

'The Spiritual Force is Lacking'

Bonhoeffer on Secularization, Technology and Religion.

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'God is dead and technology is his corpse.' That's how the perspective of the Dutch writer Harry Mulisch on technology has been summarized. This seemingly rather blasphemous and morbid metaphor contains an intriguing theory about the relationship between technology and the Christian faith. Mulisch writes: 'The god who manifests himself in human relationships, was the glue that kept people together for centuries: most clearly on Sundays in church, most strongly through membership in the church by way of baptism. (...) But then, after the world had been a single uninterrupted Sunday for eighteen centuries, came technology. (...) Therefore, because the word became flesh in technology, we no longer need a mystical god to keep us together.(...) We all partake of and in life and death are at the mercy of the iron body of Christ.' [\[1\]](#)

With these terse and hyperbolic words a challenging theological connection is made between the Christian view of the incarnation and the role of technology in western civilization.

In this view technology is regarded as the product and end of the history of western religious metaphysics. Technology is to be seen as the continuation of religion and metaphysics, but by different means. Using myths and magic humanity once tried to impose order on being, to give structure to our existence. A projection of sense and meaning in response to the vagaries of nature. A colorful variety of religious systems emerged. The most highly developed religions arrived at the belief in one God, the existence of one world. The monotheistic God was the source and guarantor of the structure of being and thus made it possible for mankind to get a single all-encompassing hold on the reality surrounding it. Belief in God thus in some sense performed a 'technical' task. In modern culture this role of God has to a large extent been assumed by technology. In effect technology still performs the

same *function* as did the edifice of religious metaphysics: it introduces human, meaningful structure into a chaotic existence. It uses different means, however. It does not wait to see whether any sense or meaning can be discovered behind, above, or under this reality. Rather it itself constructs this meaning in reality. In order to do this, it does not change to a different world, as does religious metaphysics, but itself changes the world. It applies structure and does no longer wait till structure is revealed to it.

The living faith that used to connect us with the metaphysical source and guarantor of the structure of existence, has a fitting substitute: confidence in technology. That's the reason why faith has gradually died out; it has become superfluous and is retreating, since in many ways technology is able to successfully achieve the same things religion used to promise: create a certain degree of order and security, which enable us to develop and sustain ourselves in this existence. God is gone, but what remains of him, his skeleton, a reasonably structured framework of being, religion has left us in technology.

One of the modern theologians who has thoroughly thought through the connection between technology and Christian faith suggested here, or at any rate suspected the importance of it, is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The letters he wrote from prison in 1944 - 1945 attest to this. In this article I offer a number of considerations in response to Bonhoeffer's 'Outline for a Book,' a draft for a book that he wants to write, included in his prison letters and collected in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In my opinion an intriguing connection is made in one of the fragments between technology, the end of religion, and human responsibility. Bonhoeffer's originality lies in the manner in which he fits this view of technology into a Christian theological framework: that technology can be described as the "corpse of God" does not mean the end of the Christian faith; technology enables us to live with and for the living God as responsible human beings.

I. Technology, Secularization and Coming of Age

The letter Bonhoeffer wrote to Eberhard Bethge from his cell on April 30th, 1944, marks a turning point in his view of the relationship between western culture and Christian tradition. Bonhoeffer recognizes that the days of religion are over. 'We are moving toward a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more.'^[2] Bonhoeffer sees religion as a historically determined and passing form of human expression. It has no future in a world that has come of age. The working hypothesis 'God' has become superfluous,

now that mankind has learned to work out all important questions within itself. He portrays the history of western civilization as 'one large development leading to the autonomy of the world.'^[3] The world has come of age, Bonhoeffer then realizes, using terminology that refers to Kant. Our situation is such, in effect, that we can no longer hide behind a guardian that speaks for us. We will have to speak for ourselves, whether we like it or not. Finally, based on this analysis of culture, Bonhoeffer arrives at a theological assessment of our situation. 'So our coming of age leads us to a true recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as people who manage our lives without God. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15, 34).'^[4]

