

Martin Luther, in his explanation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed, offers a basic understanding of what it means to be an embodied human creature: "I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them." Notably, Luther connects creatureliness to the bodily senses.

John Calvin, in his *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, echoes Luther's emphasis on the importance of the bodily senses as they relate to Christian anthropology. Calvin connects the sacraments to the bodily senses so that God's promises are comprehended through all those senses:

As we are surrounded with this body of clay, we need figures or mirrors to exhibit a view of spiritual and heavenly things in a kind of earthly manner; for we could not otherwise attain to them. At the same time, it is our interest to have all our senses exercised in the promises of God, that they may be the better confirmed to us.

In other words, Calvin argues for a multisensory relationship between the creatures and the Creator. Calvin indicates that the bodily senses are integral to being a human creature and that these senses are vital when it comes to receiving the promises of God.

The importance of the bodily senses is certainly not limited to Protestant traditions. Drawing on insights from the ancient Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, Pope Francis highlighted the role of the bodily senses in an address from the Vatican in 2017:

In the human body, the senses are our first connection to the world ad extra; they are like a bridge towards that world; they enable us to relate to it. The senses help us to grasp reality and at the same time to situate ourselves in reality. Not by chance did Saint Ignatius appeal to the senses for the contemplation of the mysteries of Christ and truth.

Pope Francis, like many theologians before him, indicates that the bodily senses play a crucial role in interacting with the world in general and worship in particular.

Eastern Orthodox theology also has something to say on this topic. John Zizioulas, in his *Being as*

Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church, explores how the church is an incarnate community in communion with the Trinity. According to Zizioulas, one cannot be fully human without being in relation to others, just as the church cannot be the Body of Christ without being incarnate: “A Church must incarnate people, not ideas or beliefs.”

Although Lutherans, Calvinists, Catholics, and Orthodox may disagree on worship theologically, they agree on worship anthropologically. These Christian traditions agree that worship involves wholly human creatures engaged in the ongoing communion of body and soul, eyes, ears, members, reason, and senses.

WORSHIP: AN ASSEMBLY WITH WHAT?

Having established that worship is an assembly of human persons (sensory creatures), we can now venture to another nuance of the worship question: Worship is an assembly *with* what? With what tools or technologies do we assemble for worship?

Contemporary worship is an assembly with many different technological artifacts: There may be pulpits and pews, buildings and baptistries, crucifixes and candles, speakers and screens, cameras and computers. Those gathered for worship assemble with multiple forms of media, such as Bibles, hymnals, artwork, and video.

While technology and media are often conflated, they are not identical or interchangeable. Technology can be understood as tools or instruments. (To be certain, this is not an exhaustive understanding of technology.) Media, on the other hand, are often understood as conduits for communication. Media are that which convey ideas, images, or information. For example, Martin Luther in his lectures on Isaiah recognized the ways in which worship and media intersect: “As the God who is worshiped, God is clothed in the earthly media of the Word, of Baptism, and of the Lord’s Supper, wherein he reveals himself.” Although it may often go unnoticed, corporate worship—both past and present—relies heavily on media.

Just because media are conduits of communication does not mean they are entirely passive or neutral. Marshall McLuhan, an influential media theorist, highlighted the ways in which media shape not only communication but also the sensory creatures involved in this communication. A prevalent theme

within McLuhan’s work is the notion of media serving as an extension of the human body in some way. For example, in his book *The Medium Is the Message*, McLuhan notes: “Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical.”

These extensions, however, are not without consequence. As one aspect of the body is extended, the other senses and human faculties are transformed as well. McLuhan goes on to say, “The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change.” Thus, media are conduits for communication that influence not only the message itself but also the recipients of the message. For example, livestream video of in-person worship extends the sight and sounds of the sanctuary, but not the taste, touch, and smell of the worship service. Those viewing the livestream worship see and hear the sanctuary while the rest of their senses are located elsewhere. Their eyes and ears are extended into the worship space while their nose, tongue, and other body parts are not. Digital media allows part of you—but not all of you—to be somewhere far from the rest of your body.

Digital media’s ability to extend some of our senses results in a fragmented bodily experience, hence a disintegration of the senses. Part of you may be somewhere, but not all of you. The opposite of this is common sense (*sensus communis*), wherein there is communion and harmony of the bodily senses.

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Common sense occurs when all your senses—sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell—are gathered together in a harmonious and singular experience.

In-person worship is a common sense experience: You see the sanctuary, stained glass, cross or crucifix, and candles. You smell the incense. You taste the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. You touch the pews and hymnals and embrace others. You hear the Word proclaimed, crying babies, and the din of the worshipping space. In-person worship is the communion of senses wherein taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing coalesce in a common experience.

Metaverse worship, however, ruptures the communion of our senses. A VR headset transports everything to a virtual site of worship; eyes and ears and mind extend into the metaverse, while nose, mouth, hands, heart, and guts remain elsewhere. The sense of touch is relegated to a couch or computer chair while smelling a house, coffee shop, or dormitory. Since the metaverse is a place devoid of tastes, VR worshippers taste whatever happens to be at the ready where they are worshipping: pancakes, coffee, or Doritos. Worshipping in the metaverse is devoid of common sense—you are here, you are there, you are everywhere. In short, you are nowhere.

Does this mean that nothing happens when people worship in the metaverse? Far from it. To be certain, something real and meaningful can and does occur when people gather for worship in the metaverse. The Gospel can be proclaimed and people can come

to faith in Jesus through digitally mediated worship. The metaverse is a place where people can worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23–24).

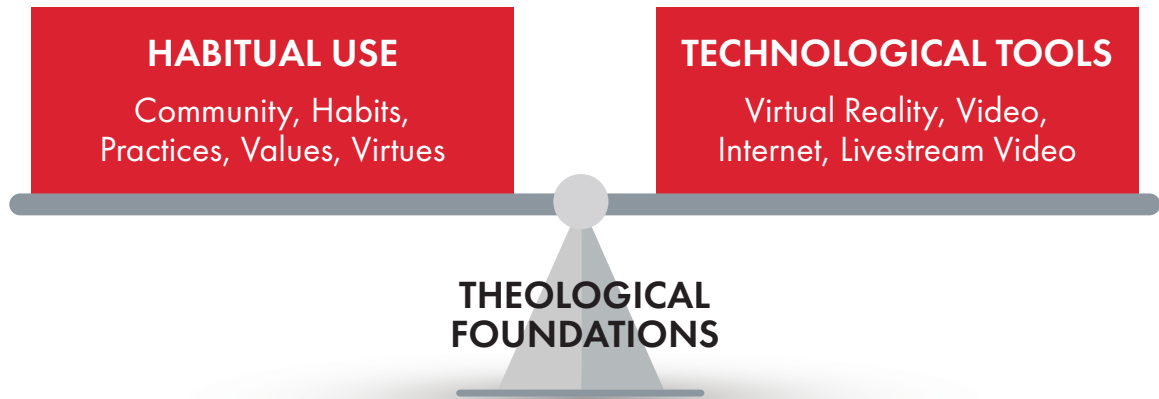
However, the more integrated the bodily senses, the more worship engages the fullness of the sensory creature. If worship is to grab us by the head and the heart, the gut and the soul, then it needs to engage the body and soul, eyes, ears, members, reason, and all the bodily senses. Unlike in-person worship, worship in the metaverse is a disintegrated, dismembered, here-there-everywhere-yet-nowhere practice of worship.

KEEPING BALANCE IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

With all that said, outrightly rejecting the possibility of worship in the metaverse is not a responsible path forward. After all, the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found in its November 2021 report that 80% of U.S. congregations now utilize a hybrid worship service in which congregants simultaneously gather in person and online. While livestream worship is not the same thing as worship in the metaverse, both are digitally or technologically mediated and involve a rupture of the bodily senses. With so much online and digital worship happening in the church today, there is tremendous exigency for developing a framework for maintaining a balanced approach to such worship in all its forms. This requires accounting for such key components of online worship as ecclesiological foundations, patterns of habitual use, and the technologies themselves.

At the foundation of any Christian worship are certain ecclesiological presuppositions. As previously mentioned, this is where Avery Dulles' insights are helpful. Each Christian tradition identifies a different center of corporate worship; for example, some traditions identify the proclamation of the Word or the celebration of the Eucharist as the *sine qua non* of corporate worship. As such, different ecclesiological foundations are more or less congenial to digital forms of worship; a tradition that values proclamation of the Word may see great possibility in online worship, whereas one that gives priority to the Eucharist may see online worship as untenable.

Patterns of use and their implications must also be considered. What happens to a Christian community when it moves online? Is a congregation dismembered when some of its members worship in person while others worship online? (If so, what happens to mutual care, fellowship, and encouragement?) Changes in worship practices will have impacts on



habituation, formation, and community. Altering where and how we worship will alter our values and virtues, possibly encouraging a more solipsistic and individualistic approach not only to worship but to the Faith as a whole. A thoughtful approach to worshipping in the metaverse will consider its impact on our relationships, community, and practices.

Finally, a framework for maintaining a balanced approach to online worship must attend to the technological tools themselves. VR headsets have different affordances than that of a television screen. Broadcasting a worship service over the radio is not the same as conducting a service in the metaverse. As such, we must carefully attend to the affordances, design features, and implications of the particular technological tools we use for worship. Is idolatry a real threat here, not only by making fetishes of our gadgets but also in imagining God and proper worship of Him in inappropriate ways?

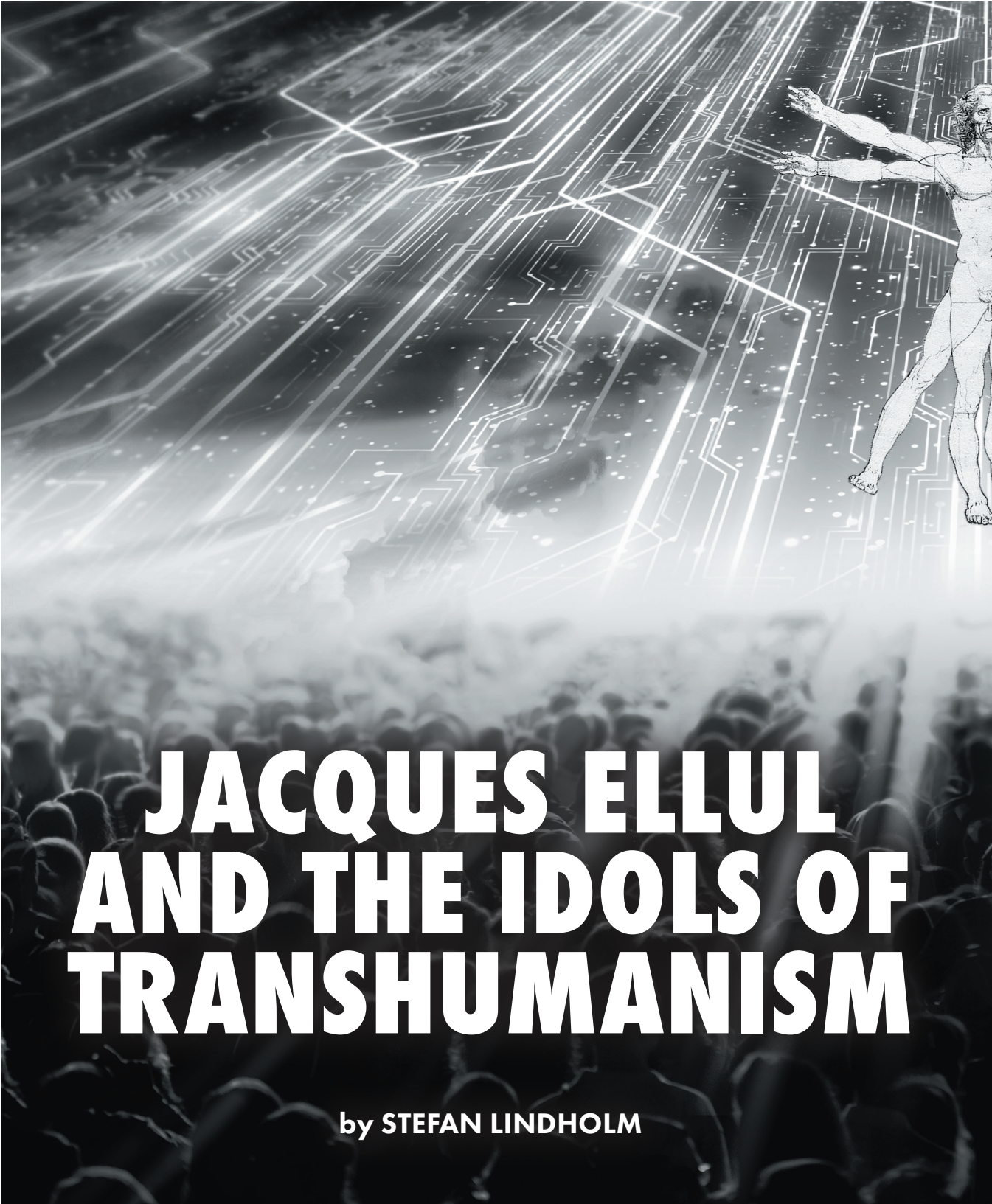
When all these elements are brought together, this framework looks something like a seesaw or a scale. At the fulcrum of the seesaw are the ecclesiological presuppositions upon which worship hinges. Balanced atop this fulcrum is habitual use on one end and the technological tools on the other end. Since both of these are dynamic and ever changing, they must be constantly assessed and adjusted to maintain balance. For example, VR headsets and other tools for accessing the metaverse will continue to develop and change, which will in turn have an impact on patterns of use and worship practices. Maintaining reflective equilibrium depends on holding these three elements together in a good and godly balance. Failing to consider any or all of these elements may be ruinous for a Christian community.

UPHOLDING WORSHIP IN A WORLD OF UPLOADING

Worship in the metaverse, along with all the other digitally mediated forms of worship, extends parts of our bodies while leaving the rest behind. This frenetic fragmentation of our bodies will eventually leave us unable to remember what it is like to assemble for worship as wholly present human beings. While the world uploads into the metaverse, the church must give priority to worship with the wholly present human body.

Why? Because the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus brings redemption to the whole human person: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23). Faith in Christ Jesus and the fleshy promises of the empty tomb grips our head and heart, gut and soul, eyes, ears, members, reason, and all our bodily senses. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so—not with detached bodily organs but as whole humans responding in worship. **RL**

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JACQUES ELLUL AND THE IDOLS OF TRANSHUMANISM

by **STEFAN LINDHOLM**



The transhumanist movement represents the ultimate temptation for man to play God and refashion himself as an immortal being free of pain. As Calvin warned, the human mind is a forge of idols.

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TRANSHUMANISM IS A VISION of the future of humanity in which applied technologies are supposed to enhance and upgrade human existence. According to the transhumanist story, evolution has brought us very far indeed—to the moon and back, so far. Yet as an intelligent species, humanity is still very primitive and thus stands in need of upgrading. Given the rise of new technologies, transhumanists argue that we can—nay, should!—overcome our current evolutionary limitations in terms of physiology, emotion, cognition, and (at least sometimes) morality. *The Transhumanist Declaration*, the work of a variety of international authors and “modified” repeatedly since its publication in 1998, states that



"Metaphysics," 1898 illustration by E. J. Sullivan from *Sartor Resartus* by Thomas Carlyle

Humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future. We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.

This visionary agenda is not primarily crafted in the academic ivory towers but in an interplay between technological industries, culture makers, and consumers. Many of its key players or supporters are known to the wider world and work in significant institutions, such as futurist Ray Kurzweil (director of engineering at Google), inventor Elon Musk (Tesla, SpaceX, Neural Link, and more), and philosopher Nick Bostrom (The Future of Humanity Institute, Oxford). Some are not as well known but just as important to the project, for example gerontologist Aubrey de Grey and philosopher-futurist Max Moore.

Closely connected with these ideas and aspirations is the growth of emerging technologies, foremost the impressive developments in artificial intelligence

(AI). More than that, we are witnessing not only the emergence of technological innovations and applications but also their convergence into new areas of research (foremost the interconnectedness of neurobiology, information technology, computer science, and biotechnology). Such developments—although relatively independent of the transhumanist movement—are taken as promises of the trustworthiness of the transhumanist vision. Absolutely central to this vision is the prediction that in a not-too-distant future, there will be an intelligence explosion, or, as it is also called, a point of technological singularity, when AI first reaches a human intelligence level in all domains of knowledge and then self-improves in order to reach a superintelligent echelon. Such an advanced and autonomous super-AI will acquire abilities beyond the narrow tasks of playing chess and directing cars between two points, since it will drastically exceed human abilities and not be liable to humanity's many weaknesses. Some predict that once AI has reached human-level intelligence (perhaps even within the next few decades), there will be a very rapid takeoff of ingenuity and mastery of knowledge and practices that will be impossible to control. Such a Superintelligence will be able to

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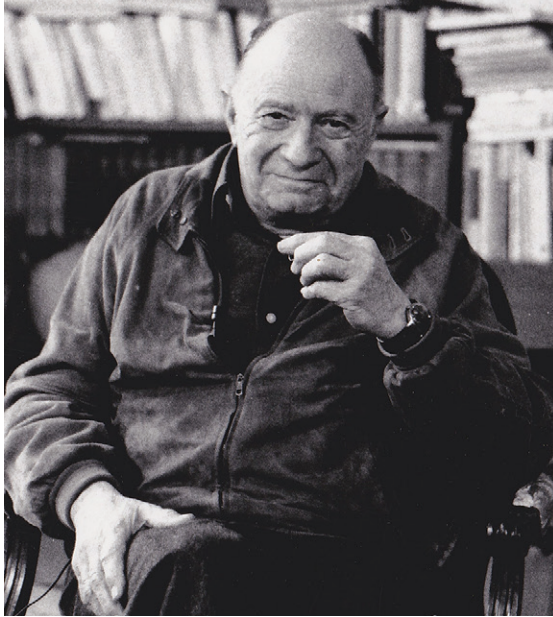
establish its own goals and perhaps have its own kind of consciousness. In preparation for such an intelligence explosion, transhumanists advocate that humanity should get ready to upgrade so we may coexist peacefully with other types of intelligences. Furthermore, we should also consider novel ethics challenges, like what moral rights and duties applies to fellow nonbiological intelligent agents.

Transhumanists advocate a blurring of the boundaries between the biological and the technological, the natural and the artificial, and that we should be free to reconstruct “humanity” as we like. This so-called morphological freedom is the freedom to change body and mental makeup by means of technology in any way one wishes. As various enhancement technologies become more generally available, they will change the common perception and future concrete practice of, for instance, medical science so that the distinction between medical treatment of illnesses and medical enhancement will be less clear cut, and one day obsolete. Here we should mention de Grey and Moore again, who in different ways have taken concrete measures to obliterate or postpone their own deaths.

And what's a revolutionary movement without reactionaries? Anyone who resists this pendulum swing will be branded “bio-conservative” or even “bio-Luddite” by the transhumanists, who argue that leaving “old” biology behind will not be a great loss because we are not limited to our biological and evolutionary origins by any kind of determinism—divine or materialistic. In fact, our current state as *homo sapiens* is merely a brief phase in evolutionary history. We are, in other words, facing the possibility of being superseded by a future *posthuman* species. (Thus the label “transhumanism” is sometimes used to denote the efforts to bring about the intermediary life form between humans as we know them and posthumans.)

JACQUES ELLUL AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Objections to transhumanism comes in various forms. Bio-conservatives have sought to defend the claim that there are essential features of humanity that get lost in the transhumanist vision—for instance, the integrity of the natural and the biological, and the gift of finitude, which grants us our species-specific dignity and moral status. (There are also bio-conservatists who argue from a more explicitly leftist-oriented political agenda, saying that enhancement technologies would boost global inequalities,



"Jacques Ellul in his house in Pessac, France," photo by Jan van Boeckel, *The Betrayal by Technology* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: ReRun Productions, 1990)

dividing humanity into two classes.) Leon Kass and Francis Fukuyama have argued that enhancement technologies would be equivalent to our "playing God" and a threat to human dignity, as they would manipulate nature in unlawful ways. Some religiously oriented bio-conservatives argue that nature is sacred because it is created by God; obviously, such an assertion is not shared by nonreligious bio-conservatives like Jürgen Habermas.

While I think there are ways to defend coherently at least some of the bio-conservative arguments on theological as well as philosophical grounds (e.g., by looking at the metaphysics of persons), that is not exactly what I shall do here. Instead, I will briefly try to say something about the transhumanist vision in an exchange with one of the most energetic critics of modern technology in the 20th century: the French sociologist and lay Protestant theologian Jacques Ellul (1912–1994).

Ellul is occasionally honored with a quote in the literature debating transhumanism, but his ideas are rarely brought into extended dialogue with the themes of transhumanism. There is perhaps reason for this lack of engagement, since he had an aptitude for making sweeping generalizations about problems with modern technologies. (I, too, have

my reservations about various aspects of Ellul's techno-criticism, but I think there are important aspects that should be considered in this debate.) Lutheran theologian Ted Peters, for instance, argues that Ellul was overly critical of technology as such, and points out that any reasonable anthropology would acknowledge that using and developing technologies or techniques is part and parcel of what it is to be human, a *homo faber*. The real problem is the misuses or overuses of technologies, says Peters. This criticism might be fair as far as it goes, but it also runs the risk of missing the main point of Ellul's criticism: *modern* technology is no longer merely an instrument disposable for our use (and abuse) over which we may deliberate rationally and ethically.

