Book Report on David Noble's *Religion of Technology*

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Synopsis

In *Religion of Technology*, David Noble challenges the claim that religion is old and forgotten while only technology flourishes in the modern era like a religion. He argues instead, that technology and religion progress together in the sense that humans are now approaching technology in the same way they approach religion, as if they are seeing religion within technology. Noble included various examples of human activities, for example, creating life by means of genetic engineering or attaining immortality with machine-based life.

The increasing similarities between technology and religion turn technological advancement itself into a religious progress. The reason people hope to find religion within technology is that people are trying to recover their original divinity and the perfection of man[1], made in the image of God, which appeared before the fall of Adam.

Another reason that humans are looking into technology for religiosity is that people crave transcendence, or immortality of the soul. Instead of asking for transcendence from God, humans turn to technology and, instead of letting the body die and the soul transcend, they would like to achieve transcendence by never dying with the help of technology. Another way of putting this is that religion inspires people to develop technology in order to satisfy their religious desires. Whether this is what God wants is, however, not what Noble is interested in. Instead, he explores how religion inspires people to make use of technology to account for religion such that religion "prepared the soil for the scientific outburst",[2] and how technology is a result of "theological reflection".[3].

Selective Exposition

In *The Religion of Technology*, Noble has dedicated many chapters to making an account of and evaluating the idea that technology is a reflection of religion. Noble only looked at Christianity to account for this notion. He first quotes from the Holy Bible of Christianity to say that the first man, Adam, is created according to God's image. This is what Noble means by men's image-likeness to God. As we possess this image-likeness, as suggested by philosopher Erigena, "all men by nature possess natural arts"[4] with divine nature, as nature is created by God. It follows that, having sinned, men "are sunk in a profound ignorance",[5] meaning that what men once knew about the world has been obscured. Therefore, people in the earthly world strive to pursue and restore their past perfection, which is the "knowledge…that Adam has possessed in his innocence".[6] By restoring perfection, men achieve transcendence and exist as a holy being. The key question philosophers and theologians are struggling with is how men achieve transcendence.

The book introduces two different views of seeking former perfection and transcendence. The first view is that people can only achieve former perfection by praying for God's grace. In this view, technology has nothing to do with transcendence, but actually a "denial of transcendence"[7]. This view is supported by philosopher and theologian Augustine, who states that the "astonishing achievements"[8] in science and technology are only the glorification of the mortal life, and do not help reach "the way of truth that leads to eternal life"[9]. In the Augustinian view, indulging in perfecting the mortal life by means of technological advancement is only a

way to damnation and eternal misery.

Another view of seeking former perfection is that it is God's will that technology will advance so that it can unfold God's plan. In an illustrated version of the Psalms called the Utrecht Psalter, the illustration of Psalm 63 involves a few of God's people sharpening swords with a newly-developed grindstone, attempting to fight against evil-doers who uses the old fashioned whetstone. Philosophers had used this illustration to explain that "technological advance is God's will"[10]. In other words, technological advancement is an indication of men's movement towards a restoration of perfection[11]. This view bypasses the importance of praying for God's grace, suggesting that God permits the use of technology to achieve transcendence of men, meaning that advancement of technology leads to transcendence.

So we see that the goals of both views are the same, which is an eventual reunion with God, but the means by which men achieve this reunion is radically different: one is through God's grace and one is through God's permission to use technology. The latter view gained its prominence in the Middle Ages when technology achieved significant development and acquired influential power over humanity.

So how does technology bring about transcendence? As mentioned before, the recovery of universal knowledge indicates the divinity of men. Philosopher and Lord Chancellor of England Francis Bacon suggested that technological advance is to bring about the advancement of knowledge, which is important to salvation and ultimately "the promised restoration of perfection"[12]. This means that technology is used in pursuit of universal knowledge, which in turn is used in recovering men's image-likeness to God, therefore restoring men's divinity. But what is this knowledge? Bacon suggested that it was not moral knowledge, which led to the Fall. Instead, it is the pursuit of natural knowledge, of which we do not judge good and evil.[13]

Theologians and philosophers continue with this way of thinking about technology and transcendence, and eventually bring up the notion that technology is, at the same time, eschatology[14], which deals with the ultimate purpose of the world, and the end of humankind. People aspire to bring an end to the world because the end of the world promises the restoration of the divinity of men. The idea that technology is a tool to bring about the second coming of Christ (which is the end of the mortal world) is prominent among scientists and explorers. Christopher Columbus is one example. Columbus believes that God has given him the marine arts and sent him to open up a new way to other places of the world, fulfilling God's will. What Columbus meant by God's will is the ultimate conversion of non-Christians[15], which indicates the fruition of the kingdom of God and the end of the mortal world. This way of thinking about men's relationship with God would be that man cooperates with God to establish His Kingdom[16], that one day "God and men would once again become co-workers in creation"[17]. Note that the "traditional" view, denying technology as a means of transcendence, would imply that God makes use of men to maintain the world, and men are not the one who establishes it. The role of men in the world is radically different in the two different views of how to achieve transcendence.