In the reception of Bonhoeffer the cultural-historical outline that leads to this theological verdict has in fact only been interpreted in terms of the enlightenment paradigm: the growing autonomy of the world is the result of the increasing self-awareness of the rational subject, which gradually liberates itself of extraneous authorities: religion, church, state. Bonhoeffer himself gave occasion for this humanistic interpretation. His description of the history of modern civilization (WE (DBW 8) 529ff.) in his letters to Bethge was strongly affected by his recent reading of W.A. Dilthey's *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation*.^[5]

However, in the draft of the book that he was about to write based on his new insights – unfortunately the book is now lost – little of this reading shows up in a direct way. When taking stock of Christianity – the first chapter of the book, which will be followed by a chapter dealing with the question 'what exactly the Christian faith is about' and a chapter drawing conclusions – not the rationality of the individual subject but technology as a social environment supplies the primary explanatory framework for the coming of age of humankind (and – as a corollary of this – its religiouslessness). Not so much increased rational self-awareness, but the modern development of technology into an encompassing cultural environment makes humankind come of age and spells the end of religion. One can say that Bonhoeffer moves away from Dilthey – who hardly speaks about technology at all – and ends up close to Harry Mulisch.

The passage follows here. I will comment on it afterwards.

(a) The coming of age of humankind (as already indicated). The safeguarding of life against "accidents" and "blows of fate"; even if these cannot be eliminated, the danger can be reduced. Insurance (which, although it lives on "accidents," seeks to mitigate their effects) as a Western phenomenon. The aim: to be independent of nature. Nature was formerly conquered by spiritual means, with us by

technological organization of all kinds. Our immediate environment is not nature, as formerly, but organization. But with this protection from nature's menace there arises a new one – through organization itself. But the spiritual force is lacking. The question is: What protects us against the menace of organization? We are again thrown back on ourselves. We have managed to deal with everything, only not with ourselves. We can insure against everything, only not against ourselves. In the last resort it all turns on us. ' (TF 510f.)

At first sight one might think that a humanistic cultural critic is speaking here, describing the conflict between the human soul and the anonymous power of technology and playing them both off against each other. Bonhoeffer's reading of Oswald Spengler appears to dominate here.^[6] But the text can also be read less prescriptively and more descriptively: here we have, within a cultural-historical outline, an explanation of how we became what we have become. Humankind has come *of age*; in a descriptive way this is to be seen as an interpretation of our actual moral situation: we have become responsible for our life and cannot back out of this with any appeal to any authority whatsoever. What made us come of age? The fact that people tried to reduce the contingencies in their existence as much as possible using 'technical organization of all kinds.'

Bonhoeffer sees technology here as *organization*, a rational and methodical way of ordering and structuring reality. Technology is creating a human network of sense and meaning in the midst of the capriciousness of chance. In my opinion Bonhoeffer here opens the door to an unusual understanding of technology. Usually technology is seen as the application of science, a form of rational knowledge applied to exercise control. Technology as *manipulation*. However, technology as organization could also in some sense be regarded as a developed form of language. Modern linguistic philosophy doesn't only see language as a form of expression, but also as a form of social activity. Human beings speak as they act and act by speaking. They perform *speech acts*, and use words as *tools* to do so. But this is not restricted to words. Speech acts can also be performed with other tools. Material objects and devices are used by human beings to serve as carriers of meaning, creators of order and structure, communicators of sense. They function as 'metaphors' of language. Language and technology have the same purpose: they constitute a network of meaning and thus create human, inhabitable order in a chaotic universe. A hammer, a factory, a train, a computer network – individually they each perform a practical task in an efficient manner. But together these technological resources constitute an *environment*: a single technological universe.^[7] A unity of meaning, independent of nature.

In his 'Outline for a Book' Bonhoeffer regards technology as a form of rational organization. He presents the insurance business as a model for technology: the example shows that technology is not able to organize contingencies away (fate still keeps striking people in ways that cannot be reversed). But chance becomes more bearable, less painful, less dangerous. So this is not about the idea of western humanity trying to take control of existence through technology. Technology is presented here as a form of 'Kontingenzbewältigung'^[8], a way to be surprised as painlessly as possible by the vagaries of a nature indifferent to humanity. 'The goal is to be *independent* of nature'; not its domination, exploitation or suppression. Bacon ('knowledge is power') or Descartes ('humanity as master and owner of nature') are far away here.