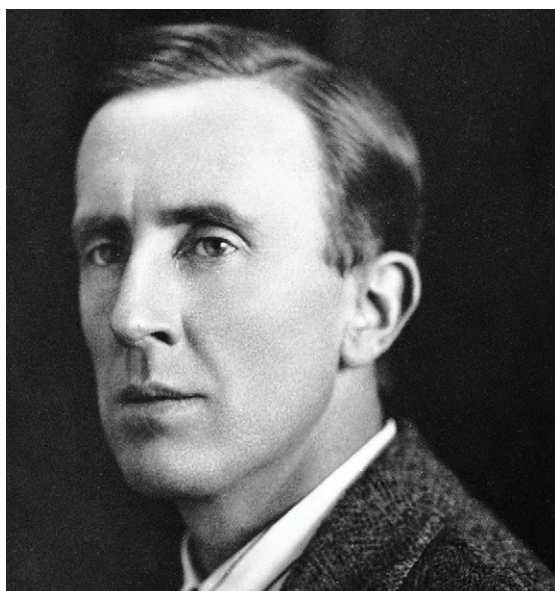
Even if Ellul's (in)famous criticism of our technological culture was severe and sometimes overstated, it reflected a broad techno-critical sentiment among European postwar intelligentsia. Ellul can be said to belong to a diverse group of thinkers including Martin Heidegger, Lewis Mumford, Hannah Arendt, as well as Christian authors J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. They all had a vivid sense of how a relentless technological optimism could just as rapidly destroy as construct, to the detriment of humanity and the biological world. Samuel Matlack, editor of *The New Atlantis*, captures the zeitgeist of the times: "Utopian dreams comingled with nightmares of terrible ruin." The thrust of Ellul's criticism focused on technologies as they have and will shape the possibilities of life. As

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he put it, modern technology has become a “buffer” between us and nature so that we now are separated from the kind of environment we have evolved to live in. This is, in a nutshell, the problems of technique.

Ellul’s most famous book on the subject, *The Technological Society* (written in French in 1954 and translated into English in 1964 on the suggestion of Aldous Huxley), however, is not concerned with any particular technology. The author’s extensive analysis concerns the phenomenon of *technique*. He begins by making two observations: (1) technique precedes scientific developments, since scientific developments require new methods and techniques; and (2) technique is not to be identified with the machine, yet the machine is the ideal realization of technique. Technique is simply defined as the complex of rationally ordered methods and means for making all human activities more efficient. On the surface it may not sound harmful, but problems arose in the modern period when this innate tendency in human practical rationality began to be applied to virtually all areas of human life and beyond, converting everything into a means to an end. As a consequence, the ends to which the tightly controlled means are directed have been arbitrarily stipulated by the whims and wishes of human societies. The modern methods of technique, so understood, are all-pervasive and have become a complex integrated and autonomous system that has slipped out of the hands of humans so that we are

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973)



Silver didrachma from Crete depicting Talos, an ancient mythological automaton with artificial intelligence (c. 300–270 B.C.)

always and everywhere in the hands of technique. It has become its own kind of all-embracing ideology. Ellul points out that for modern people, virtually every problem in every domain of life—from a mere inconvenience to an illness to an existential crisis—is expected to have a technical solution. The irony is that the problems that technique is supposed to solve often arose as a consequence of an earlier technique. The result is a kind of technological totalitarianism that exponentially will—although not by absolute necessity, Ellul is careful to add—continue to shape and control human societies and life.

Ellul gives plenty of examples of how all areas of human and nonhuman life are being subjected to techniques of various kinds—family and population planning, the environment, animal care and agricultural work, economics, politics, and so on. A familiar one is that education has by means of technique gone from teaching skills and facts to efficient methods of passing tests. Not all the examples Ellul gives are grounded in thorough research (some are even anecdotes and drawn from general experience). Some are overstated or misguided (that jazz music is enslaving, for instance). Yet the essence of his analysis is worth paying attention to and appears to be increasingly confirmed by the technologies that have now entered our lives. Today we naturally think of the problem of climate change, which is caused by

human overconsumption based on “unsustainable” technologies and is now, at least according to a substantial number of politicians, activists and scientists, supposed to be solved primarily by another set of “sustainable” techniques, preferably those that will change our lifestyles as little as possible.

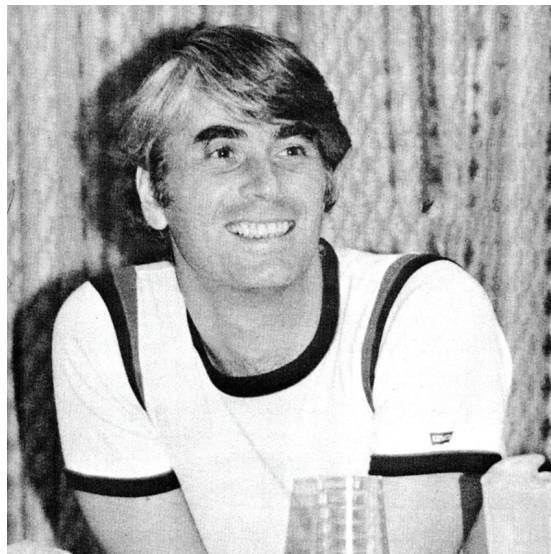
Ellul based his dystopian-future predictions about the technological society on observations from the techno-optimist spirit of the post-WWII societies of the 1950s. Those predictions, not least after the advent of the internet in 1994—incidentally, the same year Ellul passed away—and the advancement in and application of artificial intelligence to various spheres, have at least been partially fulfilled. It is certainly striking that Ellul saw already in the 1950s that there would be a scientific and cultural acceptance of a blending of the artificial and the biological (DNA was discovered only in 1953), which is central to the transhumanist vision of morphological freedom.

However, as emerging technologies gain increasing power to condition and reshape human and other life in all sorts of ways, the transhumanist sees the flip side of Ellul’s dystopian future. Where he perceived illusory freedom and bondage, they predict freedom and individuality.

THE DEMISE OF THE ACTING SUBJECT

Transhumanists welcome a society saturated with and built on technologies, because they believe it will be composed of true “individuals”—be they humans or something beyond human. They will be wholly free to choose their own makeup (physically, mentally, emotionally) and will be liberated from death, boredom, and suffering. Ellul objects that such a vision is not only naive but also fundamentally misguided, since more technique will not make for more or genuine freedom. In a technological society, humans and their successors are not acting subjects anymore but objects of technique. Therefore, they are liable to all kinds of necessities and control, because technique implies that, in the name of rational efficiency, everything becomes a means of impersonal, technical development.

Ellul’s claims about technique have similarities to what today is called “ultimate harm” and “existential risk”—the kinds of harms and risks that can potentially annihilate the conditions necessary for the survival of the entire species. It is exactly these kinds of risks that sober transhumanists (and there are some) try to manage in their pursuit of a safe transposition to a new kind of technological existence. However,



Robert Nozick (1938–2002), from the cover of the December 1977 issue of the *Libertarian Review*

since transhumanists value the outcome of a free society so highly and attribute to it the coming of a technological age, they are willing to try to manage the risk by a cooperation between scientists and intellectuals of all stripes. Philosopher Nick Bostrom perfectly embodies the technicist ideal when he argues:

The [philosophical] outlook now [in contrast to the ancient one] suggests that philosophic progress can be maximized via an indirect rather than by immediate philosophizing. One of the many tasks on which superintelligence (or even just moderately enhanced human intelligence) would outperform the current cast of thinkers is in answering fundamental questions in science and philosophy. This reflection suggests a strategy of deferred gratification. We could postpone work on some of the eternal questions a little while, delegating that task to our hopefully more competent successors—in order to focus our own attention on a more pressing challenge: increasing the chance that we will actually have competent successors. This would be high-impact philosophy.

We may say that Bostrom’s “high-impact philosophy” is one that has been subject to and transformed by technique, which, on Ellul’s analysis, implies that it has traded its freedom for efficiency. Put differently, the virtue of perennial wisdom is replaced by a sort of smart utilitarianism.

NO FREE CHOICES?

Modern people are culturally conditioned to think they are freer than previous generations, in large part due to the blessings of sciences and technology in their everyday lives. Admittedly, we are generally enjoying a materially more comfortable life than did our forebears, but we are also beginning to be alerted to the problems involved in this kind of life. I have already mentioned climate change but numerous examples can be drawn from the way smart technologies and social media affect us. For instance, there are endless possibilities for self-expression by way of social media, but we have also become increasingly aware of being “owned” and conditioned by the big tech companies and billionaire CEOs. But a dim awareness is not to be confused with an insight into our state that will lead to action, at least not for most individuals. Moreover, according to Ellul’s analysis, those very big tech elites are equally determined by the technology they produce. In fact, in a technological society, there is no longer a *controlling* elite, because politicians, journalists, technicians, and philosophers (which is to say, government, media, big tech, and the academy) are also defined by—and perhaps in the end replaced by—the perfection of technique: the machine.

By extension, then, even the individual or corporate choice to enter a transhumanist existence is not a free choice. Even less free are the individual and corporate choices involved in such an existence. With the emergence of the Janus-faced artificial human intelligence, at some point morphing into superintelligence, the rendering of what constitutes “individuality” will be determined by a superior technological power whose goals we may not be able to predict or understand. It has been suggested that perhaps the goal for a Superintelligence is to produce an infinite number of random objects, like paper clips. Then everything will serve that arbitrary end-as-means, humans included. (Think humans as “batteries” in *The Matrix* films.) This suggestion is supposed to highlight the potential dangers of letting an unharessed artificial intelligence loose in the world. The transhumanist future hope is thus very fragile.

Despite these hypothetical risks, let us grant, for the sake of argument, that should humanity survive the supposed point of singularity, when artificial intelligence exceeds human intelligence, enhancement technologies will bring high and stable degrees of happiness, physical strength, and perceptive awareness to transhumanist individuals. However, such

enhanced features are not unequivocally identical to a heightened individuality or autonomy according to Ellul’s basically personalist analysis. He remarks: “When Technique displays an interest in man, it does so by converting him into a material object,” and man will be guaranteed the kinds of “material happiness as material objects can [guarantee].... But the technical society is not, and cannot be, a genuinely humanist society, since it puts in first place not man but material things.” Ellul is convinced that human or “spiritual” excellence and progress is not reducible to technique. Conversely, material development is not identical to spiritual or intellectual maturation. (Ellul here has an argument with both the capitalist and the Marxist visions of well-being, which were clearly displayed in the postwar European scene.)

In the last chapter of *The Technological Society*, Ellul cites some proto-transhumanist futurists. One of them enthusiastically claims that humanity will be able to have “emotions, desires and thoughts” modified, and so produce “a conviction or impression of happiness.” Interestingly, Ellul’s response bears striking similarities to Robert Nozick’s famous thought experiment, “The Experience Machine” (1973), directed against the unlimited hedonism of



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utilitarianism (“pleasure is good”). Imagine that a machine can manipulate a human being so that she experiences a simulated reality that feels perfectly real and can produce unlimited positive emotional input. What reality would you choose to live in? This absurd example was supposed to be a *reductio* against utilitarian hedonism, since Nozick assumed that rational people would choose to live outside the machine, despite being liable to boredom and suffering. However, this kind of objection is not particularly effective against the transhumanist intuition that already accepts, ideologically, the idea of technological absolutism. To many transhumanists, a simulated reality is just as much a reality as what we ordinarily call reality. Thus, there is no significant distinction between living in or outside of the Matrix, since intelligences or persons are fundamentally nothing more than patterns in an information flow that can exist biologically (wetware) or on a silicon substrate (hardware). Indeed, the idea that we live in a machine already (created by technologically superior intellects in a distant past) is something that Nick Bostrom *et cohortes* argues is more likely than not. Here we hit the bedrock of competing intuitions about reality. However, on Ellul’s analysis, this is to be expected in a technological society where the values of techniques have become so deeply engrained that reality is essentially a technological simulacrum.

A NEW RELIGION FOR A NEW AGE

Although there are some religiously inclined transhumanists, like aforementioned Ray Kurzweil or sociologist James J. Hughes, transhumanism is basically a secular movement. Yet it has been characterized—and I think fairly—as a form of “secularist faith,” since it promotes a vision of the “good life”

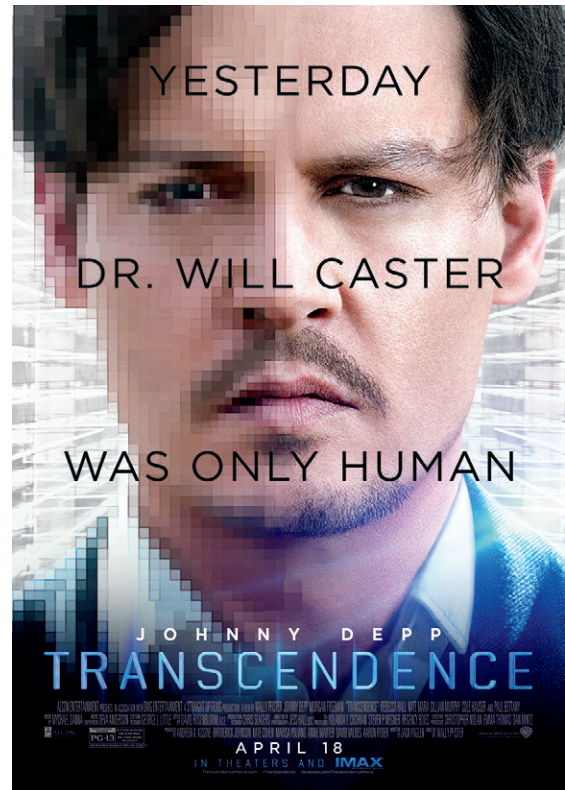
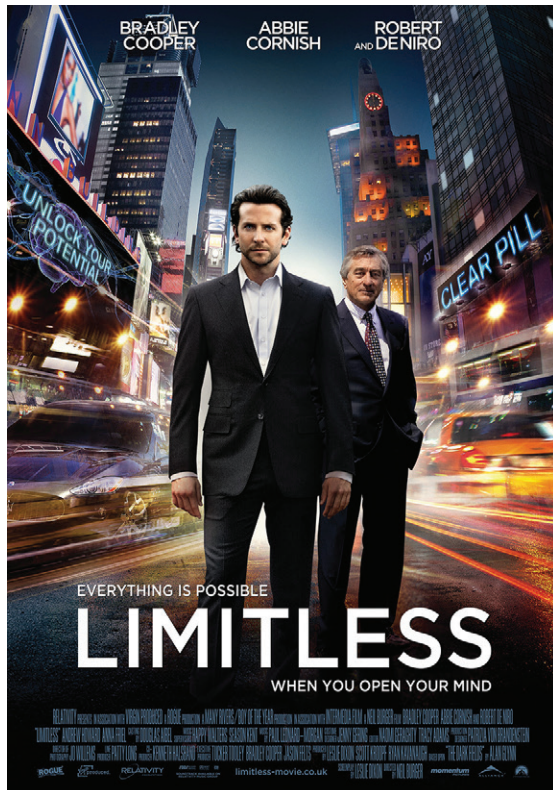
and “pious” practices similar to those taught by traditional religions, although with radical differences. I believe that transhumanism, in soteriological terms, is essentially “Pelagian,” since “salvation,” a new kind of “eternal life,” is strictly in the hands of human beings. Technology is the “divine” power that will deliver the goods, and humans are responsible for bringing about the technological heaven on earth. However, when technology is given such authority, it both leads to human domination over creation and puts an enormous weight on the ability of humans to shape their own and the world’s destiny. As theologian Norman Wirzba points out in *The Paradise of God: Technique (Techne)* in the antique was the human way of working with the inherent order and reason (*Logos*), whereas the modern combination of the two—technology—is the exaltation of human intelligence as the order of things. Ellul teases out the spiritual consequences:

The individual who lives in the technical milieu knows very well that there is nothing spiritual anywhere. But man cannot live without the sacred. He therefore transfers his sense of the sacred to the very thing which has destroyed its former object: to technique itself. In the world in which we live, technique has become the essential mystery.

This is nothing short of idolatry in theological terms. It is surprising, however, that Ellul did not write that the sacred is *eradicated*. He could have claimed that at the arrival of the “machine-man,” secular technique would have done away with the need of mystery—God and religion—in all its forms. But he did not, because his anthropology reflects the Christian basis of his thought, which is radically different from the austere materialism of many thinkers in the postwar period. As I have hinted above, I think we should understand

Imago Dei as depicted in *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo, part of the Sistine Chapel ceiling (c. 1512)





Transhumanism featured in such films as *Limitless* (2011) and *Transcendence* (2014)

Ellul as a personalist: He is convinced that the human person is an irreducible category of reality. Reducing persons to matter is by the same token reducing their freedom and status as *imago Dei*. As a Christian, Ellul is well aware of the effects of sin. It may be said that his analysis of the phenomenon of technique is an analysis of sin as bondage to created goods and gods, of how the mystery of God as *telos* migrates and becomes the “mystery” of created means.

In a wider sense, substituting the created for the Creator is symptomatic of our human condition and not merely a modern problem. As Calvin famously put it, the human mind is a factory of idols. The transhumanist vision can function as a way to survive the loss of religion, since it bears a superficial resemblance to religious themes. It thus offers a sort of hope to people who are losing their faith in religion but nevertheless cling to new forms of spirituality.

Christians are not immune to such temptations, as they are implicated in a technological society. To live faithfully in a world increasingly determined by technology, one needs to be observant about the myriad ways in which one is buying into materialist

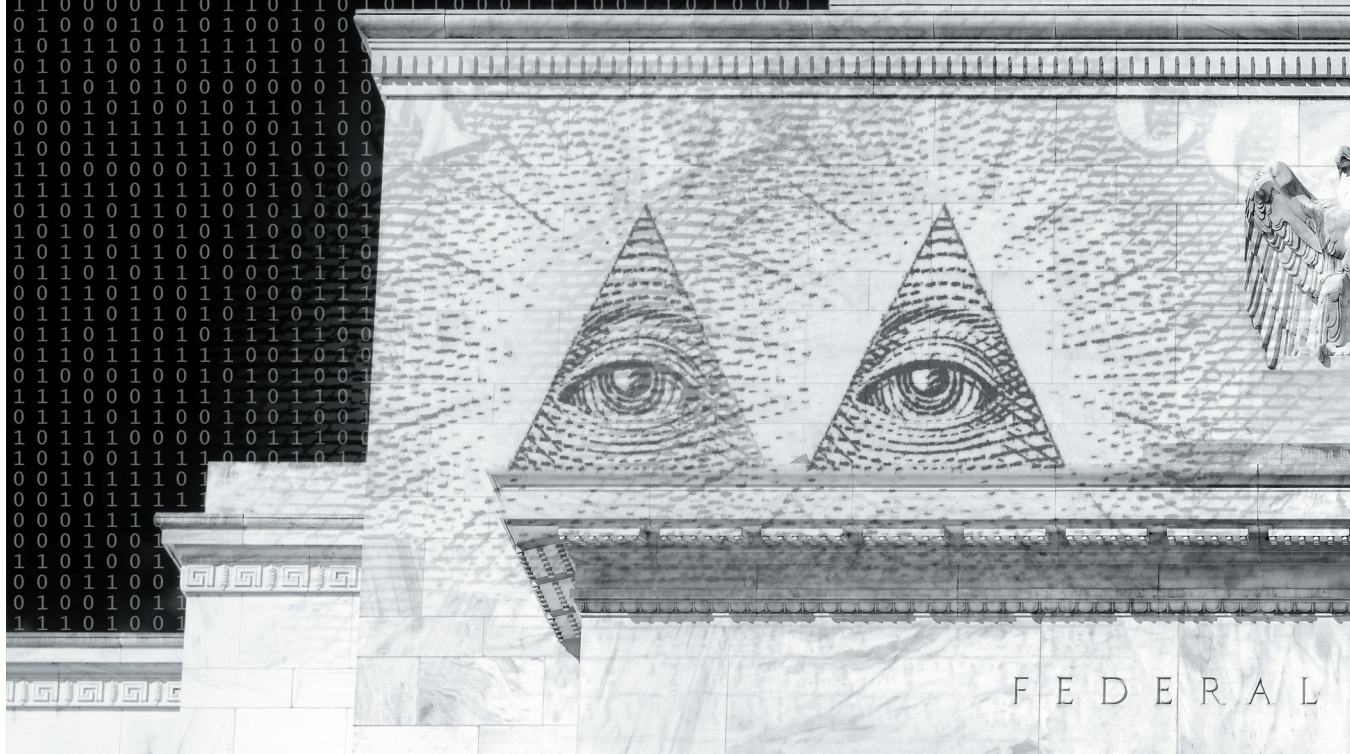
visions of the present and future at odds with classical Christian anthropology and eschatology.