The book also provides insights to account for modern technology with respect to eschatology and ultimate transcendence. Millenarians believe that the modern world is corrupted and unjust and will soon be destroyed by God. They also believe that the millennium (the limited duration

before the end of the world) has begun, and Christ will return only after mankind had created an earthly Kingdom[18]. This means that the destruction of the world brings about a new beginning[19]. The advancement of technology, then, would serve to defend Christ against the Antichrist that will arise during the millennium in an attempt to destroy the divine. From this point of view, the development of technology of warfare is a means to ensure that technology is used by the forces of good rather than the forces of evil[20]. This is comparable to the situation of North Korea and the United States - while the United States ordered North Korea to disarm their nuclear weapons, the United States retains their right to arm. This parallels the battle between the Godly people and the Antichrist, where technology of the Godly people will be used to defend against that of the Antichrist. When the Godly people possess a better technological status, they will surely win against the Antichrist, as the illustration of Psalm 63 in the Utrecht Psalter has shown. In this view, nuclear weapons are weapons of "death that might also redeem mankind"[21].

The pursuit of technology has brought about the pursuit of universal knowledge, as suggested earlier in this paper. One aspect of the knowledge that people have been pursuing is the location of heaven. In the Bible, God and heaven is usually recognized as a place elevated and high above[22]. The spatial sense of high/low can be read as a metaphorical space or an actual physical space. Therefore, deeply religious scientists had once attempted to locate heaven by going out of the Earth, which gave rise to the area of space exploration. For example, Johannes Kepler had sought to reach God by physically leaving earth and going to the moon[23]. Many space explorers are, surprisingly, deeply religious as well[24]. The use of technology to reach the divine is, once again, an attempt to bypass God's grace to reach transcendence.

So we see from various examples that instead of passively waiting for salvation and the second coming of Christ, people feel that technology can be used to actively bring about salvation and end to this mortal world[25]. Hence, it can be seen that technology can be described as a reflection of the religious regime and the process of thinking of philosophers and theologians.

Evaluation

In the evaluation I will focus on two aspects of technological advancement mentioned in the book: warfare and exploration. Both these aspects are related to the theme of eschatology, which concerns how the world will end under God's rule.

As noted in the previous sections, people make use of the Bible to account for the fact that God allows us to make use of technology to perform His will. It is worth noting, however, that the primary illustration of technological advancement of warfare as a reflection of religion is not written in the Bible; it is an interpretation by different people. The illustration of Psalm 63 in the Utrecht Psalter does portray God's people wielding advanced tools and defeating pagans who have relatively rudimentary warfare technology, yet we have to keep in mind that this is only a human imagination. Reading through the actual words of Psalm 63 in any version of the Bible, there is no way of concluding that God permits us to use technological advancement as a means of demonstrating religious zeal. The pictorial depiction in the Utrecht Psalter is a product of man, not the words of God. To conclude that technology is a reflection of religion by looking at man's own way of interpretation is superficial and misleading.

Having said that, God had ordered his people to kill pagans by the act of war, but these occurrences are mainly in the Old Testament. This act of killing is not considered murder and therefore not a sin to man. To remove these pagans from the world, some form of advancement in warfare tools and skills is needed because these pagans are often referred to as powerful and strong. In the Book of Judges[26], Gideon was appointed by God to destroy three hundred Midianites (who were pagans at that time) using only one hundred men. God ordered Gideon to sneak into the Midian camp at night, sounding trumpets and breaking empty pitchers to make the Midianites think that they were surrounded. Then the Midianites ran in panic and killed each other. This example in the Old Testament illustrates that God is the one who initiated the war and through Gideon, God's will is exercised. Also, the skill or tools in the war should all be used according to God's will. Therefore, having a man to decide what tools to use to carry out God's will is inappropriate.

In the New Testament, however, God's people do not kill pagans anymore because through the coming of Christ, pagans can now be saved should they convert and become loyal to the true God. This means that the old fashion of making use of tools to remove pagans no long apply in the years of the Common Era. The new way to remove pagans is to convert them. This also means that by killing pagans, we sin. In other words, warfare is now seen as a secular act of man, not God's will.