Technology means making nature more human.

Technology mediates our relationship with the reality that surrounds us, it acts as a human buffer to the unknown, the 'unheimische'. No longer does 'the soul' ward off the contingencies, says Bonhoeffer (is he thinking of magic?), but now technology does this. We can connect this comment with others from the prison letters. Elsewhere we read that the relationship with nature no longer runs directly by way of inwardness. Those times are over, observes Bonhoeffer in his letter of April 30th, 1944, and *therefore* also 'the time of religion in general.' (TF 501). The relationship to nature has become external, by way of purposeful organization of man and means.

As a result it is no longer nature but technology that determines our primary experience of reality. Only on the edge of the lighted city do we still see the starry sky at night. Where do we actually live? In the cosmos or in the city? In the city, naturally. Our primary direct experience of being is a mediated one. Technology is not some arbitrary *means* to an external goal, it is our *environment* that forms an intrinsic part of our self-understanding (Ellul). Here Bonhoeffer doesn't seem to argue for an instrumental, but for an *ontological* view of technology. Technology makes up our present cultural historical context of being.

But technology also participates in the 'dialectic of the Enlightenment', described by Horkheimer and Adorno - in 1944 again, but this time from exile in the U.S. - : the victory over dependence from nature in turn creates new dependencies. Technology, intent on humanizing nature, threatens humanity. Bonhoeffer is definitely not oblivious of the negative aspects of technology and must certainly have been thinking of Hitler's machinery of war and destruction here.

Then we read: 'But the spiritual force is lacking!' Are we to read this as an accusation against modern man, who doesn't have enough backbone to resist 'le système technicien' (Ellul)? Is he arguing here for a return to a normative humanistic view of mankind which can lead to the

rehabilitation of the 'soul', the inwardness? Or is this a *description* again, the registration of a fact: as technological human beings we have become a problem to ourselves and we will not be able to solve the problem by doing a step back. Realizing our own vulnerability (we cannot insure ourselves against ourselves) *and* responsibility (we are thrown back on ourselves) is what qualifies us as being of age. 'In the last resort it all turns on us.' This is what Bonhoeffer apparently means with 'being of age': not a factual or ideal autonomy, no optimism with regard to the possibilities of humanity, no blind faith in the progress of technology, but insight into the moral situation with which a technological culture confronts us: being radically responsible for the continuation of the world.

In the first section of 'Outline for a Book' coming of age and technology are *intrinsically* connected to each other. In the second section Bonhoeffer draws the conclusions from this for religion:

'(b). The religionlessness of those who have come of age. "God" as a working hypothesis, as a stopgap for our embarrassments, has become superfluous (as already indicated).
(TF 511)

It is not easy to read these words without prejudice; they have become such a cliché in the theological debate after the war. But let's try to come to a creative interpretation of Bonhoeffer's notion of religion by tying in to a central sense he attaches to this notion: religion as metaphysics. Mainly understood by Nietzsche-reader Bonhoeffer as a thinking in terms of two spaces, in which the world of experience was regarded as a mirror of a transcendent double world.^[9] Perhaps understanding Bonhoeffer along the lines of Nietzsche and Heidegger can help us along in this area.^[10]

According to Bonhoeffer this radically responsible humanity in a technological culture has become a humanity without religion. Again the registration of a fact, a description, not a normative judgement. Nor is this a prediction that religious practices will cease or that the experience of transcendence will become stale (an error of the so-called theologians of secularization who regarded Bonhoeffer as their prophet). What is at stake here is the insight that in a technological universe 'God' cannot perform the role of the principal foundation in a world view any more. The 'God' who up to now performed the role of first principle, of *archè* of the world, the role of the corner and capping stone in western metaphysics, has become superfluous through a humanity that organizes its world technologically.