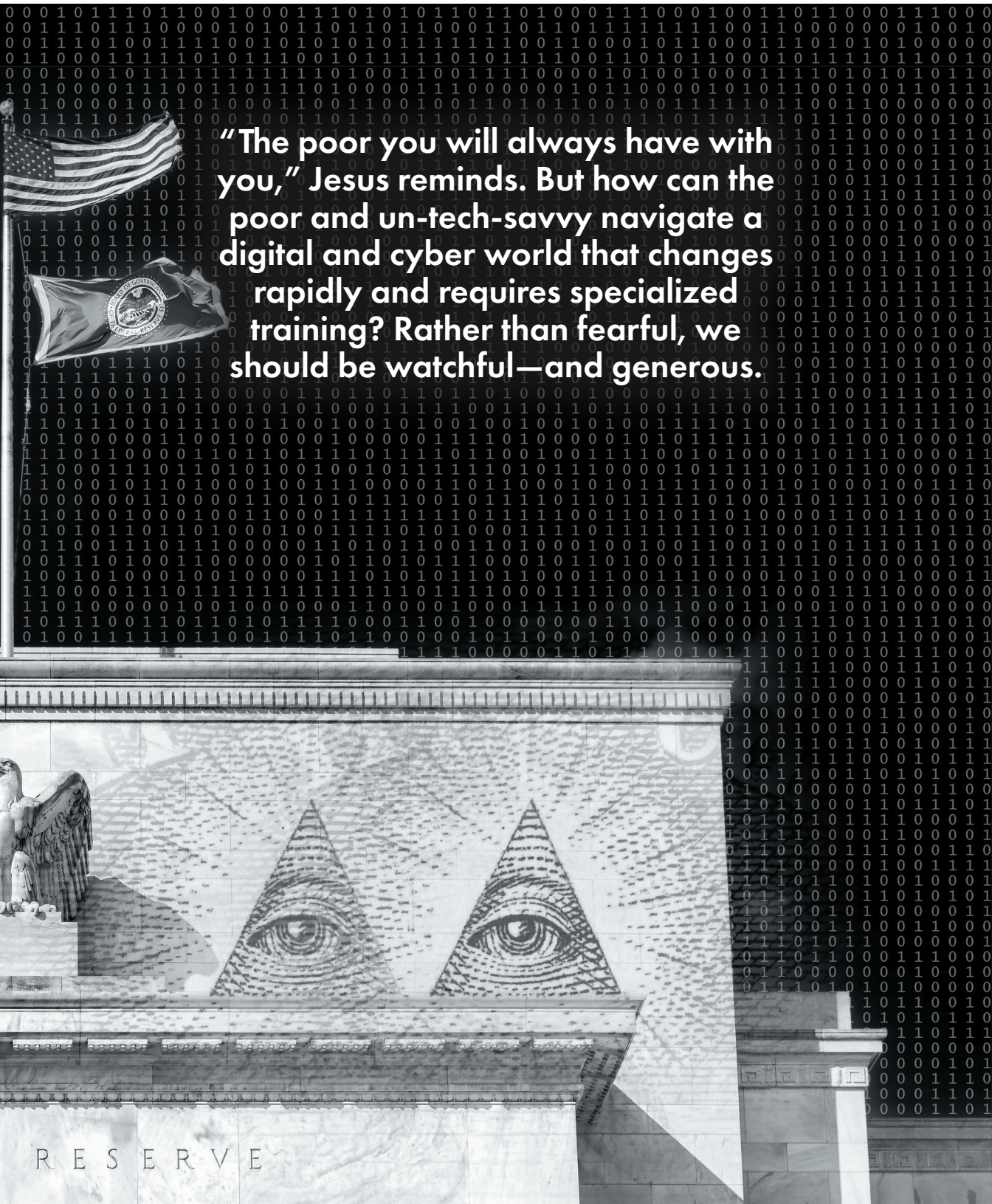
The Apostle Paul exhorted the early Christians in Rome to practice discernment in pursuit of God’s will for their time and to be transformed by the renewal of their minds (Romans 12:1–2). This is an exhortation for our own day, too. Ellul’s prophetic analysis of technique is helpful for a vigilant life in face of the particular temptations of idolatry today. Although Ellul at times can sound a bit romantic about premodern life, he never advocated a nostalgic return to a pristine age but urged us, by the grace of God, to live well in the here and now with a sober and supernaturally grounded view of the future. **RL**

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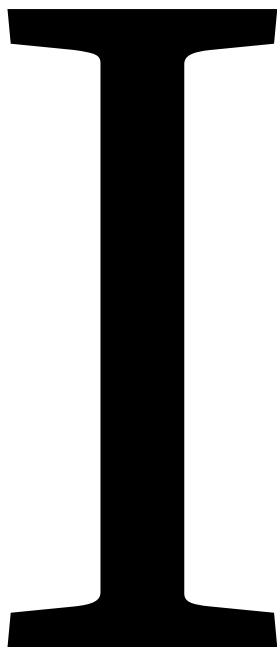
THE DIGITAL ECONOMY IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

by DYLAN PAHMAN and ALEXANDER WILLIAM SALTER





"The poor you will always have with you," Jesus reminds. But how can the poor and un-tech-savvy navigate a digital and cyber world that changes rapidly and requires specialized training? Rather than fearful, we should be watchful—and generous.



IN 2021 THE PARENT COMPANY of the massively popular social networking site Facebook changed its name to Meta Platforms. Mark Zuckerberg, its creator and chairman, plans for the company to develop a “metaverse,” a virtual reality (“VR”) world in which all kinds of social and economic business can be conducted by users via VR avatars and digital transactions. Not to be outdone, rapper Snoop Dogg has developed his own “Snoopverse,” and other celebrities are getting in on the VR real estate game as well. Is this the way of the future? Should Christians strap their phones to their faces and dive into the metaverse? And what does this imply about those who can’t afford to do so?

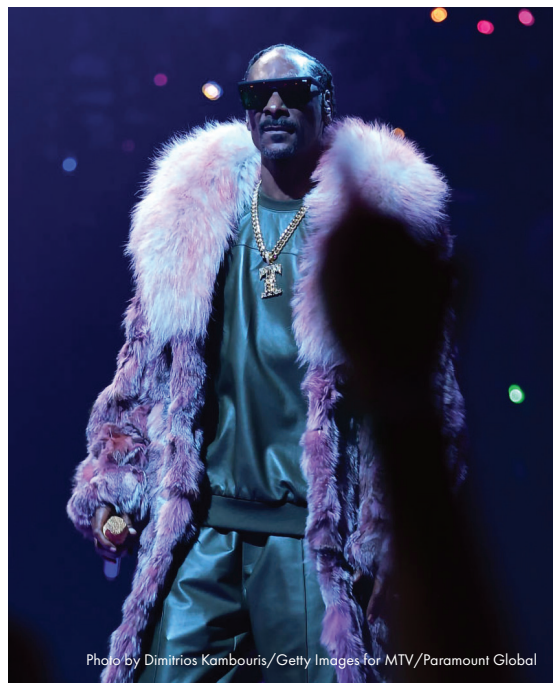


Photo by Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images for MTV/Paramount Global

Snoop Dogg performs onstage at the 2022 MTV VMAs

The journey to VR worlds could be bumpy. Meta’s development department posted a \$10 billion loss in 2021, and Zuckerberg has stated that losses will substantially deepen in 2022. Not everyone’s doing so poorly, though. Mr. Dogg sold a parcel of Snoopverse real estate in December 2021 . . . for \$450,000. The middle-class masses are not likely to follow anytime soon, let alone the poor. So maybe our meta-future is overhyped, at least for now.

Yet there are many ways in which the future is already here, at least in terms of cashless digital transactions, internet businesses and commodities, and other technological advances in our economies. To the extent that these trends will continue, we can make predictions based on what we know of them in the present. Christians need not fear—nor uncritically participate in—such novelties. But Christians should take the time to understand who thrives and who struggles with them, as well as what promises and dangers they contain.

As St. Paul the Apostle wrote, “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Philippians 4:8). But how

are we to know what things reach these lofty heights? St. Basil the Great, echoing a common early Christian teaching adapted from the Stoics, offers additional guidance: “Health and sickness, riches and poverty, credit and discredit . . . are not . . . naturally good, but, in so far as in any way they make life’s current flow more easily, in each case the former is to be preferred.” So, too, when they detract from what is good and godly, they are not “to be preferred.” Thus, any Christian engagement with our digital future requires a prudent and accurate understanding of these technological trends. The good of the underprivileged deserves special attention. What impact do digital technologies currently have on the economy, and what sort of public policies have been proposed to address those left behind by the march of time and tech?

THE ECONOMICS AND POLITICS OF DIGITIZATION

According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the digital economy includes “online shopping, digital media, the sharing economy, and other e-commerce developments.” The economic importance of these technologies and processes grows by the day. The digital economy represents a significant share of economic activity, both in its own right and through its effects on traditional methods of production and distribution. In 2020 the digital economy accounted for 10.2% (\$2.1 trillion) of U.S. gross domestic product. It supported 7.8 million jobs and generated \$1.1 trillion in compensation. It grew 6.3% per year from 2012 to 2020, roughly three times as fast as the overall economy. Clearly, the digital economy has become a “commanding height” of production and exchange.

To ascertain the promises and perils of digitization, we need to explore its effects on the distribution of income and wealth. This can help us understand digitization’s consequences for economic opportunity, especially for the underprivileged. But economics by itself cannot tell the whole story. We also need to explore the effects of digitization on the distribution of *power*. How digitization affects the scale and scope of government matters just as much as its effects on work, consumption, and investment.

The distribution of income depends on productivity. Labor and capital typically earn the value they add to production processes. A worker who makes \$15 per hour for her employer will earn about \$15 per hour; a machine that adds \$100 per day to a contractor’s business will rent for about \$100 per day; and so on.

These values are always in flux, in part because the productivity of one factor depends on the availability of the other. Labor is usually more productive in the presence of additional capital, and vice versa. All else being equal, when workers have more or better capital, they produce more and hence earn more.

New investments in the digital economy represent high-tech additions to the economy’s capital stock. We should expect this to make labor more productive, and hence work more remunerative. But things are not quite that simple. Not all workers are equally adept at using this new high-tech capital. We also need to consider the laborer’s accumulated *human capital*—the techniques and skills that make workers more valuable, especially in the presence of specialized production processes. The digital economy requires specific forms of human capital. Not all workers will have it.

Entrepreneurial ability, creativity, adaptability, and overall tech-savviness are crucial for workers looking to create value in today’s increasingly digitized economy. Workers with human capital specialized to yesterday’s production processes could fall behind. This is a familiar story in the history of economics. Economic restructuring, or “creative destruction,” is necessary for economic growth. While it creates many more “winners” than “losers,” the hardship of the latter should not be minimized. The automobile and Henry Ford’s assembly line meant monumental improvements to overall quality of life, but it also put many blacksmiths and horse breeders out of work. Similarly, it’s unlikely many midcareer coal miners or day laborers can run a metaverse boutique or trade cryptocurrencies. It seems inevitable that digitization will contribute to economic inequality.

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REQUIRES SPECIFIC
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Ford assembly line, 1913

But is it inevitable? A closer look reveals some countervailing forces. If recent innovations in payment technologies become widely adopted, digitization could radically expand access to the financial system. Peer-to-peer exchange and “crowdsourced” lending, which eschew traditional financial-sector middlemen, could transform the lives of those poor in collateral but rich in ideas. Formal credentials, such as a university degree, matter less in a digitized economy. There are many talented and ambitious youngsters who cannot afford a four-year degree but can have a go at e-commerce. The previously mentioned traits of “entrepreneurial ability, creativity, adaptability, and overall tech-savviness” are much more likely to be evenly distributed throughout the population than is wealth in our pseudo-meritocracy. The digital economy will not be an egalitarian paradise. But it could be more equal—and, more importantly, less impoverished—than what we have now.

You could tell a similar story about political power. Some aspects of the digital economy select for centralization and hierarchy. Others portend radical devolution and autonomy.

Predicting which forces will prevail is all but impossible. But we can understand how they work, which offers valuable guidance.

On the one hand, the digital economy makes top-down regulation easier. James C. Scott, an anthropolo-

gist and political scientist, coined the term “legibility” to describe how governments try to rationalize the societies they oversee. As digitization proceeds, politicians and bureaucrats will find much of the work has been done for them. Digitized production and exchange leave records that are often easier to trace than low-tech paper trails. That which can be measured and recorded can be controlled. The governing classes are more than happy to let the legibility-enhancing tendencies of the digital economy do their work, because greater legibility means easier social control.

On the other hand, digitization could yield technological advances that frustrate the ambitions of would-be technocrats. Blockchain technology is an obvious example. By facilitating secure, anonymous peer-to-peer exchange, blockchain shields the identities of transactors from prying eyes. Governments could, of course, punish vendors merely for accepting cryptocurrency, but this extraordinary step is very costly. Bundled with improvements in cryptography, many parts of the digital economy could become ungovernable.

Imagine a new, independent class of proprietors with unmediated access to capital, cryptographically protected against government expropriation. Political philosophers going back to Aristotle believed a secure middle class is the best guardian against tyranny. More recently, Christian intellectuals such as Hilaire

Belloc and G.K. Chesterton argued that political and economic freedom depend on widespread access to productive assets. While they occasionally indulged too deeply in their romantic visions of free yeomanry, some of their insights concerning the relationship between liberty and human flourishing could find expression in the digital economy. Instead of creating the conditions of dependence and servility, digitization could be a new foundation for ordered liberty.

THE PROS AND CONS OF A DIGITAL DOLLAR

The conflicting forces unleashed by digitization are particularly clear in the debate over central bank digital currencies. About 80 nations, representing 90% of global income, are exploring a digitized form of national money. In the United States, the Federal Reserve is interested in the idea but has not yet taken concrete steps to create one. Fed officials should think carefully before they do.

Electronic money is nothing new. Almost everyone with a checking account has used it at some point. Digital dollars are already here in the form of electronic bank balances. But central bank digital currencies are different. If the Fed creates a digital dollar, those liabilities will be claims not on private banks but on the central bank.

A public digital dollar has several benefits. It can lower the transaction costs of payments processing, increasing the efficiency of both national and international economic activity. The resources saved through reduced transaction costs can then be put to other, better uses. Everyone is wealthier. For those concerned with equality, a public digital dollar offers another way the underprivileged, and especially the unbanked, can access the financial system. Central banks can offer direct individual accounts, unconstrained by profitability and with minimal hassle. Financial inclusion is important, even apart from efficiency considerations.

But a public digital dollar could have major costs as well. These costs depend on whether we get a “wholesale” or a “retail” central bank digital currency. The former is restricted to financial institutions. The latter is available to the public. In the limit, a retail digital dollar could assign an account to every citizen and permanent resident.

If this seems too good to be true, it may well be. The retail option is much more dangerous, both politically and economically. While a wholesale

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”

digital dollar largely functions to improve interbank settlement (the process by which banks clear each other's liabilities), a retail digital dollar could give the central bank a frightening level of control over the economy.

If a retail digital dollar is widely used, financial transactions essentially become public record. There is no possibility for privacy in these circumstances. The central bank would be able to see everything. And what they see, they can control. Remember, from an accounting standpoint, a central bank digital currency is a liability of the central bank. But that liability does not come with a corresponding legal duty to maintain the nominal value of account balances. Suppose the central bank wanted to “stimulate” the economy by imposing a negative interest rate policy. The Fed could deduct 2% of your account balance over the course of a year to incentivize spending rather than saving. The more households and businesses use a central bank digital currency, the more feasible this kind of technocratic interference becomes.

Even more worrying is the prospect of the Fed meddling with digital dollar balances for partisan reasons. In recent years there has been noticeable

mission creep at the Fed. The central bank started pursuing objectives far removed from its monetary and regulatory mandates, such as climate change and racial justice. Regardless of these causes' merits, they hardly fall under the Fed's purview. Furthermore, they could very easily be used to perpetuate new injustices. If the Fed controls the payment system, as it would through a retail digital dollar, what stops it from selectively hampering payments processing for politically disapproved firms? Fossil fuel companies or businesses with insufficient (as determined by the Fed) minority ownership and upper management representation could be severely disadvantaged. What started as a project for empowerment and financial inclusion too easily ends with increased economic and political power for central bankers, who already had plenty of both.

For central bank digital currencies, everything depends on the form they take and how they are used. This is a microcosm of the whole digital economy. The humane and egalitarian possibilities are real. So are the domineering and hierarchical ones. Reasonable people can disagree over which outcome is likely to prevail. A prudent approach would distinguish those features of digitization most likely to make productive property more accessible to the disadvantaged from those most likely to imprison us in a financial panopticon.

DISCERNMENT IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

Given this mixed bag of possibilities, we recommend that Christians take a cautiously optimistic approach. It will not do to uncritically praise or reject our coming economy. We must practice discernment through the ancient ascetic practice of *nepsis*, or "watchfulness," carefully examining our thoughts and passions to ensure they truly reflect a sober, reasonable, and righteous account of the world and our hearts. Ancient Christians practiced this prayerful meditation as a way to bring "every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). This ancient asceticism still holds the key to prudent living in our economies today as well as in the future.

Because specialized human capital will determine a person's ability to thrive in the digitized economy of tomorrow, those who are able should look for opportunities to help the poor and the marginalized increase their skills so as to adapt to these technological trends. We can and should celebrate the economic

enrichment created by digitization. But those on the losing side of creative destruction will need supportive communities—families, friends, local churches and parachurch ministries—genuine "neighbors" in the sense of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), in order to get back on their feet.

At the same time, we must also be discerning about the forms digital transactions take, whether so autonomous as to lack legal safeguards or so thoroughly under the state's surveillance, as in the case of retail digital dollars, as to afford no space for privacy. Christians with the know-how necessary to use emerging technologies have a duty to share that knowledge with those in need, denying aspiring tyrants the possibility of meddling in every transaction. Note well: This tyranny is precisely the form St. John ascribes to the "beast coming up out of the earth"—namely, that "no one may buy or sell" without its permission (Revelation 13:11, 17). One need not take an apocalyptic view of the present or near future to see this as a warning against all-embracing economic tyranny at any time in history. Once again, we must practice discernment in order to know what things are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, virtuous, and praiseworthy...and what are their opposites.

There is an additional dynamic that Christians cannot overlook. Many of the most vulnerable people in the midst of rapidly advancing technological

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Saint John the Evangelist on Patmos by Hieronymus Bosch (1505)

change are the poor (including disproportionately marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities), the disabled, and the elderly. In every case, the feeling of falling behind adds an additional barrier. Poverty cannot be reduced to material insufficiency alone. It includes the debilitating stress of living paycheck to paycheck—if one is even fortunate enough to have a paycheck—always anxious about how to provide for oneself and one’s family. The Psalmist says that the Lord “heals the brokenhearted / And binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3). So also the Law teaches that “man shall not live by bread alone” (Deuteronomy 8:3). All people, rich and poor, able-bodied and disabled, those of sound mind and the mentally ill, the young and the elderly, need the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the love of Christians, the Church, in order to flourish. Christians should lead the way in fortifying the brokenhearted, healing their wounds, and feeding people’s souls with the Word of God. When people have that kind of support, they have one less barrier in the way of their economic improvement as well.

SUBSIDIARITY

When it comes to the digital economy, we cannot predict whether the forces of empowerment or servility will prevail. Both are real. Both can transform economics and politics. And both entail serious moral consequences. Aided by contemporary social science, sober-minded Christians are uniquely positioned to guide digitization along paths that respect human dignity.

Subsidiarity, an important principle from Catholic social teaching, holds that authorities should govern at the smallest scale possible. The Reformed concept of sphere sovereignty offers similar guidance: The social world is composed of multiple overlapping spheres or areas of interaction, each containing authorities with a legitimate domain. Similarly, the Orthodox Tradition reminds us of the ascetic core of social life—that in order to live well with others, we must deny ourselves. So, too, every sphere or sector of society must deny its ambition to dominate others. The Church may be all things to all men, but for any other area of society, such pretensions are heretical and dangerous. Christians of all confessions must work together to ensure that the digital economy unleashes human flourishing rather than stifling it. That means advocating and responsibly participating in the uplifting aspects of digitization. It also means critiquing and modeling resistance to the stultifying aspects of digitization.

Christians hoping for a list of licit and illicit digital activities are bound for disappointment. Prudence doesn’t work that way. Instead, followers of Christ must use their practical and moral reasoning to study the consequences of digitization. Conversation and debate in the public square will play an important role in setting the basic legal framework governing the digital economy. For the sake of the least among us, we have a responsibility to ensure that the digitized playing field remains open, competitive, and fair. **RL**

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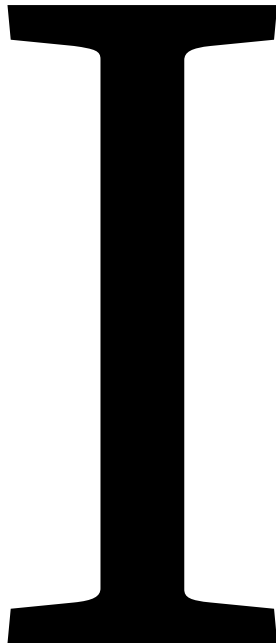
FRIENDSHIP IN THE AGE OF FACEBOOK

by RACHEL FERGUSON

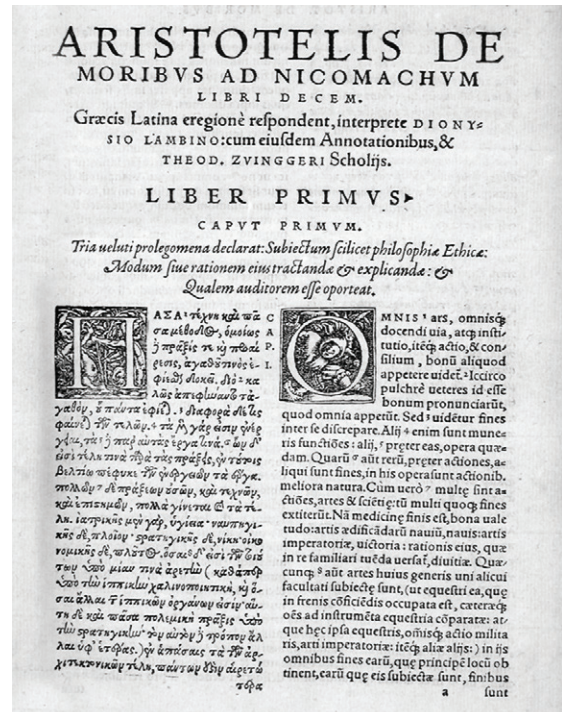


**Are those people who friend you really
“friends”? Or are they something less
than? Do online acquaintances have to
be the equal of real-life relationships?
Or can they supplement them in
unique and life-enriching ways?**





IT WAS NEVER LOST ON ME that Aristotle dedicated two of the 10 books of his *Nicomachean Ethics* to friendship. He clearly considered it to be entirely essential to a good human life. His famous distinction between types of friendship serves us well still today: Friendships of pleasure are typical of the young and fade when the shared interest is gone; friendships of utility are more typical of older people but also fade when the utility does; and finally, true friendship is friendship of virtue, in which both friends encourage one another in excellence. Friendships of pleasure and utility are not necessarily bad, although they can be; they're simply not friendship in the fullest sense



First page of a 1566 edition of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in Greek and Latin

of the term. A good life is an end in itself. No one can answer the question “Why do you want to be well?” because we want well-being for its own sake. Similarly, the elements of the good human life are ends in themselves, too: virtuous activity, beauty, friendship, family. Friendships of pleasure and utility are not ends in themselves, however; they are merely instrumental goods. Only friendships of virtue are worth having simply for themselves, which is why, in a true friendship, the friends will endure great suffering with one another rather than give up on the other. C.S. Lewis’ rumination on friendship in *The Four Loves* is helpful, as he points out that friendships of pleasure and utility may be the “matrix” within which a true friendship blossoms. Following Aristotle’s logic, Thomas Aquinas argues that the essence of love is to will the good of the other, since true friendship always draws the other on toward excellence. It’s an excellent definition of love, but it’s also so abstract that I might (with the help of the Holy Spirit) love everyone in the whole world in the sense that I am willing to do my part in their betterment whenever and wherever the opportunity should arise. Lewis does a better job of explaining specifically how actual,

concrete friendships form, particularly in contrast to romantic love. While lovers are pictured face to face, friends are side by side. Friends have some shared project or passion, and a morally good friendship will be one oriented toward the truth, goodness, or beauty inherent to their shared interest.