As mentioned before, Millenarians believe that the Antichrist will rise and attempt to destroy the divine, and the advancement of warfare technology is used to defend Christ from and defeat the Antichrist. If we look at this issue in a strictly religious way, we need not prepare for this defence, for God will protect us. In this sense, the advancement of warfare technology is solely credited to the fear of man, and not an act of man trying to fulfil God's will. The notion suggesting that warfare technology such as nuclear weapons is a saviour of mankind seems radical and unjustified. Therefore, I do not agree to the proposition that the advancement of warfare technology is an illustration of religious progress.

In terms of using technology as a means of world exploration, there are mainly two rationales. One of them is to find a way to transcend mankind independent of God's grace; Kepler's space exploration is an example. Another rationale is to spread God's Gospel to other parts of the world, so all of mankind can be saved; Columbus's continental exploration is an example. From a strictly Christian point of view, the first rationale is invalid and impious. We gain our transcendence by receiving grace from God, meaning only God can help us transcend. Using any other way to attempt to transcend is invalid, for there is no God's grace within. In other words, transcendence of man is not done by the individual, but by the craving of man and the reciprocal grace of God.

The second rationale that we should use technology to explore other parts of the world that haven't heard of God's Gospel and convert them is more valid rationale to illustrate the advancement of exploration technology as a reflection of religious progress. After the death of Christ, apostles perform God's calling by spreading the Gospel. This shows that we as men have the duty to spread the Gospel to people who are not God's people yet. Technological advancement in terms of transportation can facilitate the spreading of the Good Word, and the rationale is clearly according to God's will.

We see from the previous examples of exploration technology that the type of technological advancement is not the most important thing to consider when we discuss whether technology is a reflection of religious progress. The rationale behind such technological advancement is more important. For example, advancement in exploration technology can be seen as a reflection of religious progress only when it is according to God's will, and the advancement of warfare is no longer acceptable according to God, and is thus not a reflection of religious progress. We must make a clear distinction between what man wants and what God wants. I am not saying that all wants of man should be stopped, but that if the wants are only attributed to man's own desire, those wants are not a consequence of religious belief. If, however, the wants are also what God wants, then we can say these wants are a reflection of religious progress.

This book gives a very descriptive history of how people see technology as a means of acting out their religious beliefs, and poses no judgement towards any examples. It is, therefore, essential that we bear an objective eye to the text and understand the unchanging principle of Christianity — that we must gain transcendence by God's grace, and act according to His will. Hence, we can clearly see that some of the cases discussed in the book are actually not good examples of religious progress.

Reading *The Religion of Technology* has helped me in several ways. It helps me understand more how people think about God within the eras of blooming technological advancement, and also helps me think about how we, living in this technological society, should treat our religion. We now see that technology can, to a certain extent, be complementary to religion (contrary to the view that they are mutually exclusive). In the times when the Bible was written, people pursued technology because it can facilitate God's will, but now people pursue technology for the sake of mankind only, while not considering what God wants us to do. This is no wonder why Nietzsche said that God is dead — we have been blinded so much by the pursuit of technology that we often hide away from God. If we really want to save mankind, we should listen to what God tells us to do. Gaining transcendence by our own hands can never be a solution.

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[1] In this report, 'man' is used as a collective term to refer to humankind, and has no gender or ethnic bias.

[2] Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern Worl,*(New York: Free Press, 1997), p.39.

[3] George Pattison, *Thinking About God in an Age of Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.1.

[4] David F. Noble, *Religion of Technology. (*Michigan: A.A. Knopf, 1997), p.17.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., p. 40

[7] Ibid., p.12

[8] Ibid., p. 11

[9] Ibid., p.12

[10] Ibid., p.13

[11] Ibid., p. 22

[12] Ibid., p.50

[13] Ibid., 50

[14] Ibid., p.22

[15] Ibid., p.31

[16] Ibid., p.15

[17] Ibid., p.52

[18] Ibid., p.103

[19] Ibid., p.104

[20] Ibid

[21] Ibid., p. 107

[22] Ibid., p.117

[23] Ibid., p.116

[24] Ibid., p.13

[25] Ibid., p.24-5

[26] The Holy Bible, Jud 7:15-23

Reference

Illustration of Psalm 63. The Utrecht Psalter: Digital facsimile.
  <http://psalter.library.uu.nl/images/FOL_035V.JPG>(accessed November 8, 2009).

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