It's not about the question whether people *can* believe in such a 'God', but about the question whether they – living as they do in their own techno-scientific universe – in fact are still doing the God thing, even when maintaining their conceptions of god and their religious practices.^[11] They may still speak the language of traditional metaphysics, but it has become a language the life of which has disappeared. It is no longer supported by a vital religious devotion.

That time, Bonhoeffer observes in his letter of April 30th, 1944, is past and gone. 'The time of inwardness and of conscience, of religion, in other words, is over.' For a time soul, inwardness and conscience were the places where transcendence was experienced. But since our subjectivity has expanded and organized itself in the technological universe, there no longer exists an unmediated experience of the self (in soul, inwardness and conscience) and an objective, transcendent world surrounding us. Subjectivity has been externalized as and objectified in technology and is mediated by it.

Reality has changed its shape, and this influences our experience of the transcendent. To say it in a Heideggerian way, we have a *historical* relationship to being. Being has its own 'Seinsgeschick'. We are shaping being into what it is with technology. We have constructed our own, immanent ontology. Thus technology has brought metaphysics to an end. But technology inherits a mortgage as well. It too is driven by the desire to change the world into an inhabitable home.

II. 'In the last resort it all turns on us'. A radical ethics of responsibility.

What does this mean for theological ethics and its evaluation of technology? I will draw a number of conclusions.

1. In the first place the insights mentioned above have a *methodological* implication: Seeing technology as purely instrumental (as a means to reach human goals) or anthropological (as a form of human activity) means to overlook its *ontological* significance.^[12] Technology organizes our experience of being. We have to assess technology as *homo technicus*. Theologians that radically criticize technology are like passengers in an airplane that instruct air control to shoot down their plane.

2. Next: an assessment of technology will never be completely positive or negative, but rather both at the same time. Technology is ambivalent and must be guided as much as possible by a process of political and

ethical decision making and serve human values. This view corresponds with a notion of technology that does not see it as a linear application of scientific knowledge, nor as an autonomous power that determines everything, but as a factor in contextual interaction with culture and science.

Even if one must acknowledge, with Heidegger, the far-reaching ontological consequences of the development of technology, one does not have to follow his one-sided negative assessment of it. With Gianni Vattimo one can also read the history of technology in a more differentiated way. Domination is not distinctive for western technology *as such*. Technology is more than machine, it is also art. Present day ICT opens up the possibility of a 'softer', more peaceful communication technology. In a way *homo technicus* has grown up and entered a second phase of his existence: he is no longer the subject facing an object, like an adolescent that wants to conquer the world, but he is an actor in a continuous game of interaction in which he can hold his own only if he doesn't continually speak but also listens. Modern technology embodies new forms of subjectivity in which play and passivity play an important role and the struggle for survival is no longer the main concern.^[13]

3. However, it is important to maintain a healthy balance in any theological assessment of modern technology. We should not without qualification call it a messianic tool, as some 20th century theologians have done. The theology of secularization, we can say now, did not take leave of metaphysics radically enough. It did part with nature as an ontological paradigm, but traded that in for history. History became the place where God and the path to the Kingdom could be found. Faith in progress and eschatology melted into one another, and again religion took responsibility away from humanity.

A radically secularized theology along the lines of Bonhoeffer, however, will have to reject *both* nature and history as a legitimizing site where God's providence can be found. In a technological culture history too is man made, a form of 'technical organization of all kinds' (Bonhoeffer). There is no room for a quasi-religious faith in technology any more.

4. What does all this imply for the normativity of a theological ethics that wants to come to an assessment of technology? To conclude I return to Bonhoeffer's prison theology. God makes us live without the construct 'god'. That is true in ethics as well. In ethics too we like to be 'religious', if possible. We yearn for security, guarantees, legitimization of our moral decisions. But God himself – we concur with Bonhoeffer – point us back to ourselves. We have already cited the sentence: 'God would have us know that we must live as people who manage our lives

without God. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15, 34).’ He then continues with: ‘The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. (TF 508, letter of 17.7.44).

