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Faith, Librarianship and Technology

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Faith, Librarianship and Technology

I. Introduction

Technology has had an impact on our culture. A clear example can be seen when new freshmen come on a college campus each fall – a laptop computer, a cellular phone, an iPod, an iPhone, an ieverything. The student is also spending more and more time using what is called, “social software” available via technology, MySpace, Facebook, Delicious, YouTube, etc.... We are dealing with students who are not only familiar with technology but for whom it is a way of life.

A show on PBS entitled “Growing up online,” talked about the effects that technology is having on teens; people who have never known life without technology (Dretzin, 2008). It brings up some interesting points, such as the argument that “The internet has created the greatest generation gap since the advent of rock-n-roll.” (Dretzin, 2008) One of the individuals interviewed stated that while using the internet, “I did not feel like myself, but I like the fact that I did not feel like myself, I felt like someone completely different.” (Dretzin, 2008) These scenarios may be extreme, but they do shine some light on how technology is changing the social fabric.

With technology comes change and this change has had an impact. But from a Christian perspective, the question needs to be asked: has technology directed us correctly? Has technology led Christians to a self-forgetful concern for others, an agape love? Has technology assisted Christians in letting go of themselves and caring for others?

This paper will narrow the focus and address what these concepts mean in the context of a library at a Christian college or university. A Christian librarian can play a critical role in the spiritual, mental, and professional development of a student. This development ultimately should entail a restoration of the image of God both in students and librarians. This restoration process can only be implemented with a proper perspective of technology and academic librarianship.

II. Christians, Libraries, and Education

What is the purpose of academic librarianship and how does technology fit into that purpose? Academic librarianship has traditionally supported education to some degree or another. Thus, in many ways, the purpose of academic librarianship is dependent upon the purpose of education (Smith, 2002).

A. Christian Purpose of Education

Throughout history, education has been founded and supported as a means to some end. In ancient Israel, education was to produce a faithful member of the chosen nation – a son who would bring pride to the family and his people and glory to God (Fox, 1994). In ancient Greece, the school was to produce a productive citizen, wise and mature. Rome followed the example of Greece (Marrou, 1956). In the Christian tradition, education was first about making disciples. The earliest Christian schools were catechetical schools for new believers (Marrou, 1956).

Scripture gives some instruction on what is involved with making disciples. Matthew 28:18-20, says “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’”

This verse suggests that teaching and baptism are two important elements of a restoration of the image of God to individuals (France, 2007). The great commission mandates the teaching of disciples so that they obey all that Jesus commanded (Turner, 2008). How is one to obey all that Jesus commanded? Jesus summed up his own commandments with two commandments: love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength, and all your soul and love your neighbor as yourself.¹

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ABSTRACT

Technology is transforming many venues. Some suggest that the transformation is happening much too quickly, others suggest not quickly enough. As Christians, we have a responsibility to observe this technological transformation through the lens of faith and act upon what we learn. As academic librarians, we have a responsibility to use technology to further the spread of resources to our patrons. How does a Christian librarian respond to changes? Is there a measuring rod by which technology should be evaluated?

This article argues that relationships are the measuring rod by which technology should be evaluated; relationships meaning not simply a casual acquaintance, but an effort to restore Eden in every interaction that takes place, both online and face to face. When these efforts are made, faith, librarianship, and technology can serve a unified purpose.

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¹ Luke 10:27

How does a librarian teach students to love God and to love their neighbor? A librarian's instruction and service provides a road map to the available resources that the institute has available. Even if items are not present in a particular library, librarians often have keys to open the doors of other schools' resources to their students. Much of this educational pursuit is accomplished with the advent of technology. However, by fulfilling this critical role, is a librarian truly filling the teaching role of the great commission?

"... Much of what Christians are to learn can only be learned in the crucible of life situations. They were right when they observed that there is in the Gospel itself a certain appeal to experimentation as a way of coming to know the Gospel is true and vibrant." (Harder, 1963, 353)

This statement is not attempting to discredit the traditional setting for education. What Christians need, and particularly students in a Christian college, is the truth to be able to interpret and understand experience in line with the gospel. They will hear that truth through many venues: instruction, reference interviews, and interaction at the circulation desk; but, it will come to life when they see it lived out. Living out can be seen in many venues, but relationships are perhaps the most effective.

B. Relationships form a Critical Component of Christian Librarianship

Education is all about what an institute wants people to know, how they want them to think, and what kind of people they want them to be (Mohler, 2008). Relationships and the library play a critical role in this.

When Adam and Eve sinned at the Garden of Eden, the results were immense. One of them was the disappearance of relations of peace and justice, alienation, both from God and one another, and thus deterioration of relationships (Kidner, 1967; Walvoord and Zuck, 1985).