I'll leave it to others to debate whether marriage is a subspecies of friendship (as Aristotle and some new natural-law theorists hold) or in some category of its own (as other new natural-law theorists hold). It still seems worth mentioning that the great physical and psychological benefits of marriage, statistically speaking, might be due to its nature as a kind of guaranteed friendship (one hopes). It persists through moves and life changes, and it produces more guaranteed friends in the form of grown children (one hopes). While family love is something different than friendship, the best familial relationships are ones in which parents and siblings are also friends.

KEEPING SEX OUT OF IT

Ancient friendships seemed to have had an intensity unfamiliar to the modern Western world—Achilles and Patroclus, David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi—so much so that modern interpreters often argue that these relationships were sexual. But a look around the globe at non-Western cultures shows how parochial such a view is; men in Arab countries hold

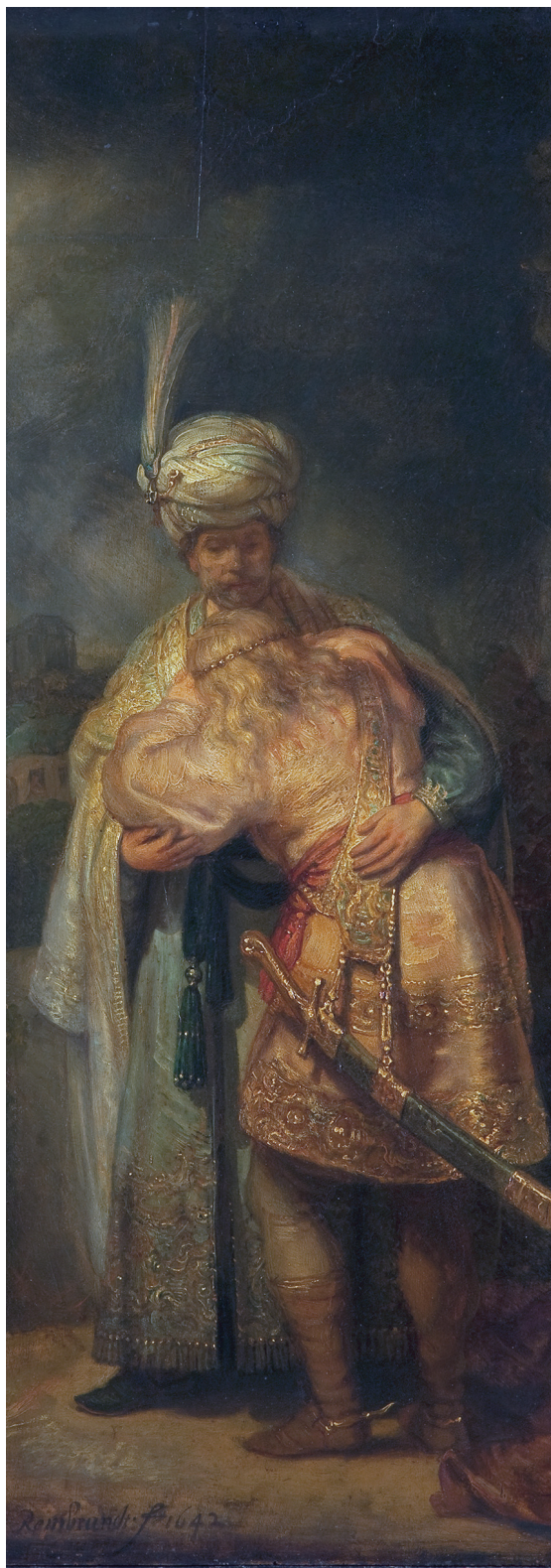
hands while walking, and Jesus' disciples laid their heads on his shoulders. Setting aside the intricacies of Christian sexual ethics, this may help explain some of the historical taboo against homosexuality. Allowing that same-sex friendships could always blossom into romantic love undermines the safety of forming those friendships, just as (on an even deeper level) keeping parent-child and sibling relationships non-sexual keeps those relationships safe in an important way. Some have argued that this partly explains why we're seeing such a boom in middle-school girls declaring themselves bisexual. (In seventh grade, my son said every single girl in his class said she was.) While part of this is clearly faddish, there may also be an element of confusion among pubescent children who have not been given a paradigm for deep friendship, and whose only cultural paradigm for genuine affection is romantic love.

I imagine that right about now you're wondering whether I'm on Billy Crystal's side, when he declared in *When Harry Met Sally* that women and men can't be friends. Absolutely not! It's merely the case that friendship was often experienced between people of the same sex in the past because men and women occupied very different social worlds. As our social worlds overlap more and more, friendships between men and women will develop quite naturally. But it still remains that there will be a difference in those friendships, when one or both are married or the two

Achilles Tending to Patroclus (c. 500 B.C.)



FRIENDSHIPS OF PLEASURE AND UTILITY ARE NOT ENDS IN THEMSELVES, HOWEVER; THEY ARE MERELY INSTRUMENTAL GOODS. ONLY FRIENDSHIPS OF VIRTUE ARE WORTH HAVING FOR THEMSELVES.



David and Jonathan by Rembrandt, circa 1642

are of widely varying ages, for instance, from a relationship in which people really are potential mates. Romantic love and human sexuality are wonderful things, but they also introduce many complications into a relationship, which is one reason why the boundaries around sexual behavior were always tightly regulated, even if in different ways in different cultures, until quite recently.

In the end, though, there will always be a special place for same-sex friendships because there are some tendencies and experiences unique to being male and others unique to being female. While it's popular these days to say that gender (and even sex) exists on a spectrum, I suspect that any person who only has friends of the opposite sex has actually denied themselves something quite precious, perhaps as the result of false ideas about themselves or their own sex. My own mother often said that women were catty and petty, and that men made better friends. Little did she know that I would enter academia in a field—philosophy—in which women make up only 17%. If you're not already aware, academia—and especially philosophy—is definitely the cattiest and pettiest of the professions, so I've experienced no dearth of catty and petty men (as well as wonderful ones!) to disabuse me of my mother's self-hating notions about the female sex. On the other hand, I've been delighted to enjoy some of the deepest and most spiritually profound relationships of my life with other women. I will venture to say, even on pains of cancellation, that the particular kind of intimate friendship I am describing now could not exist for me with a male friend, even though I enjoy many wonderful and supportive friendships with men.

THE STATE OF FRIENDSHIP TODAY

Before we proceed to the doomsaying over social media and how it has changed the notion of friendship, we ought to address the doomsaying over modern friendship itself. There are many concerns and many arguments over the concerns. First, Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* told us we were increasingly disconnected. Then some countered that comparing our level of connection to the nationwide solidarity at the height of World War II might be to compare apples with rationed oranges. Then we noticed that more people live alone than ever, as many delay marriage, others never marry, and many more divorce. But living alone is not the same as being lonely, and being unmarried is not the same as having no friends.

Nevertheless, we were told that America was experiencing a loneliness epidemic, but some researchers say that Americans are reporting no higher rates of loneliness than they did in the 1970s, at least on average. Social science is harder than physics, so I'm not going to pretend to untangle all these debates here, but one thing does seem apparent: Middle-aged men, particularly white ones, are the loneliest, most friendless people in our country. They have high rates of suicide and many of them are simply "missing" from the workforce. This is a shocking problem, even—or perhaps especially—if friendship among other groups remains steady. There are all sorts of interesting facets to the issue of what has happened to spaces for male friendship, and we in the church should be particularly sensitive to examining them. But one thing is for sure: Social media is not an important factor in this. If some middle-aged men are getting lost in videogames, it's because they're already depressed, not the other way around. Instead, it's changes in larger social structures that I suspect is the culprit.

THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

I hope I'm not just being a contrarian, and I'll address a few areas in which the rise of social media is quite worrisome. But in general, social media can be extremely beneficial when used properly, and I actually think a majority of people do use it properly. It's just that the tiny fraction of people who use it improperly also use it *a lot*. Their noise and prominence exaggerates the sense that social media use is mostly about various nasty kinds of interaction. When it comes to the disastrous social consequences of new tech, I always presume against the doomsayers for three reasons. First, new tech is, well, new. Like any new product in the marketplace, it may take a little while to find its own feet as well as its proper place in our lives. For a while there it looked like the ladies really were going to be quite corrupted by the novel, but soon enough Jane Austen and George Eliot came along with their careful character analysis and moral rectitude, and in the end all was not lost. Second, our preference for the known makes our attitude toward the changes new technology brings predictably negative. Plato was worried about the spread of writing, which he thought would make us dumber by making memorization unnecessary. Many worried about the printing press, arguing it would result in nothing but the publication of trash. Nevertheless, writing actually allowed a much deeper level of intellectual

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analysis and cross-generational conversation, and the printing press's greatest hit was the Bible. Third, even where some of the doomsayers have a point, it's quite difficult to measure the benefits versus the costs of any new tech. I'm not a huge fan of the way cars have structured our living spaces, and don't even get me started on the federal highway system. But I also know that motor vehicles have allowed many, many people to make a living where they couldn't have otherwise. It's not at all obvious that my perfectly valid critiques of our car-based society mean we would have been better off without cars.

Research shows that people with well-established friendships tend to use social media to maintain and expand them. My son Solomon had a best friend in grade school who moved to California. In my day we would probably have lost touch, but Solomon and Taj play videogames online with their other friends. They laugh together and make appointments to do it again tomorrow. For the past five years, Solomon has spent two weeks in California over the summer with Taj and his family, whom he refers to as his "other family." It's a blessing to have such a long-term, ongoing friendship throughout one's childhood, and I'm always so happy for him when the trip comes around.

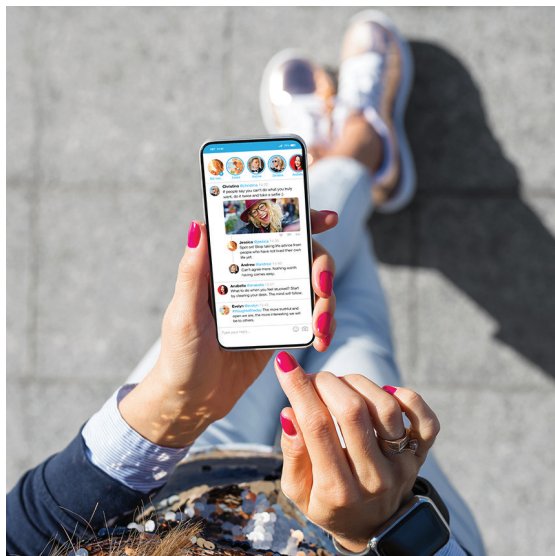
While I often use social media to keep up with friends I don't see in person anymore, our exchanges can still be quite meaningful. Friends who were once close (and in closer proximity) can still be sincere in congratulating the others' successes or mourning with them when they experience losses. I've even experienced this with people I've never met at all. Because I joined social media for the sole purpose of keeping up with colleagues in academia from across the country, my experience has been dominated by many wonderful, like-minded people with good information to share. I have often "friended" someone through interactions with a mutual friend, even if I haven't met them in person. I've enjoyed it when we do meet and can laugh about the fact that we already "know" each other! On one occasion, I friended a professional acquaintance that I'd spoken to on the phone. He enjoyed my posts and interacted with many of them. Sadly, his home was completely flooded by a dam breach. I teamed up with another friend whom we both knew to run the GoFundMe effort, since that would expand the reach of the campaign. We were able to raise over \$80,000 to restore his home, and it was a blessing to keep up with the reports on his progress, but it wasn't until a few years later that we actually met in person! By then he had already been interviewed by my husband on his experiences and we finally met because he invited me to his campus to give a talk on my new book. Recently, we experienced a once-in-a-millennia rain in my hometown, and he Facebook-messaged me to make sure I was OK. On another occasion a Facebook friend whom I'd met

at a few conferences posted that he was looking to fill a certain post at his Christian university. At the time my own university was making cuts, and I knew the perfect person for the job was already on the chopping block here. He had always wanted to work at a Christian school. I recommended him strongly. Sure enough, they hired him, and he emails me now and then to tell me that he feels like he's in heaven at this job. Without social media, not only would I not have seen the posting, I probably wouldn't have kept up with the contact at all or been in a position to be considered a trusted source by him.

One of the joys of these recent years in my career has been building a network of scholars interested in promoting liberty, and especially connecting with Christians in these spaces. Especially during the pandemic, I was able to read others' research and keep up with their work through social media. I was asked to write more because of interactions on social media, and when I published a book, social media was a great way to make connections with others interested in my work and in engaging with it more deeply. I'll venture to say that a social media feed carefully curated to be full of interesting (and sometimes opposing!) comments, articles, and book recommendations can be a genuine improvement to one's life, including the development of new friendships. But this has to be deeply intentional, and even then, regularly fasting from social media can be an important spiritual discipline.

FRIENDSHIPS: THICK AND THIN

While I'll insist on the benefits of social media for keeping up with old friends, for cultivating all kinds of professional connections, and (properly curated) for aggregating stimulating news and analysis, none of this is really what Aristotle or Aquinas or Lewis meant by true friendship. True friendships may be founded on common interests, but they go much deeper than that. A true friend doesn't simply wish for the good of the other; she *acts* for the good of the other. She acts not just for her friend's external good but also for the internal goods of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual growth. This is the friendship that Aristotle conceived of as an end in itself, part and parcel of the well-being of the human person. So perhaps it ought to come as no surprise that such friendships will almost exclusively be embodied, in-real-life, three-dimensional relationships. We humans are, after all, embodied beings. Being in this particular



body is part of what it is to be me, which is why I'll inhabit something like this body even in eternity.

As spatiotemporal beings, we are limited in whom we can love at the level of action. Anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar is famous for his claim that face-to-face communities are limited to about 150 people, given the capacity of our brains. But he also said that “best” friendships will land somewhere around five, and close friends, to whom we can turn for sympathy and help, around 15. (A recent AEI American Perspectives Survey reported that only 59% of respondents claimed to have a best friend at all, compared with 75% in 1990.) Friendship, then, doesn't require only the desire for the good of the other but also the physical proximity to make action possible. There are a few occasions where friends separated by distance can still do each other great good; but in general, even these will be based on friendships first developed in person. So we might conclude by appealing to this distinction between thin and thick friendships, and that thick ones won't be cultivated through social media. While “thin” friendships certainly can, it will be worth it only when we use wise media hygiene. This includes double-checking the veracity of anything we share, muting or blocking anonymous accounts and trolls, and refusing to use dehumanizing language. That sounds reasonable enough, which means that there's one population that won't be able to do it, and it will affect their thick, not just their thin, friendships: kids.

I sat down with a savvy teenage friend of my son's named Addie. I knew Addie would be frank with me about her experiences, but I was still surprised by what she described. She admitted that she regretted ever joining Snapchat, where malicious gossip and unhealthy comparison among friend groups had permanently destroyed some friendships in her circle. Group chats could make friends feel left out, and constant posting means that if you didn't get invited somewhere, you'll know it. It's hard enough for all of us to understand the tone of a text-only communication, but young people don't have the experience to realize what language comes off as angry or mean, even if it's unintentional. When reading the recent work of Jonathan Haidt (coauthor of *The Coddling of the American Mind*) on the terrible rise in mood disorders among girls, I assumed that the correlation he draws with social media use had to do with things like body image. It hadn't occurred to me that social media could also be undermining girls' close friendships, but that's the story Addie told. She's 17 now

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and has turned off all notifications on her phone so that she looks at social media only when she intentionally chooses to. Between what she told me and Jonathan Haidt's concern, I'm wondering whether a social movement to get teens off social media altogether wouldn't be in order. Addie said one really encouraging thing that resonated with me as a Gen X mom: Parents today didn't grow up with social media and so often can't walk our kids through the tough situations encountered there, or even know to limit media use. But this upcoming generation does have such experience, and we may see more wisdom on kids' social media use as Gen Z starts having families of their own.

So if you're an adult capable of good media hygiene, go ahead and enjoy the creation and maintenance of important, but perhaps thin, friendships. Log off regularly for some quality time over dinner with flesh-and-blood friends, though. Fast from tech completely every now and then, too—it's a new kind of Sabbath for our overtaxed consciousness. And let's give the kids a chance to grow up a bit before they have to navigate all that. They'll thank us later. **RL**

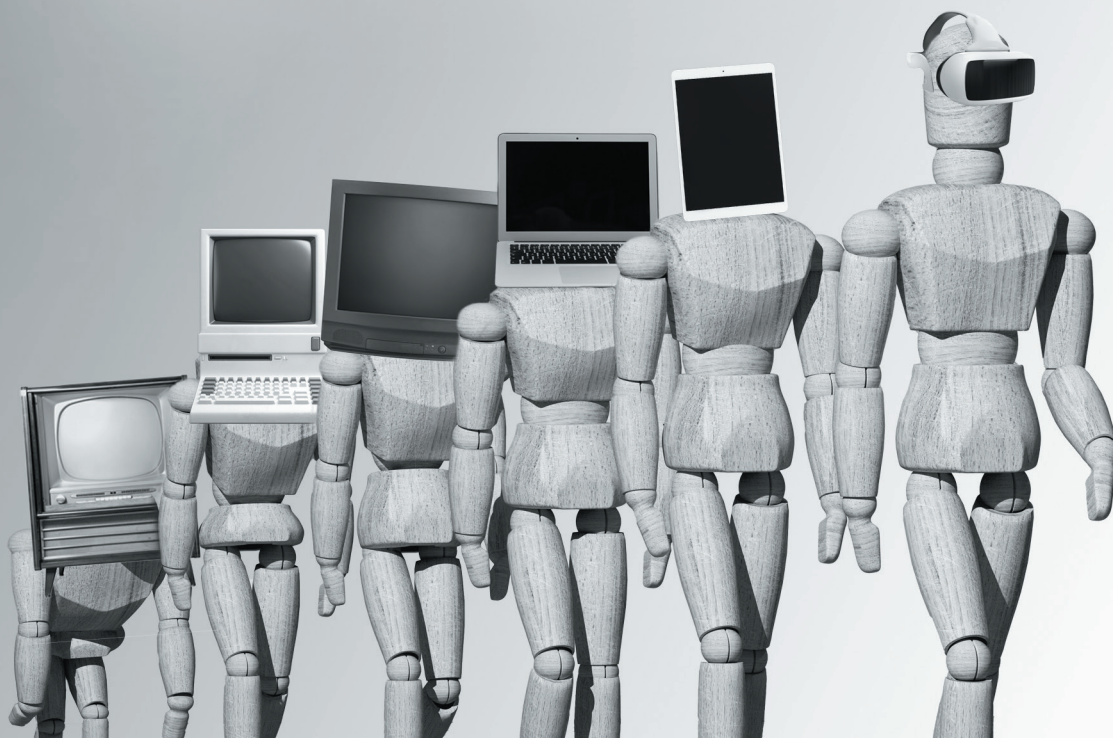
Rachel Ferguson received her Ph.D. in philosophy from Saint Louis University and is director of the Center for Free Enterprise and assistant dean and professor of business ethics in the College of Business at Concordia University Chicago. She is the coauthor, with Marcus M. Witcher, of *Black Liberation Through the Marketplace: Hope, Heartbreak, and the Promise of America*. Ferguson is also a board member for the Freedom Center of Missouri, Faith Ascent Ministries, and LOVEtheLOU, and a founding member of Gateway 2 Flourishing, as well as affiliate scholar for the Acton Institute.



THE SCREEN IS NOT YOUR MASTER

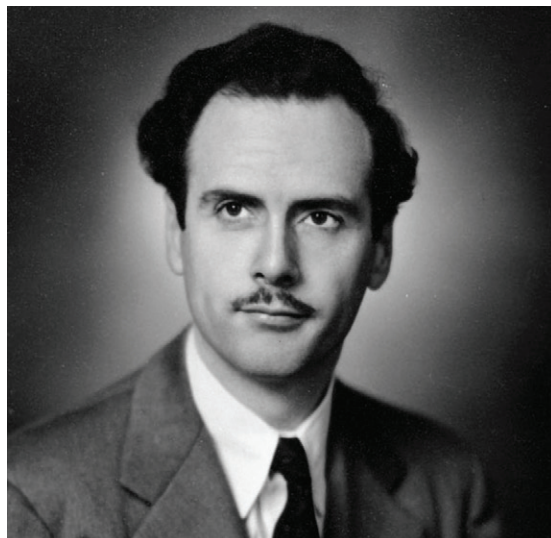
by **DAN CHURCHWELL**

**We need not be held captive by our tech
if we take the time to understand it and
how it has the capacity to change us, often
without our being aware it's doing so.**



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A DAY DOESN'T GO BY without some new story on the subject of technology, ranging from the “this technology will solve all our problems” camp to the “robot overlords are at the gates” perspective. The debate surrounding the good and evil resulting from technological innovation has been taking place for millennia, but due to the ubiquitous nature of modern media, it seems somehow both more invasive on one hand and simply the water in which we swim on the other. How should we interpret all this information? What sources bring clarity and discernment? Or should we just “turn on, tune in, drop out”? While that phrase was made popular by counterculture icon



Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980)

Timothy Leary 55 years ago, it was actually coined by one of the most important prophets of the electronic age, Canadian professor Marshall McLuhan, an enigmatic provocateur whose religious sensibilities, though hidden from plain view, fueled his probing of this indomitable subject.

The profound cultural effect that McLuhan had from 1960 to 1970 cannot be overstated. Arguably the most influential critic of that age, McLuhan’s reach extended from the academy to titans of business all the way to Hollywood. His books were bestsellers, universities competed for his attention (Fordham University paid him \$100,000 in 1967 to be a distinguished visiting professor, an amount that translates to more than \$800,000 in 2022 dollars), and Woody Allen even cast him to play himself in the 1977 movie *Annie Hall*. While McLuhan is best known for his catchy and oftentimes confusing aphorisms—“the medium is the message,” the world as “global village,” the distinction between “hot and cool” forms of media—his deep study of literature and the classics gave him access to a stream of thought that revolutionized media theory for years to come, eventually turning it into a brand-new discipline called media ecology. To top it off, McLuhan is considered the patron saint of *Wired* magazine.