A theology that reflects on secularization, leads to a radical ethics of responsibility. Nature happens to us and faces us; whereas technology, that's us (even if it happens to us). The technological universe is open to moral evaluation (Barbour). In the end it turns on humankind there. Theological ethics is an ethics ‘without God.’

Hans Jonas wrote such an ethics in his *Prinzip Verantwortung*. In the end it turn on humankind, wrote Bonhoeffer. Jonas starts his book with a similar observation, taken from Sophocles’ Antigone: ‘Much is monstrous, and nothing more monstrous than humankind’.^[14]

Are there any points of orientation to which the responsible human being can appeal in his moral reflection? Neither nature nor history can serve as moral authority any more. So in the ethics of technology- it really turns on humankind, and humankind alone. The current debate on biotechnology and genetics shows how difficult it is to find one's bearings. I think that theological ethics partake of the same quandary. There is no ultimate principle for humankind but the 'idea of mankind itself', according to Jonas, ‘the image of man to which we feel indebted’.^[15]

In Christian theology this statement is not understood in a formal and circular way, but in a meaningful and historically specific way. The image of the person to which it is indebted is the concrete figure of Jesus Christ. In this human being God has shown himself to be ‘God-with-us’. The proclamation of his life and death, of his incarnation, his suffering and his resurrection, has blazed a trail in history through Scripture and tradition and generated a complex network of practices and values that can continue to serve as a set of bearings in our search for the *humane* content of technology. Within and thanks to the hermeneutics of this tradition, thanks to this labor of remembering, we don't live in this technological universe only abandoned by God (*‘without God’*), not only in radical responsibility (*‘before God’*), but also in all this *‘with God,’* as fellow creators in his continuous work of creation.^[16]

^[1] Harry Mulisch, *Voer voor psychologen*, Amsterdam 1998 (1961), 130 – 140, 138v.

- [2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom*, Edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, Revised Edition (Harper, San Francisco) New York 1995, 501. (TF)
- [3] *Ibid.*, 529 ff. (letter of 16.7.44)(LPP 360)(modified translation)
- [4] *A Testament to Freedom*, 508 (Letter of July 16, 1944).
- [5] With regard to the influence of Dilthey on the prison letters, cf. Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *Glauben als Leben. Dietrich Bonhoeffer und die nichtreligiöse Interpretation biblischer Begriffe*, Frankfurt am Main e.a., 1996.
- [6] As in his *Ethik* (DBW 6), 168ff.
- [7] Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, Continuum - New York, 1980, 34 ff.
- [8] In recent sociology of religion (Lübbe, Luhmann, Berger, Luckmann) the central notion in a functional theory explaining religion.
- [9] Cf. E. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Eine Biographie*, Munich 1978 (4th ed.)(1967), 979 ff.
- [10] I have drawn my inspiration here from the writings of Gianni Vattimo (*The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1991; *Ethique de l'interprétation*, Paris 1991; *The Transparent Society*, Cambridge 1992; *Beyond Interpretation. The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, Cambridge 1997).
- [11] Cf. TF 511 (Outline for a Book), 511v. 'What do we really believe? I mean, believe in such a way that we stake our lives on it? The problem of the Apostles' Creed? "What *must* I believe" is the wrong question...'
- [12] Here lies the importance of Heidegger for the philosophy of technology. See his 'Die Frage nach der Technik' (1954), op.cit. 6 ff. About this: Michael Trowitzsch, *Technokratie und Geist der Zeit. Beiträge zu einer theologischen Kritik*, Tübingen 1988, 83 - 195.
- [13] Vattimo, *Ethique de l'interprétation*, 114 ff.
- [14] Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung. Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Frankfurt am Main, 1984 (1979), 17.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 52.
- [16] The concept of human beings as *created co-creators* (Ph. Hefner, *The Human Factor. Evolution, Culture, and Religion*, Minneapolis 1993) is a fruitful attempt to actualize the theological metaphor. See also F. de Lange, *Gevoel voor verhoudingen. God, evolutie en ethiek*, Kampen 1997, 192 ff.