

# Christian Perspectives on Technology: A Dialog Between Faith and Innovation

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the historical interplay between Christianity and technological progress, highlighting three predominant perspectives: optimistic, pessimistic, and ambiguous. The optimistic view, rooted in philosophers like Francis Bacon, emphasized technology's potential to enhance human existence and creative responsibilities. In contrast, the pessimistic outlook, exemplified by thinkers like Jacques Ellul, warned against dehumanization and alienation brought by mechanized efficiency. A middle-ground view, represented by Stephen V. Monsma, portrayed technology as context-dependent and ethically shaped. The research situated these perspectives within Christian themes such as humanity's role in creation, the Fall's impact, and eschatological hopes, offering insights into technology's spiritual dimensions.

**KEYWORDS:** Christianity and technology, optimistic perspective, dehumanization, moral ambiguity

## 1. Introduction

Technology is a challenge and a source of questioning for the contemporary world, which has led to the development of the philosophy of technology. Carl Mitcham (in Verkerk et al., 2015 13-14) identifies three stages in the evolution of philosophical reflection on technology. The first stage, at the end of the 19th century, includes thinkers such as Ernst Kapp and Karl Marx, who saw technology as an extension of man and a form of social liberation. The second stage, influenced by existentialist philosophers such as José Ortega y Gasset and Martin Heidegger, emphasizes personal experience and the human relationship with technology in a cultural context. The third stage is characterized by an empiricist approach, proposed by thinkers such as Don Ihde and Bruno Latour, who seek to learn to live with advanced technologies. Theology, too, has addressed the challenges of technology, initially through the writings of Jacques Ellul and C. S. Lewis, and later through Christian studies of technology and ethics, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence and digital religion. Interest in the philosophy of technology has increased, reflected in a rising number of papers and conferences. This expansion of research reflects a deepening awareness of the impact of technology on society, emphasizing the need to understand not only the tools we use, but also their ethical and cultural implications.

Similarly, theology has begun to integrate the challenges of technology, adopting a language and approach inspired by the philosophy of technology. This intersection was initially explored by influential thinkers such as Jacques Ellul and C.S. Lewis, who laid the groundwork for a deep theological reflection on how technological innovations affect Christian faith and religious practice. In their writings, Ellul warned of the risks that technology can bring to the spiritual life, while Lewis emphasized the need for moral discernment in the face of technological advances (Mitcham, Grote, and Checketts 2022a, 234–35).

In recent decades, the attention of theologians has broadened into more specialized areas such as the ethics of technology, which examines the moral implications of the use

of technology in various contexts, artificial intelligence, which raises questions about the nature of humanity and divine sovereignty, and digital religion studies, which investigates how technology is transforming religious practices and faith communities. These new research directions reflect a growing awareness of the crucial role that technology plays in contemporary life. However, as Levi Checketts points out, a constant challenge remains the lack of an organized and coherent structure within the theological discipline dedicated to the study of technology. The theological community is constantly searching for new perspectives and methods to address these contemporary challenges in order to better understand the impact of technology on spirituality and religious life (Mitcham, Grote, and Checketts 2022a, 236).

## 2. Christian perspectives on technology

Before discussing the viewpoints, it is essential to define two terms and explain their usage in the context. **Technology:** In their work *Techniques and Civilizations*, Mumford and Winner (2010, 2–6) refer to the term technical as synonymous with machines. He believes that technical advancement is essentially the advancement of machines through mechanical processes. Jacques Ellul challenges this notion, asserting that technique originated with machines and evolved through mechanics; however, it is not confined to that, as it has also developed independently from machines, which have now become a part of technique. Setting aside the broader terminological debate for future discussions, we adopt Levi Checketts' definition of technology as "something created by human beings (a physical instrument, a social system, or a new organism) to channel the power (of nature) to achieve an end." The common tendency is to perceive technology primarily in terms of objects, yet it is crucial to understand that certain integrated technologies give rise to technological systems like the Internet (Ellul 1980, 24). **Christianity:** We utilize the term Christianity in its most basic sense, referring to Christian individuals, Christian communities (denominations or churches), and particularly Christian theology. Christianity encompasses theological thought and represents a worldview. In this essay, we will argue that Christianity, as a repository of faith, interacts with technology, particularly in the context of modern technology.

Christians' attitudes towards technology and media illustrate a rather unclear scenario, with some viewing technology and media in an exceedingly favorable light, while others hold a rather negative perspective on them. Across the spectrum of reactions to technology, several patterns can be identified. Ian Barbour, a scholar in the field of science and religion, offers a helpful three-part classification that encapsulates the most prevalent responses to technology. Barbour's research draws upon the insights of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, from the twentieth century, who identified various ways to interpret the interaction between Christianity and culture. Barbour's framework categorizes individuals into three groups: those who embrace technology with optimism, those who are skeptical of it, and those who regard technology as a complex tool of influence. Although any classification like this tends to oversimplify the intricacies and uncertainties of the subject matter, Barbour's divisions serve as a valuable foundation for exploring how different factions within the Christian community perceive and interact with technology (Campbell and Garner 2016, 40).