He was born in 1911 in Edmonton, Alberta, into a loving, cultured family. His father owned a real estate company and his mother was becoming an accomplished voice actress; in fact, young Marshall would sometimes accompany his mother on travels

throughout Canada and the United States as she performed, memories of which he would draw on years later in his theories on oral communication. The family was loosely Protestant, influenced by both his father's Methodism and his mother's Baptist heritage. Marshall regularly attended Nassau Baptist Church while growing up, where Bible studies and Sunday school were a regular part of his education. Later in life he looked back on this stage in his religious development as being provincial and anti-intellectual. Stating that "I could never have respected a 'religion' that held reason and learning in contempt—witness the 'education' of our preachers. I have a taste for the intense cultivation of the Jesuit rather than the emotional orgies of an evangelist." He enrolled at the University of Manitoba at 17 and shortly thereafter drifted toward agnosticism, even while continuing to read Shakespeare and the Bible each night before bed and journaling extensively about his religious thoughts. It was during his postgraduate study at Cambridge that he began to explore the writings of Catholic theologians, apologists, and poets such as Thomas Aquinas, G.K. Chesterton, Jacques Maritain, T.S. Eliot, and Gerard Manley Hopkins. These studies led him into a time of serious religious reflection, culminating in his being received into the Roman Catholic Church on March 24, 1937. Regarding Chesterton, McLuhan declared: "I know every word of him: he's responsible for bringing me into the church." It was Chesterton's 1910 book,

What's Wrong with the World, that offered McLuhan a "template for how Catholicism could be both a religion and a cultural worldview." While it is fairly well known that McLuhan was a dedicated Catholic, it is far less understood how his deep-seated religious beliefs influenced his public work. If you were to do a cursory overview of his books, interviews, and popular-level writings, it would be hard to determine whether religion had anything serious to contribute to his theories at all. Nick Ripatrazone's book *Digital Communion: Marshal McLuhan's Spiritual Vision for a Virtual Age* fills in that religion gap in McLuhan studies, offering a short but trenchant overview of how deeply McLuhan's Catholic faith centered his thinking and was the ultimate foundation for the entirety of his work.

THE POWER OF TELEVISION

Digital Communion opens with Pope Paul VI's historic trip to the United States in October 1965. As the first pontiff to ever visit the Americas, his one-day tour of New York City was jam-packed: a meeting with President Lyndon B. Johnson, an address at the United Nations, and a visit to the World's Fair. More than one million people crowded along the published route to see him wave from the back of a customized Lincoln Continental, and almost 90,000 people crowded into Yankee stadium to attend Mass. But perhaps the most memorable part of the pontiff's

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G. K. Chesterton (1874 – 1936)



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visit was the unprecedented television coverage of his breezy, 14-hour tour. The major networks covered the entire affair without commercial interruption, and an estimated 100 million people watched in North America and nearly 200 million in Western Europe.

The significance of this event was momentous for several reasons and not simply for the political and theological narratives. Arguably more impactful was that it took place just 38 years after engineers at Bell Labs in Whippany, New Jersey, broadcast a short message from Herbert Hoover, then secretary of commerce, from Washington, D.C., via the nascent technology called “television,” to a group of influential business leaders in New York City. Hoover declared in his optimistic message that “all we can say today is that there has been created a marvelous agency for whatever use the future may find, with the full realization that every great and fundamental discovery of the past has been followed by use far beyond the vision of its creator.” The rapid acceleration of television’s use, and therefore power, was bound to change the world.

Ripatrazone does a masterful job of fitting McLuhan into this well-told story of rapid technological innovation, as well as showing the importance of his love of the classics (his dissertation at Cambridge focused on the Latin *trivium* and essayist Thomas Nashe) and how his Catholic faith developed the foundation for his social criticism.

Along with Chesterton, the other main Catholic influences on McLuhan were James Joyce and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Regarding Joyce, it is said that

McLuhan’s “study of media ‘began and remain[ed] rooted’ in the Irish novelist.” Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* were particularly noteworthy in McLuhan’s literary development. An internationally respected communications scholar once cornered me at the 2019 annual Media Ecology Association meeting in Toronto when he found out I hadn’t read *Finnegans Wake* and proceeded to explain that there was no way I could understand McLuhan without first digesting Joyce’s eccentric novel. Ripatrazone spends an entire chapter arguing that, “in the end, what made Hopkins and Joyce especially apt for McLuhan was their Catholicism”—and reminding us that by 1962, nine out of 10 homes had a television, thus McLuhan, being “steeped in literary and religious history, steeled by faith, and charged with an open and omnivorous mind,” was ready to move front and center into the “electronic present.” It was the relatively quick conquest of television over older forms of media that drove McLuhan forward. “Television, like language, disrupts and then reconnects image and idea. Much like the stylistic lines and sentences of Gerard Manley Hopkins and James Joyce, television was a new form of communication.” And to McLuhan, any form of new communication was simply another “extension” of the human being. In other words, he “thought of a medium as an extension of the human body or the mind: clothing extends skin, housing extends the body’s heat-regulating mechanism. The stirrup, the bicycle, and the car are all extensions of the human foot.”

And these extensions always carry consequences. To the frustration of many, McLuhan saw himself as a generalist, able to explore multiple avenues and directions with “no commitment to any theory—my own or anyone else’s.... I just sit down and start to work. I grope, I listen, I test, I accept and discard; I try out different sequences—until tumblers fall and the doors spring open.” He felt the specialist merely “stake[s] out a tiny plot of study as his intellectual turf and is oblivious to everything else.” Given his generalist ideals, he was able to investigate any and all of emerging media’s after-effects. Recorded at the zenith of his career, McLuhan’s masterful interview with Eric Norden for *Playboy* magazine in March 1969 (available in a SFW PDF online) puts on display his often complex and wide-ranging ideas. *Digital Communion* is at its best when exposing these generalist tendencies that allowed McLuhan to explore, probe, and question all sorts of connections to media and our humanity, especially our religious sensibilities. Rarely



Herbert Hoover, then secretary of commerce, in the first public demonstration of intercity television broadcasting in 1927

is McLuhan explicit in this religious exploration, yet Ripatrazone points out that he nevertheless believed that the electronic world should be of concern to “every catechist and liturgist” and that the “Church has more at stake than anybody and should set up an institute of Perennial Contemporaryness!”

After McLuhan published his first book, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), a series of critical essays on modern advertising, he rarely played the moralist. Rather than telling people what to think, he would state: “I have no point of view. I’m a person who swarms over a situation from all aspects simultaneously. I am a metaphysician of the media. That’s why I’m not interested in the moral issues.” I believe it’s such statements that lead many of McLuhan’s readers to miss the religious undertones in his writings. It is here that Ripatrazone’s research shines the brightest: unpacking the seeming contradiction between McLuhan’s own words regarding his having “no point of view” and books such as his seminal *Understanding Media* (1964), where he consistently used a religious vocabulary to explain the changes that electronic

culture was having on modern man. It’s clear that McLuhan’s works “demand a high degree of participation and involvement from the reader. They are poetic and intuitive rather than logical and analytic.” But as Ripatrazone notes, McLuhan’s own books, lectures, and television appearances “consistently employed not only religious language and references but a religious sensibility: the Catholic and particularly Jesuit-influenced view that God exists in all things.”

VIRTUAL COMMUNION?

I found the first five chapters of *Digital Communion* to be a discerning mix of thoughtful research and helpful anecdotes, guiding the reader to a more nuanced and “thick” understanding of McLuhan’s extensive religious commitments. One area of departure, or rather underdeveloped thought, was the book’s conclusion. Here the author tries to apply a McLuhanesque critique to the COVID “moment” we’ve been living in for the past two years. As a practicing Catholic,



Ripatrazone delves into the conflict that the pandemic created for churches as they increasingly moved to online services, including streamed Masses. One of the main questions parishes across the country wrestled with is: Can Holy Communion, a very physical act and the embodiment of Christ's work on the cross, be taken virtually? Anticipating some of these conversations 20 years ago, the Catholic Church created the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, which concluded that "virtual communion is unable to capture 'the incarnational reality of the sacraments and liturgy'...there are no sacraments on the Internet; and even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith." Catholics aren't alone in this struggle. Earlier this year, an online firestorm ensued after Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren wrote a January 30, 2022, *New York Times* editorial titled "Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services." Her article generated thousands of responses from Protestant circles, many of them negative. These types of questions are not easily answered, especially in an age of ever-expanding technological innovation. The speed at which change is happening outpaces the time it takes to contemplate these types of questions in any meaningful way.

So was McLuhan merely an observer or truly a critic? Ripatrazone closes with the idea that

it is precisely because McLuhan's theories were so centrally Catholic and yet doctrinally undetectable to many that he is the perfect model for a spiritual understanding of the virtual world. While more cynical critics might think McLuhan's method was a form of obfuscation, it is better to consider that McLuhan's Christian vision so fully formed his worldview that there was no need to outline the foundational theologies or doctrines that structured his assumptions. McLuhan's role was not to be an evangelist; it was to describe the changing world that he occupied and to inevitably do so as a Christian. In a secular world, that itself is significant.

Or put another way: He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

DEVELOPING HEALTHY HABITS

While for many readers, especially Christians, McLuhan might be too covert in his cultural/religious critique of media, there are many other books to choose from that dive right into clear theological reflection when it comes to technological themes. In fact, a quick Amazon search will give you dozens of options in this vein. One of the newer additions on the market that takes a decidedly overt stab at engaging modern technological questions from a generally Christian and, in this case, specifically Lutheran point of view is *Redeeming Technology: A Christian Approach to Healthy Digital Habits* by A. Trevor Sutton and Brian Smith, M.D. The blurb on the back cover permits no misunderstanding as it describes the book as offering "biblical wisdom with mental health guidance to help you rethink your technology use from a Christian perspective." The authors even include discussion questions and a "Do This, Not That" section after each chapter to offer practical action steps. This style is broadly considered to be in the religious self-help genre, created specifically to be clear, thoughtful, and immediately usable. That being said, the authors pack a lot of research into this relatively short, engaging book.

In the opening chapter, after reminding us that we check our phones nearly 100 times a day, the authors explain why they wrote the book: "As a psychiatrist and a pastor, we have observed countless examples of unhealthy, out-of-balance, and idolatrous worship of technology. As practitioners—one specializing

in mental health, the other specializing in spiritual health—we are concerned about the powerful influence that modern technology has on individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole.” The pastoral and mental health aims of the book are personal and clearly tied to their vocations. Together, the authors have seen lives devastated by technology through addiction, poor choices, and myriad other factors. Therefore their project is holistic in nature as they seek to “consider how technology negatively and positively impacts the whole person—the spirit, soul, and body.”

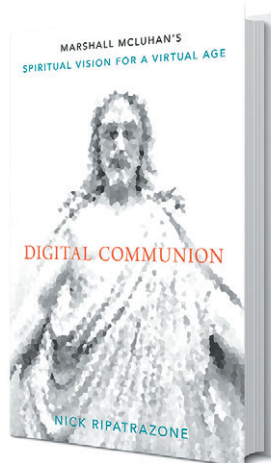
One clear strength of *Redeeming Technology* is the amount of data the authors deploy, even if briefly, to discuss and bolster their arguments. The footnotes and statistics allow for a reader to access quality sources if they want to explore the topic more on their own. Also, another general strength, especially given the target audience, is the number of biblical references and amount of theological insight woven into the distinct argument of the book. Broken into 10 succinct chapters, the authors take a survey approach to many complex topics within the field of technology and media studies. Using Jonathan Swift’s classic satire *Gulliver’s Travels* as a springboard, the authors explore the full, and often unrecognized, extent to which technology has influenced our everyday existence.

First edition of *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift (1726)



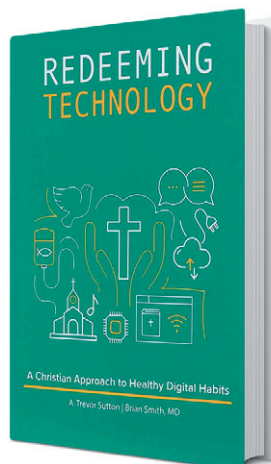
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SPIRIT, SOUL, AND BODY.’**
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Redeeming Technology lists a range of astonishing facts about the ever-increasing rates and types of modern technological consumption that should make any thoughtful reader ask, *Why are we doing this to ourselves?* That being said, the authors explain that the biblical language of redemption (thus the title of the book) offers hope when confronting even the most insidious types of captivity. I’ve already alluded to the distinction between how McLuhan approached a very similar topic and how Sutton and Smith approach it: They root their approach in theological language from the very start, stating, “Before we can use technology like Christians, we must talk about technology like Christians.” After briefly unpacking what is commonly known as the doctrine of creation, the idea that God spoke the world and everything in it into existence and declared it good, the authors show how “God charged His human creatures with the task of making new things and living creative lives.” Exploring the world and creating things is literally part of our design. Tension clearly enters this narrative when one considers the Christian knowledge of sin. As created beings marred by sin, we have the propensity to use our creative gifts for evil purposes. Using the creator/creature distinction, the authors remind us that “as creatures, we can easily confuse creation with the Creator and thereby ask too much of that which is created.” And this approach commonly leads to idolatry, worshiping the created thing rather than the Creator.



*Digital
Communion:
Marshall
McLuhan's
Spiritual Vision
for a Virtual Age*

By Nick Ripatrazone
(Fortress Press, 2022)



*Redeeming
Technology: A
Christian Approach
to Healthy
Digital Habits*

By A. Trevor Sutton
and Brian Smith, M.D.
(Concordia Publishing
House, 2021)

TECH NEUTRALITY?

It is with this basic theological foundation that they join the crowded conversation taking place all around us regarding the positive and negative aspects of technology. Is technology good or bad—or simply neutral? This is one of the core questions at the heart of technology studies. If tools are intrinsically neutral, are they then rendered good or bad in how they are used? Quoting Langdon Winner, the authors prompt us to consider that “all tools and technologies have been designed to predispose us toward certain patterns, behaviors, and consequences.” It is in this same vein that I am reminded of the Italian social theorist Paul Virilio’s profound point that “when you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck; when you invent the plane you also invent the plane crash . . . and when you invent electricity, you invent electrocution. . . . Every technology carries its own negativity, which is invented at the same time as technical progress.” The clear and necessary reminder in this section of the book should not go unheeded. Many people trumpet the overwhelming good that technology has done for the world, and while undoubtedly true, many of those same cheerleaders forget that every single technological “advance” has a tradeoff, an opportunity cost, or simply put, a negative consequence. The authors point to multiple examples of modern “creators” who ended up ruining their creation given the unforeseen, and often deleterious, ways their ideas ended up affecting society.

Why is this so easy to forget? One main reason could be the speed at which technology is progressing. In 2016 the World Economic Forum issued a statement describing the defining features of the Fourth Industrial Revolution: “There are three reasons why today’s transformations represent not merely a prolongation of the Third Industrial Revolution but rather the arrival of a Fourth and distinct one: velocity, scope, and systems impact. The speed of current breakthroughs has no historical precedent. When compared with previous industrial revolutions, the Fourth is evolving at an exponential rather than a linear pace. Moreover, it is disrupting almost every industry in every country. And the breadth and depth of these changes herald the transformation of entire systems of production, management, and governance.” The digital era is a breakneck fusion of technologies that is increasingly blurring the lines between the physical, the digital, and the biological spheres. The futurist Roy Amara would often say that “we tend to overestimate

the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run.” This pronouncement is becoming more prescient by the day and, if true, it’s logical to conclude that there isn’t a single person or sphere of life and culture that isn’t being molded right now to fit these new patterns of life.

Redeeming Technology’s chapter on beauty offers an antidote to these disconcerting questions and highlights the co-authors’ different strengths. You can see the pastoral mind at work when discussing the theological dimensions to beauty in contrast to the psychological effects of social media on modern conceptions of beauty. I found one of the more profound points in the book to be the focus on Josef Pieper’s concept of visual noise. The German philosopher died in 1997 but was very forward thinking when it came to how screens affect our common humanity. In his book *Only the Lover Sings*, “Pieper argued that rather than help us see and perceive more, televisions and screens blunt our ability to see. He wasn’t suggesting that our physiological eyesight changes; rather, we begin to lose our ability to observe God’s creation and perceive reality, both spiritually and physically.” Pieper, ever concerned about our ability to live lives that reflect what is true, good, and beautiful, offers a poignant observation that, left unheeded, will surely be to our detriment.

WORK AND CALLING

My one main critique might be minor if not ironic for a book with a Lutheran viewpoint. Near the conclusion, the authors include a short primer on Luther’s understanding of vocation and how it might be applied to the cultural moment. While the basic introduction to the theme is fine, the authors fall flat in application to the zeitgeist. Over the past 30 years, there has been an abundance of books, conferences, seminars, and institutes generated in the Protestant world attempting to define and encourage a more holistic understanding of calling and vocation. While this movement has done much to expand the definition of vocation, many of the teachings do little to consider the societal framework in which the individuals in their audiences exist. In other words, it is the aforementioned intense, systemic pace of change that is rendering these primarily individualistic teachings unhelpful. The French Christian theorist Jacques Ellul (whom the authors mention briefly) foresaw this temptation in the early 1970s and offers a critique of this truncated understanding

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of vocation in his provocative article “Work and Calling.” According to Ellul: “Work such as it is today cannot be universally upheld as a calling. At best, let us say that God can by grace and miracle cause work to be lived by man as a gift and a calling. Nonetheless, the theological rapport between vocation and work has been broken: work as such is not vocation, not a calling.” Ellul goes on to argue that raw technique and efficiency has taken over every profession (even the pastorate), so finding true “calling” in one’s work is virtually impossible. More work needs to be done here to reconcile Luther’s view and what is actually happening due to societal change.

All that being said, this book is definitely worth your time, ideally in a small-group format that welcomes sincere discussion. *Redeeming Technology* is a concise but amazingly diverse treatment of literary, biblical, and social themes that ultimately remind us that God and his world should be at the center of our lives, not our technologies. **RL**

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IN THE LIBERAL TRADITION

Francisco de Vitoria

by PAUL KENGOR

FRANCISCO DE VITORIA probably isn't a name that rolls off the lips or even vaguely registers in the minds of most, but he is worth knowing. This highly influential 16th-century Spanish Dominican priest is known as no less than the "father of international law."

Born in Burgos, Spain, in 1483, Vitoria was one of the most influential theologians of his generation. He was the founder of what became known as the "School of Salamanca," based at the University of Salamanca (founded in 1218), where he chaired the religion department from 1524 until his death in 1546. Vitoria's impact on law, theology, philosophy, and human rights is difficult to overstate.

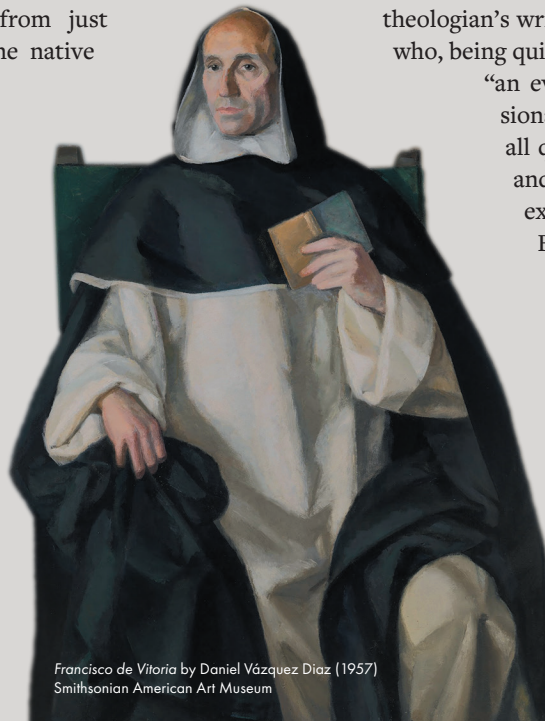
The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V regularly consulted Vitoria, who became an indispensable counsel on crucial matters dealing with the expanding Spanish Empire. Vitoria advised the emperor on everything from just war to proper treatment of the native peoples of the Americas. He insisted that the natives, despite their status, and regardless of whether they were Christians or even considered inferior, could not be deprived of their property rights. Their status should have no impact on

their natural rights to possess and use goods. They were human beings with fundamental rights based on Scripture, reason, and natural law. They were rightful owners of their property, and the Spanish Empire could not deny them. All were made in the *imago Dei*.

Vitoria borrowed from Aquinas and a Scholastic understanding of the inherent dignity of human beings, as well as the concept of *ius gentium* ("the law of nations"). His two most significant works were his *De Indis* and *De iure belli*. *De Indis* is most integral to Vitoria's defense of the rights of natives, which included their right not to be forcibly converted to the Christian faith. Like all human beings, they needed to accept the faith by their own free will, not under compulsion.

Scholar Victor Salas observes of Francisco de Vitoria that in first encountering the great theologian's writings one expects a figure who, being quintessentially Scholastic, is "an even-tempered and dispassionate intellectual who treats all questions with equanimity and is swayed only by the exigencies of reason itself."

But that is not always what one finds, as Vitoria was outraged at Spain's mistreatment of its alleged



Francisco de Vitoria by Daniel Vázquez Díaz (1957)
Smithsonian American Art Museum

“inferiors.” Salas points to correspondence on the Spanish confiscation of Peruvian property in which Vitoria expressed his disgust to his religious superior. The usually calm Vitoria fulminated: “I must tell you, after a lifetime of studies and long experience, that no business shocks me or embarrasses me more.” The “very mention [of their mistreatment] freezes the blood in my veins.”

As Salas notes, Vitoria came to the defense of the American Indians “in the only way he could,” as a Scholastic academic wielding the rich resources of the Catholic intellectual tradition, while at the same time righteously railing against the unjust violation of the intrinsic dignity of New World peoples.

