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Technology and Religion: Remaining Human in a Co-Created World (Book Review)

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Review of: *Technology and Religion: Remaining Human in a Co-created World*
By: Noreen Herzfeld, West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2009. 167 pp. ISBN 978-1-59947-313-0. \$17.95, paperback

While religion can be a volatile topic, technology has been perceived primarily as a benign or even charming conversation starter. Increasingly, however, people have differing opinions about the acceptable uses of technology, and the development of some new technologies, like cloning, end-of-life care, or stem cell therapy has raised serious moral questions.

For example, genetically modified cotton crops increase production yield by 40 to 55 percent; however, the modified crop seed costs nearly twice that of ordinary seed. In financially challenged countries such as India, this kind of cost increase has skyrocketed the level of debt beyond what can be repaid. Poor farmers there are so overwhelmed by the debt pressure that since 2002 there has been an increase in farmer suicide, averaging three per day (p. 106). Technological advancements and cultural benefits are often in conflict. This tension and the resulting ethical and religious dilemmas are the subject of *Technology and Religion: Remaining Human in a Co-created World*.

In *Technology and Religion*, author Noreen Herzfeld urges laypersons and professionals to consider the complexities of moral decision making about technology. Herzfeld explores how Christian, Jewish, and Islamic thinkers evaluate three categories of new technologies: "technologies of the human body, technologies of the human mind, and technologies of the external environment" (p. viii). This text is part of the Templeton Science and Religion series, which addresses the intersection between science and religion. While all books in this series are authored by specialists in the sciences, the material is intended for a general audience.

At just over 150 pages, *Technology and Religion* has the clear strength of being a succinct introduction to the topic. Five chapters quickly outline how technology is influencing the medical field; cyberspace; the natural world; and the globalization of communication, information, and transportation. The text is a fine introduction to the subject, particularly for those who have little or no experience with the technologies at issue. The author presents complex technical subjects in clear language, tying critical components of philosophy and religion to technology. Although the technical issues can easily become overwhelming with new concepts and verbiage, the bite-sized snippets in this book are readily accessible for most readers.

The author thoughtfully illustrates the challenges created by new improvements in technology. For example, Herzfeld portrays the difficult decisions involved in end-of-life care, including whether and when to withdraw life support. The medical profession applies four criteria: presence of fatal condition; autonomy of patient; therapy efficacy; and excessive burden of medical treatment on patient, family, or community. Patients and families, however, frequently make decisions based, at least in part, on their religious views. Herzfeld explores the different perspectives of Christian Scientists, Catholics, and Muslims on these issues.

For instance, a Christian Scientist is less likely to accept numerous medical interventions because he "might consider certain treatments religiously forbidden or undesirable and thus a spiritual burden" (p. 52). A Muslim or a Catholic, by contrast, may view the sacredness of human life as the core value and decide that, unless death is imminent, feeding tubes and other forms of life support are acceptable (p. 53). Each of these faith systems provides a foundation for exploring the complicated questions related to the technological advances changing medical care.

The greatest value of this book may be in introducing the reader to Jacques Ellul's (n.d.) provocative work *76 Reasonable Questions to Ask About Any Technology* (found in the this book's appendix). Like Herzfeld, Ellul investigated technology's repercussions in areas such as ecology, society, practicality, morality, and ethics. While Ellul's (1964, n.d.) works are important reading, Herzfeld's book is an easier entry into the field. Herzfeld also introduces readers to recent religious and ethical debates in the field of neuroscience. Interested readers can further explore the "challenges that scientific discoveries pose for some traditional Christian beliefs" (p. viii) in *Neuroscience, Psychology, and Religion* (Jeeves & Brown, 2009), also part of the Templeton Science and Religion Series.

Unfortunately, for readers wanting a thorough discussion of Jewish, Muslim, and Protestant Christian perspectives on technology, the book seems too limited and at times completely lacking in substantive religious views. In fact, the heavy emphasis on Catholic perspectives in the latter half of the book felt irritatingly restrictive. The imbalance among the religious perspectives and the failure to include a Protestant Christian perspective were disappointing, even if one takes into account the limited scope of this project.

Some readers also may be concerned that the book is published by the controversial Templeton Foundation, which has been accused of intentionally blurring the lines between science and religion and fostering a conservative political agenda. *Technology and Religion* best serves as an introduction to the ethical and religious questions raised by new technologies. Even so, I felt that the author also should have discussed more real-world applications. Despite these shortcomings, *Technology and Religion* is a good introduction to religious views on the development and use of controversial new technologies. This text could be a valuable tool for academics equipping a new generation to grapple with technology and for those in the helping fields responding to challenging questions from their clients. I would strongly recommend *Technology and Religion* to those in psychology who need a brief introduction to religious issues in health care. Handy and engaging, this book is more than worth the small cost.

References

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