Behind every viewpoint at opposing extremes lies the often unspoken premise that the human condition is primarily defined by humanity's bond with the natural world. In the optimistic viewpoint, the Christian struggles against nature, which, after the fall, no longer submits to him and which he must strive to control. In this context, technology aligns with humanity. Conversely, the pessimistic viewpoint, relies on the romantic notion of an ideal connection between humanity and nature. Here, technology

fundamentally clashes with what is genuinely human and natural.(Mitcham, Grote, and Checketts 2022b, 30–31)

### ***2.1. Technological optimism***

Christians who hold this perspective perceive technology through the theological framework that supports the advancement of modern science and technology while also grasping the role of Christians through engagement in a technological society. This attitude is well recognized in a broad segment of Protestantism throughout modern history. This is referred to as liberal Protestantism. Brunner describes it as “evolutionary optimism for the betterment of the world,” or simply “Christian Americanism” (Hutchison 1975, 367). Its foundations are frequently traced back to the writings of Francis Bacon, who significantly influenced the scientific revolution that began in the Middle Ages by advocating for scientific experimentation as a means to honor God and fulfill Scripture (Muntersbjorn 2003, 1137). The second aspect pertains to the interpretation of Genesis 1:28, where God blessed them and instructed, “Be fruitful, and multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.” John Goldingay asserts that Bacon initiates the interpretation of this text in relation to the advancement of science and technology (Goldingay 2015, 145–46), based on the conviction that this would be the correct method to restore humanity's lost dominance over nature (lost in the fall).

With Bacon's scientific viewpoint, American Christianity exerted considerable social influence, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Mead (1956, 1) contended that there was a “virtual identification of the perspective of confessional Protestantism with Americanism or the American way of life.” Religion, in general, was primarily practiced within the framework of a free market system, for which the most persuasive argument was the quest for economic prosperity. Individuals like Andrew Carnegie sought moral foundations for their financial achievements and turned to the natural law of competition for justification. Clergymen welcomed them halfway, assuring them that God was on their side. In 1901, Bishop William Lawrence of Massachusetts stated that individuals could discern two guiding principles in their lives. First, he acknowledged his “divine mission” to conquer nature, exploit its resources, and utilize them for his benefit. Second, “ultimately, only the moral individual will possess wealth,” because “piety is closely tied to wealth” (Mead 1956, 10). With such a perspective, scientific and technological advancements can only be eagerly welcomed and received as blessings from God. Other clergy members enthusiastically endorsed the strong connection between governance, economy, and the gospel. Henry Ward Beecher, amidst the triumph of the Civil War, confidently advocated for the industrialized Northeast of America:

We must take care of this continent. The South has been tried and found wanting. It is not worthy of dominion. It has lost the sceptre of our national government.... and this continent will henceforth be governed by Northerners, with Northern ideas and a Northern gospel (Mead 1956, 7).

In his article “*Christian Attitudes toward a Technological Society*”, Gustafson (1959, 180) concludes that “despite the distress caused by the swift social transformations accompanying industrialization and the cyclical nature of economic growth and decline, it appears that the hand of God rested upon those who attained power.” One can detect the ironic tone in which he describes the security of those discovering God within economics and politics, who were convinced that God endorsed any scientific progress and the endeavors of affluent individuals supporting these advancements.

## 2.2. *Technological Pessimism*

On the entirely contrary side, significantly critical views on technology have emerged. This viewpoint is distinctly illustrated by individuals within the mystical tradition, both from the West and the East. Carl Mitcham, a Catholic philosopher focused on technology, argues that the fundamental proposition of *Theology and Technology: Essays in Christian Analysis* is that there exists an unavoidable conflict between Christianity and technology.

A less articulated connection appears with the emerging discipline of eco-theology. Lynn White identifies the historical origins of the ecological crisis as rooted in Christianity. In his work, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* (White 1967, 53) contends that a human-centered perspective of nature has been fostered within Western Christianity, based on biblical texts from Genesis, which declare that humanity, created in God's likeness, he was granted dominion over nature. This notion resulted in technological advancements that overlooked the exploitation of the natural world and the deterioration of the environment. For him, the remedy “in ecological terms is contingent upon our perception of the human-nature relationship. Increased science and technology will not resolve our present ecological predicament until we discover a new faith or reevaluate the existing one”.