In this, Vitoria differed markedly from the likes of his contemporary Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, who viewed Native Americans as almost subhuman, beyond reason and natural slaves. Sepúlveda had insisted that it is “naturally just and beneficial for both sides that men upright in virtue, intelligence, and humanity rule over inferiors.” Vitoria vehemently disagreed.

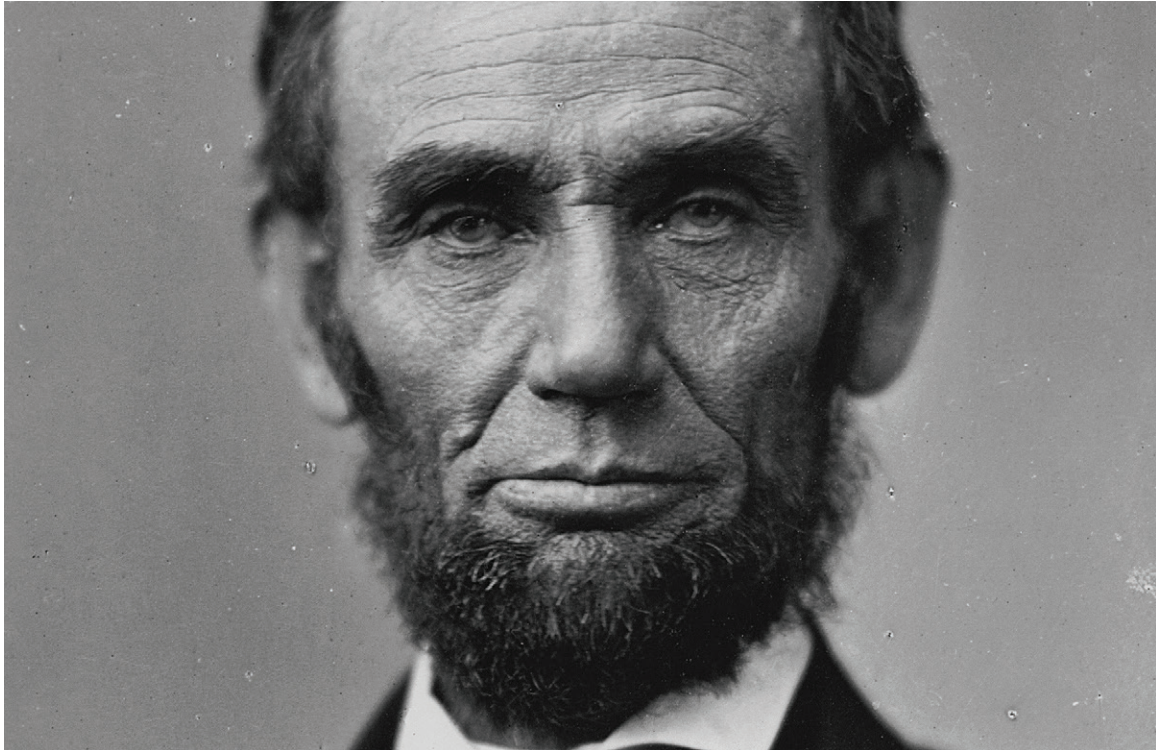
Vitoria is not without some controversy, however. Some modern scholars, such as Antony Anghie, author of *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law*, and Steven Newcomb, author of *Pagans in the Promised Land*, have taken a very different view, arguing that Vitoria’s ideas actually legitimized conquest of the natives. They assert that Vitoria’s concept of *jus gentium* meant that war could be waged against Native Americans if they resisted Christian evangelization.

That is a subject of debate, often hinging on

hair-splitting over the exact applications of just war doctrine in numerous complex situations. It was no easy task for a mere mortal, even a theologian as accomplished as Francisco de Vitoria, to forge a new way of looking at law from a truly international perspective. Many of Vitoria’s detractors are the same who begrudge the Catholic Church credit on human rights matters and are often ignorant of the church’s nuanced teachings. Vitoria today is interpreted as everything from a conservative reader of St. Thomas to a “progressive thinker” way ahead of his times in condemning what today would be regarded as racist thinking toward natives.

Yet, despite the obstacles he had to overcome, struggling to operate under the societal pressures and within the standards of his day, Vitoria has had a profound influence on law and philosophy. His work was carried on by other church notables who picked up his mantle, particularly fellow Dominicans Melchor Cano (1509–1560) and Dominic de Soto (1494–1560). Their renowned School of Salamanca would play a crucial historical role in the development of law, theology, and philosophy beyond the walls of the church. In the evolution of the recognition of basic human rights and international law, Francisco de Vitoria was an early and significant freedom fighter—yes, within the liberal tradition. **RL**

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Lessons in Thoughtful Statesmanship

Through capsule biographies of great statesmen-thinkers, Daniel J. Mahoney provides examples of the very virtues that can cure what ails the American body politic.

by YUVAL LEVIN

WE INHABIT A POLITICAL MOMENT that refuses to be taken seriously. Every attempt to take up the genuine challenges our country confronts is obstructed by a stubborn combination of crude cynicism and bitter factionalism. Every appeal to the unifying ideals of the American experience is met with ignorant ingratitude or histrionic despair. We tell the young they are inheriting a garbage heap and then are surprised they want to throw their heritage away. We tell our leaders we want entertainment and then are shocked when they behave like clowns. We confront a vacuum of civic virtue and a dearth of responsible leadership.

It's hard to know where to begin in taking on such daunting problems. But what if our failure to take our common life seriously is as much a cause as an effect

of these civic deformations? What if the place to start is by changing our attitude about the political?

This is the implicit premise of Daniel Mahoney's brilliant new book, *The Statesman as Thinker*. On its face the book is an engaging and illuminating study in the highest forms of political leadership. But in its depths it is a call to make some room for an idea of greatness amid our democratic din, and to grasp that political greatness in a free society demands moderation and magnanimity rather than vulgar self-indulgence pretending to be strength.

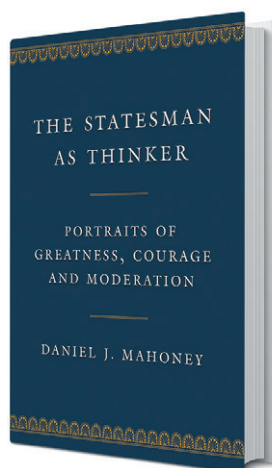
Such greatness may need to come from above before it can come from below. The vices of democracy are not likely to be best counterbalanced by the democratic multitude to begin with. But a society like ours might learn to take itself more seriously through

the leadership of statesmen who take it seriously themselves. And what makes such statesmen possible is above all a particular kind of character—a mix of virtues that is Mahoney’s foremost subject.

To speak of a statesman is unavoidably to sound old-fashioned and out of place, and this is exactly why Mahoney does it. But “statesman” is not just an antiquated way to say “politician” or “leader.” Mahoney has a particular meaning in mind, especially as his subjects are statesmen who were also thinkers. The book’s focus, as Mahoney puts it, is “on those rare and admirable souls who embodied magnanimity tempered by moderation, who embodied the cardinal virtues in a morally serious and realistic way, and whose rare combination of thought and action partook of the philosophical.”

The “rare” in that description is clearly an understatement. The book takes up Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, and Václav Havel, with significant additional discussions of Pericles, Cicero, George Washington, Nelson Mandela, and a few other leaders and thinkers. These are thoroughly exceptional people who led their countrymen in exceptional moments of crisis and need.

Mahoney tells their stories through capsule biographies, with each chapter taking up a particular statesman-thinker. And he observes them through the lens of secondary sources, generally one or two key academic or popular biographies with which each chapter is in conversation. This mode is a little disorienting at first, as each chapter functions as not



The Statesman as Thinker: Portraits of Greatness, Courage, and Moderation

By Daniel J. Mahoney
(Encounter Books, 2022)

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only a profile but also a kind of book review. But it enables Mahoney to engage one or two key scholars of each of his subjects in ways that clarify his purpose and his point. In some cases, he very much approves of the sources he takes up, as with Greg Weiner’s *Old Whigs*, which comes up in Mahoney’s discussions of both Burke and Lincoln. But in other cases, he critiques the scholars he leans upon, as with Hugh Brogan’s *Alexis de Tocqueville: A Life*, which Mahoney deems far too committed to egalitarian platitudes and therefore “woefully unsuccessful” in capturing Tocqueville’s character and ideas.

And it is on the character and ideas of each of his subjects that Mahoney dwells in particular. He offers quick surveys of their notable deeds but spends most of his time delving into the sort of person that each of them was—with special attention to temperament, prudence, moderation, judgment, and religious faith.

In most of these respects, Mahoney offers an Aristotelian ideal of the statesman, focused on core virtues that are each understood as lodged halfway between two vices and therefore as calling upon both boldness and restraint. But with his focus on religion, Mahoney goes even deeper and suggests that statesmanship of the sort he outlines is really only possible in a broadly Christian context. Not all his subjects were religious men, strictly speaking, but he argues persuasively that all had theotropic souls and drew



The Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries by Jacques-Louis David (1812)



Portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart (1803)

their confidence and greatness from wells deeper than their personal ambition.

This is an especially important insight for our times, since it suggests that genuine statesmanship calls for a person not shaped exclusively by our democracy but rather able also to call upon older and more profound sources of formation. The universities of the West used to be able to offer both Christian and pagan paths toward these deep roots of virtue, and several of Mahoney's subjects were clearly shaped by such learning. But today our universities generally no longer offer us "the counter-poison to mass culture," as a great teacher once put it. They are instead arenas for full and unabashed participation in that culture, and indeed are home to its most radical wing, and so are far less capable of offsetting its vices.

One of Mahoney's subjects, Abraham Lincoln, managed somehow to school himself in decidedly premodern modes of character and judgment without the aid of much formal education. Maybe we can hope that future statesmen could do the same, but hoping for another Lincoln hardly seems practical. Rather, it is much more likely that any genuine thinker-statesman in our time will be a product of religious formation—and more specifically, given the particular contours of our society, that he will be a serious Christian. Such formation is uncommon too, of course, but great statesmen are always uncommon. What matters is that some institutions willing to be forthrightly countercultural do teach the virtues as if they were virtues and imbue young people with both gratitude and boldness. Those who persist in such work in our day may be found mostly in tradition-minded religious communities.

This points to a further lesson illuminated by Mahoney's mode of argument. His subtitle—"portraits of greatness, courage, and moderation"—is intentionally provocative and paradoxical. Are great men really moderate? Mahoney answers decisively that they are. He contrasts, for instance, the characters of Napoleon and George Washington, and suggests that only Washington was truly a noble statesman in the end, as Napoleon embodied, in Mahoney's telling, "greatness without moderation."

Moderation is always the most challenging of the statesman's virtues, because it requires restraint of people with the capacity to act boldly. And moderation is all the more difficult in democratic times, because in such times it calls not only for restraining elite action but also for restraining public passions—or at least for satisfying public demands in only partial ways. Indeed, the absence of moderation may be the most important and most consequential of our civic vices in this moment, and the one that most urgently calls for leadership by thoughtful statesmen.

Moderation of this sort is not a mode of action but a character trait. And in the end Mahoney's profiles teach us that the same is true of greatness and courage. They describe human individuals, not a style of leadership. Each of the profiles that compose the book is a character study, inquiring into the influences that formed a great man: his family life and his friendships, his attitude toward his country, the place of philosophy and of religion in his thinking, the nature of his passion and ambitions, and the kind of disposition with which he approached his significant place in the world. Each implies that character is destiny and that a leader of truly great character can lift up the destiny of an entire nation.

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This only further highlights the depths of the difficulty we confront now, as our culture works incessantly to obstruct the formation of the kind of character Mahoney celebrates, and to mock the virtues he would have us champion. A great statesman always stands apart some from the mainstream of his culture, but in our time the capacity to stand apart, far from the tweeting crowd, is harder than ever to muster. Our egalitarianism, for all its virtues, devalues such distance and scorns the desire for it.

This is not a new problem. And in taking it up, Mahoney is working in the great tradition of some of the very thinkers to whom he calls our attention. In fact, Mahoney’s own project in this book is perhaps best articulated in his description of Tocqueville’s purpose: “This conservative-minded liberal was a party of one,” Mahoney writes, “rejecting both the perils of socialist servitude and the temptation of conservative authoritarianism.” Rather than either of those, Tocqueville’s writing suggests a man “loyal to his principles, and committed to a future where liberty and a modicum of greatness might coexist.”

This is precisely the vision underlying Mahoney’s own work, and precisely the vision necessary to enable our society to take itself seriously again. Mahoney, following Aristotle, describes the political life of a free society as “a humanizing arena for moderating conflict and pursuing the civic common good.” This is not how most Americans would be likely to describe our politics now, but it is how we should all understand it, and seek to engage in it.

The resources to reach that understanding are available to us, as Mahoney seeks to show. They are present in the living tradition we inherit as Americans. But inheritance is an active process, and it requires a willingness to appreciate that modicum of greatness present in the statesmen of our past, to admire it, and to be grateful for it in a way that might allow it to form our own characters and souls and those of our leaders. Mahoney is most impassioned when making the case for this kind of openness, as he does at a number of points in the book, and when pointing out the shallowness and the ingratitude of what he calls today’s “highly ideologized climate marked by collective self-loathing and an unremitting desire to repudiate the inheritance of the past.” In such a culture, Mahoney continues, “ingratitude becomes inseparable from vulgar and destructive nihilism.” In the end Mahoney’s learned, thoughtful, and enlightening book is an antidote to such nihilism and a recipe for a more proper disposition toward our common life.

That disposition is not utopian. On the contrary, it is very realistic. “It remains our obligation to reaffirm the real in a spirit of gratitude for what has been passed on by our forebears as a precious gift,” Mahoney argues. To cure what ails us, we must have some idea of what health looks like, and that is what this book provides.

Grasping what the highest sort of statesmanship involves is not the same as bringing it into being, of course. Real greatness is inherently rare and fleeting. “Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm,” as James Madison warned, and we are lucky to possess a system of government that does not depend upon their being at the helm in every moment. We should not envy the America of the mid-19th century, which required a Lincoln to arise in order for it to survive. That society was horribly broken in many ways that we are not. But we should be aware that we are in some ways broken, too, and that we could benefit from thoughtful statesmanship of a sort that will not arise if we are not open to it, aware of its nature, and ready to allow it to moderate our democratic passions and excesses.

We should recognize, in other words, that the politics of a free society is a weighty endeavor that deserves to be taken seriously. **RL**

Yuval Levin is director of Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and the editor of National Affairs.



Confronting the State with the Person

When natural justice and supernatural charity are confused, the state is virtually deified and social justice is reduced to a mere catchphrase. *The Greater Reset* tries to school our political and finance elites on the perils of a perennial heresy.

by R.J. SNELL

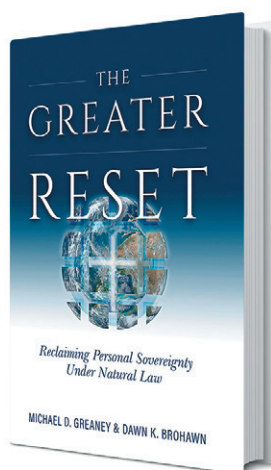
THIS CLEVERLY TITLED BOOK begins with a discussion of the so-called Great Reset associated with Klaus Schwab and the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland, at which the global elite of business, government, finance, and nongovernmental organizations speculate on major challenges to the global order and their solutions. Somewhat boringly, the best and brightest parrot the usual bromides about equity, justice, the rich paying “their fair share,” sustainability, and climate change with such frequency that one might be forgiven for rolling one’s eyes and ignoring their pretensions. However, Michael D. Greaney and Dawn K. Brohawn of the Center for Economic and Social Justice here suggest that the Great Reset is nothing other than the newest iteration of totalitarian socialism. Couched behind the buzzwords of *stakeholder*

capitalism, environmentalism, and social development is a “rehash of the same old corrupting, power-concentrating systems of both collective socialism and individualistic capitalism” that led us into the social and economic crises in which we find ourselves.

The “Greater Reset” proposed by Greaney and Brohawn denies that poverty and inequity are inevitable, and thus hope for better, but conclude they will be worsened by the dreams of Davos, all of which will undermine private property, human dignity, and freedom. Instead, a framework of natural law and Thomistic personalism, such as proposed by figures such as Leo XIII, John Paul II, Louis Kelso, and Mortimer Adler, would allow a genuine “reset” in keeping with the dignity of the person, what the authors call their “Personalist Proposal.”

A perusal of the dust jacket and introduction might cause the reader to conclude that the book will be an investigation and exposé of the World Economic Forum; it is not, however. The topic reappears throughout, generally in an abrupt and brief paragraph shoehorned awkwardly into another topic, almost as if the authors were reminding themselves to mention the Great Reset, before returning to their main interest: how principles of natural justice were replaced with a supernatural vision of charity infused into politics. In the end, the book provides an interesting, if underdeveloped, history of the emergence and misinterpretation of Catholic social teaching, but placing this in the context of the Great Reset is mostly a distraction.

The first chapters are a disservice to the book, unfortunately. Reading like notes accompanying a PowerPoint presentation, they are unorganized, poorly written, and full of assertions and unexplained claims. Headings and subheadings proliferate, with some topics raised and then abandoned in a paragraph or two before turning to another, not obviously related discussion. Schwab's proposals are given a perfunctory summary and rejected for violating the natural law or the dignity of the person, with somewhat random bullet points standing in place of more serious argumentation. While purporting to explain how the human attempts to supplant God and create the kingdom of God on earth, the first third of the book instead provides a largely unorganized and nonsystematic barrage of claims and objections about Keynesian economics, theology, Polish personalism, labor and technology, wealth disparity, natural law, the purpose of money, inflation, the Panama Papers,



***The Greater Reset:
Reclaiming Personal
Sovereignty Under
Natural Law***

By Michael D. Greaney
and Dawn K. Brohawn
(TAN Books, 2022)



L'Abbé (Félicité Robert) de Lamennais (1782 – 1854),
portrait by Jean-Baptiste Paulin Guérin (1826)

Dorothy Day, G.K. Chesterton, justice, and human dignity. That is, the first 97 pages of the book are chaotic. This reader, for instance, was very close to setting down the book for good.

It's a shame that the opening chapters do such disservice to the book, and likely will be the occasion of many readers not arriving at chapter 3, where the book actually begins and becomes interesting. Alas, occasionally the spirit of the opening pages appears in the later chapters, but the central chapters of the book reveal Greaney and Brohawn in stride. Here they suggest a hermeneutical key to centuries of debate—namely, that in an excess of charity, the natural and supernatural orders became inverted, and the natural law principles of justice are overlooked in favor of the supernatural laws of faith and charity. This error, which could generically be termed “modernism” but that is more precisely described as “ultrasupernaturalism,” absorbs nature into the supernatural, thus distorting both. It is, in the words of Ronald Knox, quoted by the authors, “an excess of charity [that] threatens unity.”

Rather than nature and natural law maintaining their integrity, an integrity true and applicable to all people given their shared nature, ultrasupernaturalism does not follow the Thomistic view that grace

presupposes and perfects nature but has faith and charity supplant reason and justice. When faith supplants reason in the natural order, opinion, especially the opinion of the elite, the vanguard, the enlightened, is authoritative, and doctrines and principles are held or rejected not for their truth or falsity but for their usefulness or inconvenience to the project, to what the elite are attempting to construct and create. Similarly, charity jettisons the norms of justice, which to charity's eyes seem too moderate, too inclined to allow freedom and imperfection, and demands perfection, insisting that any politics other than the kingdom of heaven on earth, immediately, is inadequate. Enthusiasm and irrational utopian dreams cannot but follow. Further, voluntarism is embedded in all this. Reason is not only replaced by passion, but this results in a "self-directed faith based on personal opinion"—in short, modernism.

Greaney and Brohawn do not leave such claims in the abstract, and the strength of the book is as a history text. They rightly note the weakness of the church's response to the French Revolution as well as to the Industrial Revolution, that is, the church's inability to articulate a compelling vision to changed social, political, and economic realities. Pope Pius VII had started some needed reforms in the Papal States, which stalled out through the pontificates of Leo XII and Pius VIII. Consequently, Gregory XVI encountered social and political confusion, as well as the philosophical and theological innovations of the "new religion," or the "Democratic Religion" as promoted by men such as Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, and Charles Fourier. Nor was all well within the church, and Gregory considered the greatest threat to come from L'Abbé de Lamennais, the founder, according to Greaney and Brohawn, of social Catholicism. For Lamennais, it was not grace that perfected the individual but rather collective humanity was to be saved by establishing the kingdom of God on earth. Against Lamennais and his allies, Gregory wrote in 1832 what the authors call the first social encyclical, *Mirari Vos*, "On Liberalism and Religious Indifferentism," largely targeting collectivism of various sorts.

Gregory XVI countered the new religion with Thomism as well, so that sound philosophy and normal principles of natural justice would have their rightful place. An aspect of that revival was the work of Luigi Taparelli, the Jesuit who first appropriated the term "social justice" for Catholic thought, although he meant a natural law principle known to reason as a guide to the reforming of human

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institutions. Eventually, this concern for reason was emphasized at the First Vatican Council, best understood, according to Greaney and Brohawn, as insisting on the primacy of intellect in natural matters.

While the context and protagonists change, Greaney and Brohawn identify a similar battle against ultrasupernaturalism in the British and American contexts. In Britain, Chesterton, Belloc, and the Distributists struggled against George Bernard Shaw, while in the United States Fulton Sheen and others contended with Henry George, Edward McGlynn, and John Augustine Ryan. Despite their attempts, and those of Heinrich Pesch in Germany, Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* became interpreted against its true meaning, especially in the United States, and it became a matter of course to interpret Catholic social teaching in a quasi-socialist manner. The authentic teaching of the popes, of the tradition, and of natural law



Pope John Paul II, 1984

itself was subverted, with grave results for doctrine, discipline, and political alignment. Consumption of goods is not sufficient for an economy, and an equal distribution of consumables overlooks the basic fact that goods must first be produced to be consumed, and ownership and productivity is needed for self-determination and equity.

