Review

Noreen Herzfeld,
Technology and Religion: Remaining Human in a Co-Created World
(Templeton Press, 2009). 167 pp.

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Technology and Religion is the third addition to the "Templeton Science and Religion" series. Each edition invites a leading scientist 'to distill their experience and knowledge into brief tours of their respective specialties', seeking to explain possibilities for interaction between science and religion to 'a general audience' (Editors' Introduction). Herzfeld, professor of theology and computer science at St John's University, Minnesota, fulfills this brief admirably,

introducing a wide range of ethical issues raised by technology and suggesting helpful perspectives through which religious insights may enter these discussions.

Much of the book was first presented as a series of lectures to Catholic and Islamic audiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the author served as a Fulbright Scholar, and 'in the spirit of Sarajevo' the text draws on Christianity, Judaism and Islam (viii). Five chapters address the idea of technology, three areas of development – body, mind and matter – and finally the impact of globalization.

Chapter One, 'Of Morals and Machines', reminds us that technology can be transformative in positive and negative ways. Assessment demands 'a clear grasp of who we are as individuals and societies and the values that we want to live by' (7). Religion preserves traditional wisdom, offers space for discussion and shapes worldviews, and can contribute much to this debate. Herzfeld begins this process with the Christian idea of creation in the image of God, arguing with Gerhard von Rad that Genesis describes humans as God's deputies on earth, tasked with imposing order. It follows, Herzfeld suggests, that the image of God includes the creation of technology (13). Herzfeld now moves to the Trinity, arguing with Karl Barth that the image of God is found in relationships. 'Relationship and dominion must work together in a creative dialectic' (15): as Genesis demonstrates, 'dominion without a relationship to God, to one another, and to the rest of creation can produce unforeseen and disastrous consequences'. Brief discussion identifies the same balance of dominion and relationship in Islamic teaching. Herzfeld ends by introducing three relationship-based questions used by the Amish: does a particular technology 'provide tangible benefits to the community', 'change the relationship of the individual to the community', or 'change the nature of the community itself'? (18)

Chapters 2-4 apply these principles to three fields of technology. 'Healing or Enhancing?' addresses 'technologies of the body', examining the power of medical science to alleviate suffering and change 'what it means to be human' (23). Herzfeld discusses genetic engineering, stem cell research, pharmaceuticals and prosthetics, and contrasts Christian, Jewish and Muslim attitudes to the distinction between alteration and enhancement. The pursuit of self-improvement is strongly criticized as a 'never-ending' quest that leads only to 'the sad state of dissatisfaction

and alienation that is all too common in our society today' (44). Herzfeld finally considers end-of-life care, comparing Catholic and Islamic attitudes to the withdrawal of treatment. Each religion emphasizes the sanctity of life, but teaches that 'life cannot be the ultimate good' (54). A focus on relationships, with God and one another, should encourage caution towards medical technologies that promise to alleviate and improve.

In 'Cyberspace on Our Minds', Herzfeld turns to digital 'technologies of the mind'. A discussion of the history of AI and transhumanism leads to another relational conclusion: intelligence, consciousness and the soul 'are meaningless outside of the context of the human being in a web of relationships with other humans and the environment' (69). More mundane digital technologies also receive attention, including the effects of computer game violence and the limitations and risks of online relationships. Returning again to Barth, Herzfeld argues that face-to-face contact is crucial for authentic, self-disclosing, listening, helping relationships (85). Virtual reality may prove narcissistic but could also be spiritually transformative, like an Orthodox Christian icon, through beauty, encounter and contemplation.

'The New Alchemy' addresses 'technologies of matter': nanotechnology, genetic modification and energy production. Each reflects a philosophy of transmutation, seeking to control and exploit nature. The Amish concern for the community, Herzfeld suggests, should encourage consideration for the poor, other species and the planet. Nanotechnology may move us to wonder, but Reinhold Niebuhr warns against hubris. Genetically modified crops promise much, but their control by global corporations based in the West causes enormous damage to societies and environments around the world.

The final chapter, 'Technology Goes Global', examines globalization. Herzfeld covers isolation from the global network, the loss of local control over technology regulation and the increasing reach of Western culture. Religion may both encourage and hinder technological development: Japanese enthusiasm for robots is traced to Shinto animism, while GM crops are controversial among groups concerned for social justice, kosher or halal. Globalization may threaten religious truth claims by introducing new ideas, encouraging religious switching but also entrenchment in fundamentalism. Herzfeld ends her text by returning to Genesis, through a

discussion of Christian, Hindu and Muslim teachings on the social nature of sin: the image of God involves creativity, responsible dominion and relationship, and technology becomes destructive when it undermines these themes.

The range of technological innovations and trends Herzfeld discusses is impressive, and the theme of relationship around which her engagement with religion is constructed is helpful and suggestive. The comparative religious dimension is particularly valuable, and should encourage other scholars to follow Herzfeld's example in bringing different traditions into conversation around shared concerns. The brevity of the text contributes to a number of limitations, however, which future research should hope to amend. Herzfeld's central premise is that religion, as a global and ancient phenomenon, offers a valuable perspective from which to evaluate technology, and this strategy for engagement focuses attention almost exclusively on shared and uncontroversial principles of ethics and anthropology that can be easily applied to nonreligious debates. "Religion" appears as a largely homogenous entity, with little acknowledgement of the diversity within or between different traditions, locations and eras. Such an approach is helpful, to some extent, but strips away much of what is distinctive, meaningful and challenging about religion – including those aspects which may make religious engagement with technology shallow or even dangerous. The Templeton series is intended as an accessible introduction for a general audience, and *Technology and Religion* serves that purpose well. Scholars of religion and technology should welcome this text as a helpful overview of major concerns, but Herzfeld's suggestions toward a theology of relationship will repay much further exploration.