Gustafson (1959, 181) introduces the phrase “romantic Christian detachment.” This concept is clearly represented by Eliot (1939, 91) in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, where a reflective yearning for life in harmony with nature is articulated. He analyzes the friction between the Church and the State/World, a challenging dichotomy to articulate because within each individual, the forces of the world and the forces of the Church are in conflict. However, if this tension results in a constant distraction from God, we risk the grave peril of ultimate and total alienation from God after death. The distractions that propagate a deep immorality, to which we all succumb as part of societal existence, are of utmost concern to the Church (Eliot 1939, 96).

Gustafson characterizes the view of “romantic detachment” as the belief that Christian communities can flourish more effectively in an agricultural setting than in an industrial one. The primary assertion is that human nature is more aligned with the created order, and technology hinders humanity's ability to reflect the image of God. This perspective evolves from a longing to revert to better times, when societies were stable, organized around small familial units, and engaged with nature. In such times, anxiety and mental disorders were virtually absent, leading to safety, prosperity, and enduring moral values. These longings are often inspired before a thorough examination of the communities they wish to revive (Gustafson 1959, 182).

Gustafson also highlights a principle underscored by Christians who subscribe to this view. It posits that the natural is inherently Christian, and that the natural is intimately connected to nature in a dual sense. It is presumed that both Christian and natural lives can thrive best when the artificial cultural environment is minimized. Additionally, there exists a moral order within nature, reflected in human structure and interpersonal relationships, which can be understood and historically contextualized. The technological society appears to obscure the true essence of humanity, or at the very least, provides a more challenging environment for individuals to become who they genuinely aspire to be (Gustafson 1959, 182). Under these circumstances, many thinkers propose a form of withdrawal from technological societies to preserve the individual.

## 2.3. *Technological Ambiguity*

The predominant movement within Christianity, commonly known as the church of the center, opted not to affiliate itself with either the anti-cultural radicals, who dismiss traditional values, or the cultural Christians, who readily accept modern culture. In this

framework, the inquiry into the connection with technology is examined not through the lens of man's interaction with nature, but rather through the lens of man's interaction with God. This profound perspective underscores that technology is not merely a neutral instrument, but a significant element that shapes our spirituality and connection with the divine. There is a range of discourses within centrist Christianity regarding technology, particularly those rooted in the Protestant tradition, starting with the thinker Martin Luther. For dualistic Christians, the core issue does not stem from the struggle between nature and technology, as viewed by technological Christians, but rather from the conflict between God and humanity. This tension is, indeed, manifested in the dichotomy between divine justice and human justification. On one side stands humanity, with all its actions, political and religious structures, and both pagan and Christian deeds; on the opposing side is God, revealed in Christ and Christ in God (Niebuhr 1975, 150).

Gustafson draws a crucial distinction between the ethics of conscience and the ethics of cultural responsibility (Gustafson 1959, 185–86). The ethics of conscience posits that the role of Christians is to uphold existing cultural values and safeguard the good against more significant threats. From this viewpoint, the circumstances in which Christians find themselves are determined by the world and must be accepted as they are, without challenge. Conversely, Christian prophecy does not merely accept these situations but rigorously critiques them. It does not view them as a divine blessing or as an absolute standard for living. The nuance of this ethical stance arises from the capacity to relate to social order and technological progress in a relative manner while maintaining a steadfast connection to God. According to Niebuhr, humanity gains the freedom to surpass the limitations imposed by society; individuals are not justified by societal norms but by the divine acts revealed through Jesus Christ (Gustafson 1959, 186–87). This perspective grants individuals an inner freedom to embrace moral ambiguity and take responsibility for their actions in the world without the need for absolute validation.

A pertinent illustration of this viewpoint is the response from the Pontifical Council for Social Communications regarding the Internet, which highlights its ambiguous character: “Although the virtual reality of cyberspace cannot substitute for the actual inter-human community, the tangible reality of the sacraments and liturgy, or the direct and immediate proclamation of the Gospel, can enhance them, drawing people towards a more enriching experience of faith and enriching the spiritual lives of users” (The Church and Internet n.d.). This stance encapsulates the intricacies and subtleties of the relationship between technology and spirituality within the framework of contemporary Christianity.

### 3. Conclusion

Christianity (Rotaru 2023, 62-79) provides a diverse framework for addressing challenges from modern technology. Some view technology as a divine blessing that enhances life and supports Christian values like love and compassion. Others express skepticism, seeing technology as a source of spiritual degradation, leading to addiction, social isolation, and moral distortion. A middle ground exists where individuals seek balance, advocating for a holistic approach that aligns technology with Christian ethics. Ongoing dialogue between religious and technological communities is vital to develop a clear ethical framework and ensure that humanity and spirituality remain central as technology evolves.

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