The final chapters break apart somewhat in their organization and structure, albeit not as badly as the book's opening third. Three major aspects stand out. First is the development within the church's understanding of the relationship between general and particular justice and general and particular virtue. It was long understood that legal justice was a general virtue, something like a disposition to the good of law and society in general, and with all that follows. Social justice, suggested the dissenters, was a particular virtue directed to individuals and their good, thus always demanding the bettering of their material conditions. Not so, concluded Pius XI, for social justice was directed to the common good, not directly the good of individuals, and brings about civil society and the network of institutions in and through which individuals realize their particular good. That is, social justice could be saved from crass materialism, utilitarianism, and the paternalism it so often falls prey to, and instead allow for individual freedom and the necessity of individual virtue, as is required for human dignity.

Second, the authors rightly articulate the importance of Thomistic personalism, especially in the thought of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II, which insists on the personal dignity and self-governance of the individual while allowing for a proper sense of

community and solidarity. Personalism is less an academic philosophy in competition with other philosophies and more a stance or insistence that any and all philosophies, as well as any social forms and politics, are judged against the personalist principle of the irreducible dignity and value of the human being, who is unlike any other aspect of creation in not being a thing, an object, or even merely an essence. Thus, there is a sharp binary in economics and politics, namely, that persons must be self-governed and free, never merely a project, and never adequately understood by the utilitarian calculus.

Third, despite their admiration for the popes and scholars advocating for the natural law position, Greaney and Brohawn acknowledge that a weakness or omission in the social encyclicals made them appear weaker and less applicable than they might have been. Too often the encyclicals properly promoted ownership and self-determination but overlooked the capacity of credit in creating ownership. If ownership depends upon past savings, then only those already with savings will join the ownership class. But if ownership can be based on future savings, that is, the potential earnings of an enterprise, then credit in fact allows ownership and drastically increases the numbers of those who can become owners, with all the goods that follow from ownership of capital. Too often the natural law theorists overlooked this fact, and thus could not deliver the details of how to move people from dependence or wages only into the freedom that accompanies owning productive property.

In the end, the book is an interesting mess that is nothing quite like it is advertised, not really about the Great Reset. In fact, the parts most like the advertising are extremely weak, best skipped over, and the economic proposals, too, are somewhat random and asserted without anything like sufficient discussion or evidence. The central sections, however, provide a rich historical account of a theological error with grave implications and the struggle of many to correct that error, although that error—irrationally replacing justice with the supernatural demands of charity—remains alive and well in the Great Reset and fevered dreams of its proponents. Some heresies refuse to die. **RL**

R.J. Snell is director of academic programs for the Witherspoon Institute in Princeton, N.J.



Are the New “Puritans” Really Like the OG Puritans?

A new book by Noah Rothman draws a comparison between the Puritans of the 17th century and today’s language and culture scolds. But does the equivalence hold up beyond superficial similarities?

by **SAMUEL GOLDMAN**

HENRY LOUIS MENCKEN, America’s greatest raconteur journalist, famously described Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone somewhere is having a good time.” In his essay “Puritanism as a Literary Force,” Mencken extended the argument, blaming this fear for deforming national culture. Americans, Mencken argued, habitually confused intellectual and aesthetic judgments with moral ones. Insistence that the true and the beautiful must be synonymous with the good not only stunted domestic genius but also prevented appreciation of superior foreign imports.

Mencken’s description of the narrowness of the American mind now seems distant. Our arts, letters,

and other media show few obvious traces of Puritan restraint. Mencken lamented that Americans were too prudish to recognize the achievements of Dreiser or Ibsen. Confronted with the exhibitionist contents of TikTok or other social media platforms, he might wish some of the old inhibitions remained.

The decline of traditional standards of intelligence, decency, and good taste, however, is deceptive. We’ve become more comfortable with coarse language, graphic violence, and bitter criticism of venerable institutions. But violations of political and sexual etiquette still provoke outrage, ostracism, and boycotts, if no longer the legal penalties Mencken

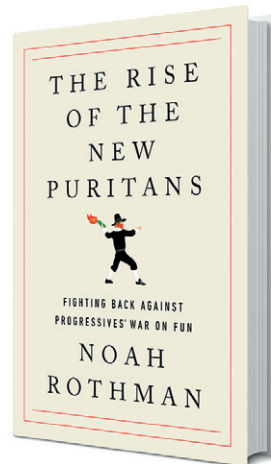
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abhorred. Mencken, who died in 1956, missed the term “cancel culture” by several generations. But he’d likely recognize a mutation of the same impulse that he described as Puritanism.

It’s not clear, though, how much such tendencies owe to the form of Christian dissent that encouraged the settlement of New England—and, indirectly, the establishment of the United States. In *The Rise of the New Puritans*, journalist Noah Rothman tries to show that they have more in common than a pithy description. Drawing on the work of historian Michael Winship, political scientist George McKenna, and other scholars, Rothman contends that there is at least an elective affinity between the old Puritans and their putative successors. The New Puritans might not believe in God, the church, or the immortal soul. But they, too, judge human affairs by rigorous, specific, and, to many outsiders, alienating standards of conduct.



*The Rise of the New
Puritans: Fighting
Back Against
Progressives’
War on Fun*

By Noah Rothman
(Broadside Books, 2022)

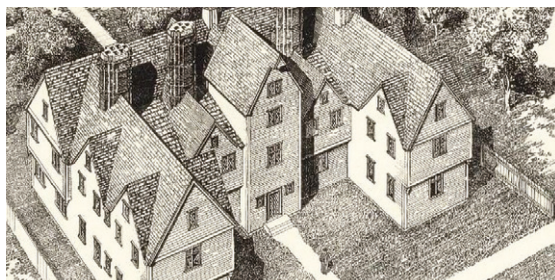
At a sufficient level of abstraction, the comparison is not implausible. Rather than presenting a full genealogy, *The Rise of the New Puritans* is organized around a set of personal and social virtues that early modern Protestants and 21st-century progressives ostensibly share. They include habits of self-scrutiny for the possibility of fault, suspicion of nonpurposive activity, an aspiration to establish a perfected society. Although Rothman does not claim that his various targets display all these qualities to the same degree, it’s not hard for him to show that they’re widespread in a milieu concentrated in education, legacy media, and arts institutions. Like Mencken, Rothman sees modern puritanism less as an expression of outright philistinism than a kind of prissy super-refinement typical of the upper middle class.

Although Rothman does not emphasize them, he can also point to institutional continuities between the original Puritanism and its descendants. Many of America’s colonial universities were founded by Puritans to produce ministers capable of sustaining a republic at home and preaching the gospel to heathens. They slowly drifted toward more secular purposes and faced heightened competition at home and abroad, but initially Puritan institutions concentrated in New England retained disproportionate status in higher education. From that citadel, they extended their influence over what used to be called the learned professions as well as lower levels of instruction. Rothman observes the irony of the 2017 decision by Harvard University to remove the line “till the stock of the Puritans die” from the college hymn. Even as they were rejecting the institution’s founders and historical constituency, Harvard’s leaders embraced those old WASPs’ vision of college as a moral exemplar to the nation and world.

It's possible to make too much of such parallels, though. Historical Puritanism had important practical dimensions. Above all, though, it was a religious movement that treated the affairs of this world as radically inferior to matters of the next. This dimension of Puritanism tends to get lost in associations of the term with a restrictive disposition. Indeed, as Rothman admits, the actual Puritans were somewhat less prudish than the reputation they acquired from subsequent critics, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mencken, and later Arthur Miller. An account of Puritanism that said less about their attitudes toward sports and clothes and more about their theology and ecclesiology makes any analogy to the present less compelling. Toward the middle of the 20th century, the historian Perry Miller and his many students tried to redeem the Puritans from their cultured despisers by asserting their centrality to the subsequent course of American and world history. But as Yale professor Harry S. Stout and other critics have pointed out, what's most noticeable when you read Puritan sources at length is how distant most are to modern, secular concerns.

Nor were the Puritans the only ones to dabble in moral perfectionism, political utopianism, or cultural austerity. Many of the same qualities were present in Christian millenarian movements, as well as in subsequent brands of secular radicalism. The militant republicans of the French Revolution and dedicated cadres of various Marxist states could be described as "puritan" with perhaps more justice than the affluent homeowner with a Prius in the driveway, NPR on the radio, and a Black Lives Matter sign in the yard. Rather than a specific inheritance from Puritanism, it makes more sense to see the quest to fully redeem a corrupt society as a perennial temptation that has been expressed in many different ways at different places and times. But "the new moralists" or "the new revolutionaries" may be less catchy titles.

Harvard College's first building (1638 – 1670)



A Marxist reader would have a point, moreover, in noting the absence of material causes from Rothman's analysis. It's not a coincidence, as Marxists once liked to say, that many of the excesses Rothman describes are drawn from the overlapping spheres of journalism, the culture industry, and higher education. These are all fields that combine high status with relatively low pay and diminishing job security. Under these conditions, accusations of racism, sexism, or other sins aren't just expressions of sincere, if perhaps exaggerated, outrage (although in some cases they are). They're also a tactic, used consciously or otherwise, to create new jobs, eliminate competitors for existing positions, and shift the balance of power within the institution.

There's a gender dimension to these conflicts as well as an economic one. The examples of the new puritanism that Rothman describes disproportionately involve women or occur in fields or institutions that are increasingly female dominated. This is a contrast to the original Puritans, whose conception of good order was no less patriarchal than most of their contemporaries (as Anne Hutchinson found out). The closer parallel, perhaps, is to Victorian-era campaigns against alcohol and sexual license. In that time as well as ours, changes that advocates saw as promoting decency and harmony were seen by critics as imposing feminized expectations and preferences in ways that constrained traditional male freedoms.

In sum: Rothman offers an amusing and appropriately scathing survey of the censorious mood that has gripped much of America's upper middle class, especially the elements clustered around the nonprofit industrial complex. Some expressions of that mood, like controversies in food and sports journalism, are not very significant in themselves. Others, like the censorship of controversial books and arguments from major vendors and social media, are more threatening to the future of a democratic republic. The influence of the Puritans of New England, who contributed so much to American institutions and culture, may be part of the cause for the most recent outbreak of these sensitivities, which seem far less common in countries with a different religious inheritance. But it's hard to believe they are the primary one. **RL**

Samuel Goldman is an associate professor of political science at George Washington University.



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Providential Deliverance of John Wesley from Fire by Henry Perlee Parker (1709)

Methods Out of Madness

As the United Methodist Church fractures, the future for more traditional Methodist congregations will depend on their ability to wed biblical, Wesleyan, and disciplinary principles into a coherent whole as overseen by faithful bishops. There is still much work to be done.

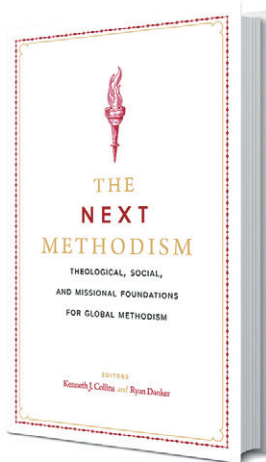
by BEN WITHERINGTON

IN HIS FAMOUS POEM “The Second Coming,” W.B. Yeats warns about what happens when a society, or in our case a church, descends into anarchy and lawlessness:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

Since well before the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, there have been seismic tremors that something

big was about to happen to the largest Methodist denomination in the world, The United Methodist Church (UMC), and it was not going to be pretty. Some began to talk quietly and angrily about *schism*, but the term schism hardly seemed appropriate. A particular Protestant denomination does not constitute the “catholic church, apostolic and universal” but rather one minority subsection of the universal church. When individuals or churches change affiliation from one Christian denomination to another, this is merely an example of sheep shift, not schism, especially when those individuals and/or churches have not been unfaithful to the biblical witness about marriage, sexuality, and ordination, or to the creeds and confessions of the universal church—or even to the United Methodist Book of Discipline’s standards on such matters.



The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism

Edited by Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker

(Seedbed, 2022)

What has happened is that the “centre” cannot hold in the UMC, and mere anarchy has been produced even by bishops who have violated the disciplinary standards in regard to marriage and ordination, with whole conferences refusing to abide by the rules about disciplining clergy who also are violating these standards—standards about sexual behavior and marriage that were once again reaffirmed at the special General Conference of 2019. And now the committee in charge of organizing General Conferences has declared that the next General Conference will be held in 2024. The Judicial Council will need to decide whether this will involve a whole new slate of delegates or the same ones elected for the postponed 2020 General Conference. Stay tuned.

The General Conference, typically a ceremony of innocence and cooperation and collegiality, even when there are differences of views, has been overwhelmed by the happenings of the past three years or so. There is nothing whatsoever Christian about acts of defiance of our moral standards. It is just further evidence that the covenant has been broken again and again by the progressives who bizarrely think they are standing on the higher moral ground in doing so. To all this I ask: What would Jesus, who declares in Matthew 19 that his standards for all his disciples are heterosexual monogamy in marriage or celibacy in singleness, say about all this? I suspect he would be profoundly ashamed of this United Methodist Church.

Were not the political maneuverings in pursuit of covenant-breaking depressing enough, most recently

there was a “worship” service at Duke Divinity School where God, who is Spirit and not within the spectrum of human gender identity, was called The Holy and Queer One. I’m sure that Bishop Goodson, who ordained me and for whom that chapel is named, is rolling over in his grave, crying out “Blasphemy and idolatry!” Certainly for many thousands of us in worldwide Methodism, we are ready to say, “Enough with the church baptizing the current ‘woke’ cultural trends and calling them good, much less godly.” John Wesley, the man who wrote “Thoughts upon Celibacy,” which is the behavior he expected of all Methodists outside the context of heterosexual monogamy, is doubtless deeply disappointed in what has been happening in the UMC.

In the wake of all this came the pronouncement that the Global Methodist Church had officially launched on May 1 of this year, and not surprisingly a large collection of essays has appeared in preparation for what’s next, appropriately entitled *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*. The volume is primarily aspirational in character, reflecting what various prominent scholars, pastors, and laypersons hope will be the more biblical and Wesleyan character of Global Methodism going forward. Of course the question to be asked is: Who’s going to decide how and whether these various hopes and dreams are actually implemented in the new Methodist Church being formed? Inquiring minds want to know, especially since there are already a variety of opinions on the crucial practical issues.

Like any collection of essays, some in *The Next Methodism* are more salient and on target than others, but all of them appear to share a deep concern that the UMC has gone badly astray in regard to appropriate human sexual expression, marriage, and ordination. The hope shared is that, in these matters and many others, the Global Methodist Church, or at least some future form of the UMC, will be an example of a genuinely more biblical and Wesleyan approach to Methodism.

In what follows, I want to highlight some of the more telling points brought forward in this volume, noting the broad spectrum represented of the orthodox, traditionalists, and evangelicals in the UMC—men and women, African and Asian and Caucasian, laity and clergy (including some bishops). None of these otherwise diverse group of essays were written by any of the main leaders of the Good News movement within the UMC, which represents the more

“conservative” faction within the denomination. No, this volume represents a much broader spectrum of Methodists, and that is a good thing.

The scope of articles is impressive—ranging from how Methodists should approach and use the Bible and better appropriate our Wesleyan theology and ethics, to a vision of evangelism and missions in the “Next Methodism,” dealing with besetting sins such as racism and sexism, embracing the spiritual gifts the Bible mentions, and so much more. The 35 articles are all clearly written and succinct, most being about 10 pages in length. It is *must* reading for those who care about the future of Methodism both in the U.S. and worldwide.

In this present climate two of the more important essays are those by Timothy Tennent on having a proper theology of the body, not a gnostic one (i.e., when it comes to one’s gender identity, the X and Y chromosomes do not lie and the body provides a crucial part of our identity now and in eternity), and James Thobaben on “The Sexual Ethics of the Body of Christ” (critiquing “the non-scientific assertion that mammals [including humans] do not have intrinsic sexuality” and the denial of “the biological reality of primates having two sexes”).

While there are very fine essays by Joel Green and David Watson on a proper approach to the Bible and its teaching and preaching in Methodism, honestly we could have used many more of that sort and fewer on the history of Methodism. After all, it is the Bible, as Wesley said, we should be preaching, not our church history. As for the sacraments, both baptism and the Lord’s Supper should focus on the death of Christ on the cross (see Rom. 6 and 1 Cor. 11), not later theologies of grace or renewal or making a good confession when one comes of age. As sociologists have long stressed, the central rituals of a religious group reflect the most crucial theological foci of that group—in this case, union and communion with Christ. Methodists need a much better grounding in the meaning of the atoning death of Christ as a ransom for the many, and in what St. Paul means when he describes the death and burial of the old sinful self as when one is buried with Christ in baptism. But for that theological awakening to transpire, one would first have to believe in the lostness and sinfulness of humankind and the need for actual redemption, not mere consciousness raising. In short, a theology of creation and redemption without a theology of human fallenness and sin and their effects even on our physical bodies is a nonstarter if Methodist

renewal is going to happen. One cannot simply assume “If I was born with these inclinations and desires, therefore they must be good, and therefore they must be from God.” Not according to either the Bible or Wesleyan theology.

A few highlights of this book are worth stressing. For example, Billy Abraham writes, “The most striking feature of the proposed doctrinal commitments of the Global Methodist Church is the addition of the great creeds of the church.” Under the heading the “Problem of Love Apart from Holiness,” Ken Collins reminds us that “when much of the vocabulary of the church has been redefined in terms of powerful social, cultural, and political currents then this is solid evidence that the regrettable event of narrative displacement has indeed occurred.” In his critique of modern assumptions, Bill Arnold stresses that the greatest lie of modernity is that we are “*Homo autonomus*, the self-sufficient, self-ruling, and autonomous human beings who are capable of controlling our own destiny.... Our world around us believes there is no higher virtue, no greater attribute than the radically free and independent, self-reliant, and self-sufficient human being.” This is coupled with the lie “that the Holy Spirit of God directs society gradually—progressively—into ethical convictions that *contradict and overturn* former truths taught in the Bible. Yet the Holy Spirit always and everywhere comes to make people holy.” Suzanne Nicholson quotes Kenda Creasy Dean, who notes that many American teens have replaced orthodox theology with the oft-cited “moralist therapeutic deism,” a belief in a god who wants people to be nice to each other and live a happy life. “This adherence to a do-good, feel-good spirituality . . . has little to do with the Triune God of Christian tradition and even less with loving Jesus enough to follow him into the world.” And L. Fitzgerald Lovett stresses, “When it comes to racism, the church must be pro-active, or anti-racist.”

It is important and telling that the quote that comes up the most in these various essays is the famous remarks about John Wesley’s fear that, while Methodism will not cease to exist, it could well become a dead sect if it does not hold fast to the biblical doctrine, spirit, and discipline that characterized the beginning of the Methodist movement. And in fact, that is exactly what has happened. The UMC has been losing members in the 21st century faster than the speed of light. And no, this is not mainly because

the recent pandemic has kept people away from in-person church attendance. It is because the United Methodist Church has too often not been faithful to its biblical, Wesleyan, and disciplinary foundations.

Let's be clear. This volume is not written by a bunch of traditionalists fervently praying that next year will be 1950 all over again. As Bishop Lowry says in his helpful essay: "When the horse is dead, dismount." Neither a bygone past nor a fantasized social justice utopia can slake the deep hunger of a spiritually impoverished society." No, *The Next Methodism* is very much forward-looking and well grounded in our biblical, apostolic, and Wesleyan faith.

To its credit, this collection of essays is not naive about the difficulties and long-term nature of giving birth to a "next Methodism" that is more biblical, Wesleyan, and disciplined than the current UMC. As David Thomas points out: "We will need a multigenerational mindset in thinking about the next Methodism, a long-term vision of the downstream benefits we hope our children and their children will benefit from. The challenge in that, though, is to match patience with urgency, marathon mentality with sprint intensity." Just so, and as John the elder once said (1 John 3:2-3): "Beloved, we are now children of God, and what we will be *has not yet been revealed*. But we know that when Christ appears, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is. *And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as Christ is pure*" (emphasis added).

But who will mind the store? As Bishop Whitaker writes: "Superintendency is essential in Methodism because of the character of Methodism as a disciplined community in which all members are accountable to one another, and there must be someone who watches over the whole. The question for future global Methodism is whether its superintendency should take the form of episcopacy." My answer to this question is yes, for several reasons: (1) There is a biblical basis for having *episkopoi* or overseers who are not local church pastors or even district superintendents. (2) Protestantism has famously and rightly been accused of having a weak ecclesiology, as evidenced by the hundreds of Protestant denominations, compared for example to the Roman Catholic Church, and so a strong episcopacy is all the more urgent for the founding of a Global Methodist Church. (3) From the late 18th and well into the 19th century, when Methodism's amazing growth in some years outpaced even actual population growth, the church

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had a strong episcopacy, with the bishop having the authority and power not only to make appointments but also to shape ministerial training, ensure that doctrines and disciplines of the church were maintained by its local ministers, and much more.

The unique genius of Methodism's structure is its connectional system, which does not agree with the notion that the local church should be autonomous and that ministers should be subject to a local-church call system. This is because the local church is but part of a larger body of believers, all of whom need supervision by a working episcopacy, not least because a particular local church often does not have an objective perspective on its needs and what is best for it. The bishop must discern what is best for all the churches in a conference, not just a few or the most successful. But it is the conferences that debate and set the policy that the bishop is then required to implement, creating a balance between conciliar decisions and their implementation and supplementation by the bishops.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from a book like *The Next Methodism* is that, since the majority of Methodists are now found outside the American portion of the UMC, of necessity the Next Methodism, whether the Global Methodist Church or something else, will need to live the meaning of the word *global*, with global leadership, global structures, and global affirmation of doctrine, spirit, and discipline. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished. **RL**

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Departure of the Israelites by David Roberts (1829)

Reason and Revelation in the Singularity

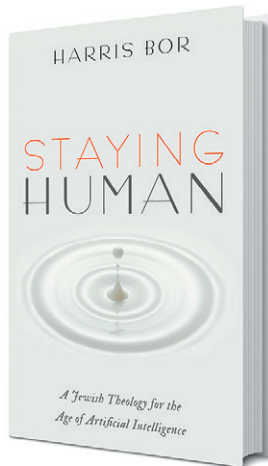
Can Jewish theology save us from the slavery of artificial intelligence by holding in tension science and faith, imagination and technology, unity and difference?

by ANTON SACK

HARRIS BOR'S *Staying Human: A Jewish Theology for the Age of Artificial Intelligence* is an ambitious book. Its message can be put simply: Jewish religious tradition has the resources to respond to a world in which technology controls human beings. Bor is responding to the promise and threat of a future in which artificial intelligence renders human choice and individuality obsolete, a future Bor refers to as “the singularity,” following techno-futurist Ray Kurzweil. Bor is convinced that the singularity is a “quasi-religious” notion that raises “essentially theological” questions about the nature of the universe and human life. Indeed, Bor approaches the Jewish religious tradition in light of the philosophical concepts of Spinoza and

Heidegger because he believes that “the philosophical roots of the idea of the singularity as God” need to be uncovered.