In an attempt to restore Eden, one of the focal points of Christian teaching is the healing of broken relationships. The healing of the broken

relationships between an individual and God, others, and his or her own self, prepares the way for successful accomplishment of education's secondary purposes: character development, acquisition of knowledge, job preparation, and the development of students who are socially, emotionally, and physically healthy (Knight, 2006). In other words, education, if seen as a redemptive activity can be seen as something whose ultimate purpose is to bring redemption into the life of students. Peace between the student and God, peace between the student and faculty, peace among the students themselves, and an understanding of the world that allows the student to live in a sinful world, yet still be at peace because of their understanding of who God is, how God works in and through them, and what God is doing. This understanding can come about by education. Because of this, education can be seen as a redemptive effort (Knight, 2006). Academic librarians can play a critical role in this redemptive educational effort.²

If relationships form a critical component of education, the question needs to be asked: what kind of relationship is necessary?

Relationships are often ambiguous in our culture. There are so many different kinds of relationships. Martin Buber, an orthodox Jewish philosopher argued that there were two ways to look at relationships. He described them as I-You and I-It. I-It relationships tend to be instrumental, people working together to get a task done. I-You on the other hand, according to Buber, tend to be relationally driven. Buber says, expounding on the differences between an I-It relationship and an I-You relationship, that "without the It a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human" (Buber, 1970, 85).

The essence of the gospel, and a key element in librarianship, is rebuilding those relationships, both with God and one another. This process entails a restoration of the image of God in

² Librarians are beginning more and more to see themselves as equivalent in task and responsibility to teaching faculty instead of simply an agency that serves the institute. For further development on this see Welch (1987) and Scott (2008).

individuals through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is rebuilding those relationships with what Buber calls an I-You, that allows restoration of the image of God.

The traditions of revealed religion, in which God has revealed truth to humankind, direct us in how to rebuild broken relationships among people, God, and the creation. In the Hebrew tradition, faithful people seek shalom - right relations of peace and justice. Religious tradition helps us to rebind our lives by commending to us senses of proportion and judgment. We cannot discover such virtue in raw information, only in time-honored moral practices that flow from people's faithful commitments. (Shultze, 2002, 70).

If relationships form a critical component in librarianship and true relationships are difficult to foster simply with technology and information, how does one develop a Christian understanding of how technology is used in librarianship?

C. Technology's Impact on Relationships

Technology has impacted relationships. Neil Postman in his book, *Technopoly* argues that every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that (Postman, 1992).

Is it possible to develop true relationships that restore the image of God solely with technology? There are some components to this kind of a relationship, which Martin Buber entitles an I-You relationship, that stand out.

1. Mutual Encounter

First, I-you is based on a mutual encounter, getting together just for the sake of getting together. A mutual encounter discourages putting up a false front, pretending to be someone who you really are not. The mutual encounter allows the opportunity for an individual to discover more about themselves. The image of God cannot be developed in individuals who does not know who they are.

If a student is willing to come to your office and chat about a particular topic, it is possible to transform this encounter from a simple reference interaction to an I-You encounter. To transform that experience from an I-It to an I-You give the patron and their inquiry your full attention. If time does not allow for this, find time in your schedule.

When a student enquires about a topic by e-mail, this will typically begin as an I-It encounter. The conversation begins as a simple exchange of data and very little interaction takes place that could possibly magnify the image of God. However, in this setting, technology can be used to foster a mutual encounter. For example, when the librarian is responding to an e-mail reference inquiry, several decisions are made in how the librarian responds. The librarian can respond helpfully, humbly, and inquisitively in an online venue. If a patron is simply asking for an answer to a simple question, this can be done by answering the question and stating something like: "If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to respond to this e-mail. We would be happy to assist you further."

This does not create the mutual encounter, but it does open the doors so that a mutual encounter can take place.

As the effort is made to transform reference transactions into I-You encounters, it must be remembered that the efforts of Buber's "mutual encounter" does not rest on the librarian alone. In order for a mutual encounter to take place in a relationship, effort must be made on both ends. The librarian is no longer the only individual responsible for discipleship. The fundamental relationship is between learner, the learning material, and the other learners, with the librarian alongside. The responsibilities of the librarian do not decrease in an online environment, but the responsibilities of the student increase (Nicholls, 2003).

2. Exclusivity

Buber's concept of an I-You relationship also promotes exclusivity. In the context of

a relationship, exclusivity means that your focus is on the individual and him or her alone. That is very difficult with cell phones, e-mails, and other technological components that librarians have become accustomed to.