Bor is guided by the conviction that, appearances to the contrary, Spinoza and Heidegger think in a way that aligns deeply with the Jewish approach to life and that they shed light on elements of this approach that counter the pull of technology. In Bor's view, Spinoza—the heretic who denied Mosaic authorship of the Torah—develops in his *Ethics* the Jewish idea of God as totality or oneness, while Heidegger—who never expressed remorse for joining the Nazi party—elaborates a Jewish conception of being in which God as creator, God as wholly different and wholly other,



*Staying Human:
A Jewish
Theology for the
Age of Artificial
Intelligence*

By Harris Bor
(Cascade Books, 2021)



Benedictus (Baruch) Spinoza (1632 – 1677)

can reveal himself. Bor's argument is that Jewish life continuously moves from the Spinozist God of oneness and totality to the Heideggerian God of difference and otherness and back again, and therefore that Jewish life reconciles these opposed conceptions of God.

But *Staying Human* forces us to ask what bearing the theological conception of God as oneness has on the techno-futurist idea of the singularity. Does the possibility of a world governed by artificial intelligence rest on an ontological claim about the unity and omnipresence of God? Bor answers in the affirmative. The singularity expresses, in his view, "humanity's hypothetical collective wish" to achieve complete wisdom and immortality, to overcome individuation and subjectivity, to participate in the eternal. Bor assures us that recognition of the singularity need not result in the obliteration of human individuality. He thinks he has developed "a rational mysticism that seeks to resist the idea of the singularity while embracing its theological implications: a religion of the everyday capable of balancing all aspects of being while holding tight to a God who is both singular and wholly other." It is no surprise that Bor is attracted to a religion that combines reason and mysticism if we keep in mind that his ultimate ambition is "to lay the groundwork for a synthesis of immanence and transcendence." A theology based on such a synthesis "demands living with these conflicting approaches and ideas without fully embracing either."

As we can see, Bor is determined to show that two opposed positions can be maintained consistently without sacrificing either. Indeed, Bor thinks he is charting a moderate course between the extremes of immanence and transcendence, unity and difference,

universality and particularity. He champions what he calls "a wholesome religious path" that "requires a consciousness of, and orientation toward, oneness," but that also requires the realization that the "sense of the singularity is only the starting point. The next step is to embrace individuation and variety, to engage the concrete universe in all its difference, beauty, and chaos."

To whom does Bor think this message will appeal? Not only to Orthodox Jews, who, like Bor, are "heavily influenced by rationalist and postmodern thought," but to "seekers of all denominations and outlooks" who want "a path or view of the world sympathetic to tradition but founded on a universal wisdom," who share "an awareness, peculiarly postmodern, that the traditions we are born into are flawed, imperfect, and one of myriad alternatives." Bor claims to be working for the general "renewal of religious practice and thinking" and for "increasing mutual understanding across religions."

Unfortunately, Bor does not come close to meeting the extraordinary tasks he sets himself. He never tires of asserting he has found a happy middle ground between opposed positions, but he is unable to demonstrate why the balancing act he finds convincing does more than juxtapose irreconcilable alternatives. He speaks of the necessity of "walking the tightrope between



The Old Man and Death by Joseph Wright of Derby (c. 1774)

reason and mysticism, science and imagination, the universal and the particular,” but it is hard to escape the impression that Bor merely jumps between the two extremes, sometimes prioritizing one position to the detriment of the other and vice versa. Bor’s treatment of two key ideas in particular makes the shoddiness of his reasoning uncomfortably apparent. These ideas are death and revelation. Since one’s approach to death tends to determine one’s attitude toward revelation, I will begin my discussion with death.

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**DOES THE POSSIBILITY
OF A WORLD GOVERNED
BY ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE REST ON
AN ONTOLOGICAL CLAIM
ABOUT THE UNITY AND
OMNIPRESENCE OF
GOD? BOR ANSWERS
IN THE AFFIRMATIVE.**

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Bor thinks that accepting the inevitability of death is key to living an ethical life: “An awareness of death is an inspiration for correct living and a stimulus to ensure the transmission of values down to the next generation.” However, he has to admit that, from the scientific, technological perspective of singularity, “death is not a part of the natural cycle, but a problem to be overcome.” The scientific, technological orientation aims not merely to prolong life but to conquer death. But the desire to achieve immortality, as Bor emphasizes in his discussion of the biblical account of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, goes with a spiritual slavery incompatible with human freedom and morality: “Slavery, like the idea of the technological singularity, treats humans as cogs in a machine, without will or worth save as a means to some external material end.” The participant in the singularity, like the slave, “is unaware of his servitude. He is passive in his suffering and sees no alternative world beyond the system.” Unless Bor is suggesting a compromise between slavery and freedom, it is hard to understand how he thinks the notion of singularity can be reconciled with religious morality.

Bor’s analysis of Spinoza, whom he does not hesitate to call the “philosopher of singularity,” makes no mention of the famous 67th proposition of *Ethics* Book 4, which states that “a free man thinks of death least of all things; and his wisdom is a meditation not of death but of life.”

Spinoza’s conception of human freedom could not be more opposed to Heidegger’s conception, championed by Bor, of being-towards-death as the proper

orientation of the human being. For Heidegger, according to Bor, only death can be “that which is uniquely mine” since an awareness of it produces the existential anxiety through which “a space is created to view that which we care most about.” What Bor cares most about is developing a relationship with “the other,” understood not only as another human being but more fundamentally as God. But it is not clear that scientific reason as Spinoza conceives it leaves room for such a relationship. As Bor emphasizes, Spinoza’s conception of scientific reason points to a way of life based on personal autonomy and independence from external causes. Connection with others is, for Spinoza, not a sacred commandment but a matter of expedience.

With this in mind, we are entitled to ask whether Spinoza’s God of oneness can be known through revelation and, if not, whether it should be incorporated into Jewish life. Bor defines revelation as “the light that shines through the tear caused by God’s withdrawal, made possible by the break in the totality of oneness.” However, Spinoza denies that God can withdraw from the world or create a break in the totality of oneness. Indeed, according to Jewish tradition, God withdraws through the miracle of creation, but Spinoza claims that miracles are incompatible with God’s nature, a fact that Bor nowhere mentions. He does refer once to “imagination as the power of revelation.” In

saying this, Bor surely does not mean that revelation is a human invention, but that ultimately imagination should take precedence over science. According to Bor, Heidegger corrects Spinoza because he shows that “imagination is not the enemy of reason, but the phenomenon which gives rise to scientific thinking in the first place.” But if imagination is the basis for science, how should we take Bor’s claim “to believe in the primacy of reason...to see the advantage of adopting it as the core of the spiritual path”?

Bor never tells us what he means by spirituality, but it surely has something to do with revelation. Yet the more Bor seeks to fuse spirituality with reason, the more the necessity for revelation recedes. Bor says that “science is not just a description of the external world but how we come to access ultimate meaning.” Yet Bor also tells us that religion, not science, governs “the realm of value and meaning.” If reason or science can provide us with ultimate meaning, why should we heed “the experience of being called” that Bor associates with revelation?

Staying Human may be a well-intentioned attempt to show that science and religion can be harmonized, but when we consider the implications of Bor’s efforts, we are left suspecting that they should be kept separate. Bor claims to be a defender of enlightened orthodoxy, but by blurring the boundaries between science and religion, between reason and faith, he compromises both. When faced with the concrete question of the permissibility of using technology on the Sabbath, for example, Bor leaves us with the following tepid statement: “I think that, apart from limited exceptions, *Shabbat* should remain technology-free for as long as possible.” In accepting that a technology-free Sabbath may not be possible in the future, Bor tacitly admits that technology has the power to render the divine commandments obsolete. This claim would be less disturbing if Bor made no pretensions to defending revelation. But one expects more from someone as deeply committed to an Orthodox Jewish way of life as Bor is. **RL**

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)



Photo by Willy Pragher, copyright Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg

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Consumers line up outside the Apple Store in New York City to buy the latest iPhone in 2019. Photo by Drew Angerer/Getty Images.

Our Smartphones, Our Humanity

So we've put down the phone, logged off Facebook and Twitter, stopped all the doomscrolling. Now what? How can we redeem that recaptured time?

by AUGUSTE MEYRAT

BY NOW IT'S FAIRLY WELL KNOWN just how much harm digital technology and the internet can do to individuals and communities. They're addictive distractions that isolate people from one another, and they have become the powerful propaganda tools, supplying a constant stream of misleading narratives, periodic outrages, and blatantly false information—all while claiming the mantel of truth and objectivity. Already adults suffer from their excessive consumption of shallow social media, mindless entertainment, and abundant pornography, but today's children stand to suffer even more, having never known a life without these devices.

Without question, it would be a tremendous good for all of us to break the bad habit of constantly pulling out our devices at every free moment, and there

are plenty of books and resources to help with this very thing, like *Glow Kids* by Nicholas Kardaras and *Digital Detox* by Damon Zahariades. Anyone who's interested can read all the studies on the effects of digital media and adopt helpful strategies to cope with withdrawal. Although a life completely free of smartphones and the internet might not be possible given how tech-dependent our jobs and education have become, a life that de-emphasizes technology is certainly possible.

This raises a question, however, not often considered: What should a person do with the freedom gained from ditching the screen? This is the very issue writer Andy Crouch addresses in his latest book *The Life We're Looking For: Reclaiming Relationship in a Technological World*. The title's not exactly



*The Life We're
Looking For:
Reclaiming
Relationship in
a Technological
World*

By Andy Crouch
(Convergent Books,
2022)

provocative or memorable, but it's an accurate summation of Crouch's argument: If we're not meant to mindlessly consume content and conduct our lives virtually, what exactly are we meant to do?

Crouch begins his response by discussing the need for recognition. From the moment we're born, we seek recognition from those around us. Crouch uses this idea to explain one of the main attractions of a smartphone that now "recognizes" the user. Not only does this recognition help the user access things on the phone more easily and customize content; it also satisfies the "very human need to be recognized and known."

It's not difficult to see how people in a screen-saturated world increasingly resort to their phone to experience this recognition—since everyone around them is too preoccupied with their own devices to look at or listen to them. Crouch explains how this issues in a kind of paradox in which our experience with technology is more *personalized* (all the content on our device is specially tailored to our tastes and interests), but our experience with actual people is less *personal* (we interact and share less with others and fail to appreciate their status as persons made in the image of the Triune God). This impersonal personalization has resulted in a crisis of loneliness across the developed world.

Thus, for Crouch, the question isn't so much, "How do we get off our phones?" but rather "How can we start seeing one another as persons again?" To answer this, he brings up an image of the early Christians meeting at a house in Corinth in the first century AD. The owner of this house is a Roman citizen named Gaius whom Crouch identifies as a

verifiable "person" in a culture that treated most people as nonpersons. However, instead of enjoying the privileges of citizenship like any other paterfamilias (the head of the household), Gaius instead joined a fledgling Christian faith that "challenged almost all the assumptions of the Roman world, and the Jewish world as well, about the ideal human community, one in which every single member mattered as much as each part of our own bodies matters to us." Considering that today's culture is evidencing the same impersonal nature as that found in first-century Rome, in which individuals are only "seen" to the extent that they are useful or powerful, Gaius' example could provide an important model to countering such dehumanization.

Recovering a culture of personhood necessarily involves defining what a person is. Dispensing with a potentially long philosophical exposition on this concept, Crouch takes his cue from the Bible, asserting that "every human person is a heart-soul-mind-strength complex designed for love." This means our personhood is tied to how we feel, think, act, and live. Insofar as we exercise these faculties, we become more fully human (more fully persons); insofar as we fail to exercise these faculties, by isolating, we lose our humanity (personhood diminishes).

This is where our technology comes in. With every new device comes the promise of what Crouch calls a "superpower." Whether it's an airplane, a Roomba, or a smartphone, users can do things with these machines they couldn't do otherwise; we can fly at high speeds, have a robot clean our floors, or access information at the touch of a button. In certain cases, we even experience a certain rush, or "superpower zone," that comes from raised dopamine levels.

However, as Crouch points out, "Power without effort requires a trade, or a bargain, of sorts: You get superpowers, all right, but only part of you gets to come along for the ride." While convenience and the "superpower zone" are technology's great draws, these very qualities hold back an exertion of one's heart-soul-mind-strength complex, what is also known as "flow." According to Crouch, the flow state of being "fully present, fully engaged, acting decisively and creatively, with focus and energy" can't come if one is already in the superpower zone.

Entering that "flow state" is not as inviting as the superpower zone, but it's much better for

personhood: “When flow subsides, as it inevitably does, we are left with a sense of gratitude, humility, and even awe. . . . We are open to other people, perhaps even to God and the cosmos, in a new way.” A life filled with flow is a much more *human* life, attuned to three-dimensional, lived reality and in a better condition to cultivate relationships. By contrast, too much time in the superpower zone effectively erases a person’s humanity.

Crouch transitions his argument away from technology itself to the idea behind technology, which he identifies as Mammon, which in modern terms is our “global system, the system that powers and is powered by the technological magic we all wield to some extent on a daily basis.” According to Crouch, Mammon is responsible for technology taking a predatory turn instead of an empowering one: “What [Mammon] wants, above all, is to separate power from relationship, abundance from dependence, and being from personhood.”

Consequently, technology on its current trajectory offers little hope for enhancing personhood. Rather, as Crouch explains, we will continue to produce generation after generation of “boring robots” that “will recede to a real but small role as one more device in a device-stuffed world.” As for human beings, we will continue to develop further into half-machine cyborgs “voluntarily embedding ourselves in digital systems to accomplish what we want to do in the world.” In other words, the worst of both the technological and human worlds prevail and finally override personhood completely.

There is hope, however, and it involves confronting Mammon. Crouch again references the community of Gaius and the early Christians that “would grow steadily, quietly, patiently, even as its outposts from time to time attracted imperial attention and violent repression.” Those wanting to reverse the dehumanizing influence of technology need to follow this example. In practical terms, this means (1) reconsidering all new technology in terms of its trade-offs rather than its benefits, (2) building up close-knit households that offer abundant opportunities for recognition and trust, and (3) honoring and recognizing the useless members of society upon whom “the flourishing of persons” depends.

It’s in these chapters that Crouch’s contribution starts to sputter. For all his thoughtful exploration, the solutions in the second half of his book prove

somewhat predictable and underwhelming—at least when compared with the book’s much stronger first half. Whereas he’s able to offer a fresh look at the allure and consequences of technology use, his suggestions to use technology as a tool and spend more time with our families and give a second thought to those with disabilities seem more or less self-evident and occasionally smack of bland Christian moralizing.

Granted, this prescription is in line with the thrust of the book as a whole, which seeks to examine underlying causes and effects of technology. As such, Crouch is always considering the personhood aspect of technology, which necessarily involves a discussion of our perception and values more than a re-evaluation of our habits. Crouch demonstrates that our continuous use of technology is less a negative aspect of modern living and more an all-encompassing lifestyle framing one’s entire perspective, which is why he is more concerned with recovering an authentically Christian way of life than presenting some helpful “life hacks” for tech addiction. And from a Western perspective, so much of what we mean by and value in personhood is readily available in the Christian faith and the examples of the earliest Christian communities.

However, those conditioned by a secular humanist worldview may find these references unpersuasive and even somewhat anachronistic. And even among Christians, many of whom are dropping out of churches, the solutions offered by Crouch may not take into consideration why they dropped out of those interpersonal relationships and faith communities in the first place.

Nevertheless, Crouch is successful in inspiring his reader to strive for a more meaningful kind of life. His language is approachable and his arguments are clear, all while touching on deeper ideas and provoking frequent reflection. In *The Life We’re Looking For*, we are given a gentle yet powerful reminder that we’re made for a greater purpose than idling our days on our devices. Rather, we are made for the high calling of loving God and one another in the fullest possible way. **RL**

Auguste Meyrat is an English teacher in North Texas, the senior editor of The Everyman, a senior contributor for The Federalist, and a frequent contributor to the American Conservative, Crisis, and American Mind.



CONVERSATION STARTERS WITH . . .

Elizabeth Corey

How have students' being online 24/7 changed education, not only in terms of accessibility of information but also attention span and what and how you teach?

It's pretty common knowledge that attention spans are getting ever shorter. I notice this not only in my students but in myself, and it isn't a good thing. Some of the problem is also that there's *so much more* to take in. I love regaling my students with stories about how when I was in college—lo those many years ago—the only way to get news was to read a newspaper or magazine, or to watch television (which nobody did). You'd actually have to walk to the library and physically pick up a copy of *The Economist* or the *New York Times* and hold it in your hands. There was no curation of news according to your particular interests; news was there on the page, ready to be ingested—but very few people did it. This meant that, as a group, my friends and I were much less political, which also meant that friendship was easier. We only knew what we revealed to each other—not what our Instagram feeds told the entire world.

Now on a regular basis I feel overwhelmed with the flood of information I'm being asked to attend to. I've recently given myself leave to not read most of what's out there, and to select a few key pieces during the week. I think students should do the same, letting go of the idea that they can be constantly and thoroughly informed on what everyone is saying about everything. This is true liberation!

What are the lingering effects of COVID in terms of how classes are being conducted? Has it changed how you teach permanently?

COVID has not really changed how I teach in the classroom. My preference is always for an in-person, seminar-style course focused on a common reading. This can take place on Zoom, but Zoom is a second-best alternative. Much is lost when we do not relate to one another as real, embodied human beings.

I will admit that the COVID time at home has made me aware of resources I might not have otherwise

considered. I regularly teach an introduction to constitutional law as a political science course, and I'm amazed at the variety of great podcasts about law. I now ask my students to listen to at least one per week, and it's a great, easy, and fun way of imbibing a ton of great information and insight. Podcasts could be used in lots of subjects—perhaps not so much art history or music appreciation—but certainly on questions of politics, they're a great resource. I try to steer away from the super-polemical ones and toward those that have a more scholarly, detached tone—those aimed not so much at riling up the base but at informing a generally well-educated public about things they should know.

Do you sense the culture wars are as important to your students as they appear to be to regular users of social media? Is everything political for them now?

I think we could say, and probably prove, that anxiety about the state of the world and investment in the culture wars increases as social media use increases. Personally, I'm intensely aware of the culture war narrative because of my friends and colleagues and my own interests, but I find I definitely feel worse about things the more I'm online. I stay away from Twitter altogether, which means I'll miss many things, but I also miss the most radical partisans on both sides, which is very good for the soul. I think of Twitter as intellectual gossip; and if gossip is bad enough in person, it's infinitely worse when you don't see people in person and just have to endure their often-outrageous views.

In general my students are too busy with study and socializing to be fully invested in the culture wars.

Have those culture wars and identity politics changed what you teach? If so, was it more fear for your job or fear of your students?

Actually, the culture wars have made me more certain that my constitutional law class is essential for fostering civil discourse. In this class we emphatically do not avoid hot-button issues but instead learn how to talk about things like abortion and affirmative action openly and charitably. We read majority opinions and dissents, and I often tell students that if you're not persuaded by the one, and then by the other, you're not really reading as you should be. I'm fortunate that I never fear for my job. But this is partly because I set out ground rules at the beginning: The classroom

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THE CULTURE WARS HAVE MADE ME MORE CERTAIN THAT MY CONSTITUTIONAL LAW CLASS IS ESSENTIAL FOR FOSTERING CIVIL DISCOURSE.

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is a quasi-sacred space; students should feel free to “try out” arguments without fear that they will be reported or demonized. I tell them that they're free to make mistakes—I certainly will—and to revise and even, if needed (though it usually isn't), to apologize.

What book have you read at least three times, and what's the enduring appeal?

Perhaps my favorite book of all time is Josef Pieper's *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. I come back to this time and again. It's so persuasive and philosophically profound. I see something new in it every time I read it. And it's a call to live a more leisured life, which I try to do but often can't. Still, Pieper offers an image of a civilized, flourishing life that we should all at least be exposed to—and try to live as much as we can.

Elizabeth Corey is an associate professor of political science and director of the Honors Program at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Her writing has appeared in a variety of popular and scholarly journals, including First Things, National Affairs, the Wall Street Journal, and the Chronicle of Higher Education. She received a bachelor's in classics from Oberlin College and master's and doctoral degrees in art history and political science from Louisiana State University. She is also an American Enterprise Faith and Public Life Visiting Professor during the year 2022. Perhaps most importantly, she is a wife to David and mother of Anna, John, and Margaret.



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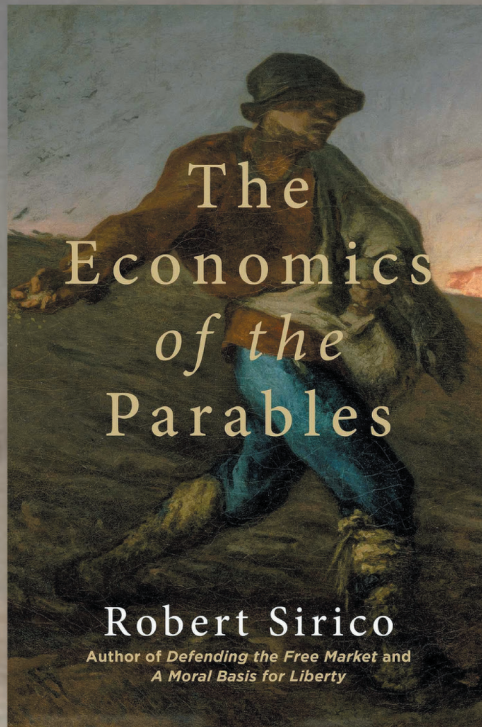
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