Several people already fight for exclusivity with relationships by how they arrange their offices. They often set their computer at the side of their office, so that when a person comes in and talks to them, they have to move 90 degrees away from their computer and this makes the computer out of their sight range. This allows them to focus exclusively on the individual.

There are some components of exclusivity available in the online environment that are difficult to find in the traditional library (Nicholls, 2003). For example, in an online scenario, there is ample opportunity for the reflective inquirer to take time before answering a reference inquiry. The opportunity is given for the librarian to make thoughtful remarks and comments solely to the individual and their inquiry. Criticisms can be thought out so that they are truly constructive and thoughtful, not only caring about the student's inquiry but their reaction to it.

Traditional reference interactions tend to be tight on time. Many times librarians do not have the ability to squeeze in what they feel is a critical component of the topic. However, what is missed in face-to-face interaction can be compensated in an online forum. In an online venue, airtime is almost unlimited and does not have to be shared between students as it does in a face to face interaction.

3. Non-instrumental

I-You is non-instrumental. Reference and other library services tend to be task-driven. Personal interactions do not happen for the value of the interaction itself, they occur to accomplish or assist in accomplishing a task. Technology has transformed many library services into instrumental engagements; where the relational responsibilities that do

take place are there for the accomplishment of a task. Is it possible to transform the highly instrumental way technology is used in this context into a means to develop non-instrumental relationships?

Technology can play a positive role in developing relationships. Since much instrumental work can be done using the advent of technology, one could allot time during the face-to-face interaction for the development of relationships at an I-You level.

If we responsibly moderate our informational desires, new technologies can afford us a greater degree of peace and harmony in everyday life. Using e-mail for instance, offers the possibility of avoiding some intrusive telephone calls and organizing our correspondence around a ritual of focused reading and writing. But do we have the patience and self-discipline both to restrict the extent of our emailing and to prevent it from chopping up our everyday lives into attention-diverting bits and pieces? (Schultze, 2002, 61)

III. Application

What can we do? We cannot simply unplug computers for a semester and "see how it goes." One cannot simply dismiss technology as a medium that has corrupted culture. Technology has become a critical component of our culture and our profession.

1. Communication. Use discretion in what you communicate via e-mail, versus going over to a person's office and chatting with them. If the topic that needs discussion may provide an opportunity for the image of God to be manifested, perhaps a face-to-face conversation may be best.

In an online environment, e-mail is typically the easiest way to communicate. However, make certain that office doors are open so that other conversations can take place. Let people know that they can call you or walk in and chat during your regular office hours.

When communicating via e-mail, attempt to write clearly, carefully, and compassionately. Much communication is traditionally done through non-verbal venues. This value is lost when communication is done solely through an electronic medium. A conscience effort must be made to manifest the image of God in e-mail conversation. This is much easier said than done, but with some thoughtful reflection it is possible.

2. Environment. Attempt to foster in your office (and in your classroom) an environment that stimulates conversation. If teaching in an online environment, use venues of social software to let the students know who you are. For example, create a Facebook account and have pictures of family and friends on it, hobbies, and different elements that might allow students a look into who you are, perhaps even part of your testimony. Transparency fosters transformation.

Technology in librarianship is here to stay. Christians are called to be good stewards of what God has given to us. Part of that good stewardship involves using technology in a way that glorifies God.

IV. Conclusion

With technology comes change and this change has had an impact. But from a Christian perspective, the question needs to be asked: can technology be used to glorify God? Can technology lead Christians to a self-forgetful concern for others, an agape love? (Ferre, 1991) Can technology assist Christians in letting go of themselves and caring for others?

The show “Growing up online,” ended with a variety of reactions to technology and the changes that it has evoked. Some students feel that they need to get a taste of life without the flavor of technology and are abandoning technology for a time in their life. Some parents of teenagers recognize that technology is here to stay. Technology cannot be rejected; we need to learn to live with it. There are other groups who are proactive about technology and accepting it cautiously, proactively teaching others simple technological courtesies.

Technology has the potential to transform many facets of our culture, including professions. While Christian librarians are at the threshold of this transformation, we have the opportunity to use technology to lead us to a self-forgetful concern for others, an agape love, but it is not easy.

Technology is to be done as a form of service to our fellow human beings and to natural creation. This means that we are to develop technology in such a way that the blessings, riches and potential God has put in creation are allowed to flower... Second, our technological activity should reflect love for God and neighbor by expanding, not constricting, the opportunities for men and women to be the loving, joyful beings God intends them to be. Our technological activity should increase opportunities for us to freely choose and act, thereby contribute to society. (Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, 1986, 68-69). †

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