Law and Grace: Combating the American Heresy of Pelagianism

The American Church has fallen under the error of Pelagianism. *Law and Grace do not represent two plans of God, but two phases of the same plan of redemption: preparation and fulfillment.*

"For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ." (John 1: 17, NASB)

A young college student once told me that a pastor's son argued with him that no religion—and especially not Christianity—was about faith in any God, but rather the good works that we do for others. Christianity, so the preacher's boy said, concerned doing to others what we would have done to us; it does not even matter if God exists or not, only the good we do for people counts—philanthropy, morality and being a good person matters most, not faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

What the young theologian argued was that all religions are basically the same. They are moralistic[1], which means they inspire people to do good works and that any metaphysical aspect, such as who God is or what he may have done for humanity is irrelevant. Similarly, we often hear that people choose to do evil and that they are not born that way, it is the environment that makes us corrupt—that we are not corrupt by nature.

This all sounds like common sense, but amounts to a denial of the central Christian belief in salvation by grace through faith alone. If we are not sinners by nature but only by choice than we can conceivably make more good choices than evil ones in order to redeem ourselves and then there would be

no need for faith or a savior. Good works and keeping either the internal law of conscience or the old Mosaic Law would suffice.

Salvation by Grace Through Faith Alone

Salvation by grace through faith provides the great distinctive of the Christian faith compared to the other world religions. In contrast, the monotheistic religions Islam and Judaism both present a path of works salvation through obeying either the Torah or the Qur'an. The pantheistic religions, like Buddhism and Hinduism, believe in a rigorous path of enlightenment. While they subscribe to a unique theological heritage and may even be saved, many within the Christian sphere tend to under–appreciate and even unintentionally deny God's free and eternal gift of salvation through a well–meaning but misdirected emphasis on the Mosaic Code, also called the Law (or the Ten Commandments) or other moral and legal codes that operate in a similar fashion, as measuring sticks for salvation.

Christians continually misunderstand and misuse the Law, thus placing themselves and others in bondage to a *de facto* works salvation mentality. The Apostle Paul argued that we did not begin with the Spirit in our salvation only to be perfected by "the flesh" in the works of the Law (Galatians 3: 3). Paul repeatedly identified legalism as a work of the flesh or sinful human nature and worldliness. He spoke of "the elemental principles of the world" (Galatians. 4: 3 and Col. 2: 8, 20) not as secularism, or so called "worldly" practices such as dancing, smoking or movie attendance, as Christians do today. Rather, worldliness according to these passages was the religiosity of the Judaizing heresy that imposed legal restrictions on believers such as circumcision (as seen in *Galatians*) or dietary restrictions, festivals and Sabbath observance or angel worship (in *Colossians*). Paul rejected his great religious inheritance, status and fame as a Pharisee,

considering it all a work of the flesh, so that his righteousness would not derive from the Law, but from Christ (Philippians 3: 1–9). Religious legalism represents as great a threat to grace in the New Testament than any libertine license for sin.

Works salvation indicates a profound insecurity concerning individual freedom in the world's religions and a desire to impose an authoritarian structure. Christians are not guiltless either, as they harbor the same tendencies to impose the Mosaic Code or some form of it on Christians and non–Christians alike. For example, Torah Observant Christians, *Reconstructionism*, *Theonomy*, and *Covenant Theology* all hold to a continuity between law and grace that brings Christians back under the legal and moral requirements of the Mosaic Code. The persistence of Christians who want to commit themselves to the Law, even after 2000 years of Christian history, indicates the Church's misunderstanding of the role of the Law after Christ and the Church's uneasiness with its own belief in grace.

The Role of the Law Today: Instructive, *not* Operative

Preachers and theologians are known to say "We are still under the 10 Commandments" or "The moral law is still in effect, but the rest has been fulfilled by Christ." Although, these explanations offer some guidance on what to do with the 800 pound gorilla in the room– with the theology of grace–they ultimately cannot avoid inconsistencies either with the Law or with the New Testament principle of grace, God's unconditional love.

The Mosaic Law was given to Israel on Mount Sinai as their Constitution and guide to holiness; it was never capable of bringing eternal salvation, but served as a teacher to the preservation of Israel in the Promised Land while demonstrating God's righteous character. It was a temporary

operating system, so to speak, that was necessary in order to display human sinfulness and point to humanity's need for grace. But, crucially, it was destined to pass away or be retired once the plan of God came to fruition in the Life of Christ (Galatians 3). It showed only humanity's guilt, yet foreshadowed in its practices the promise of God's ultimate work of grace (Hebrews 8: 5; 10: 1). Once grace arrived in the work of Christ, the Law was no longer necessary (Hebrews 8: 6). The Law only pointed to human need for grace or the presence of sin. The Law shows people their unrighteousness. God demonstrates his mercy only after explaining and portraying his righteousness. God gives the Law first to demonstrate sin and *then* sends his Son to reveal His love and grace.

The Mosaic Law functions similarly to natural law or general revelation in demonstrating humanity's need for God, the absence of God from the human heart (Romans 1 & 2). The Law and general revelation both perform a preparatory role: either telling humanity it does not know God, as with general revelation, or revealing humanity's sin, as with the Law (Romans 3). They give no saving knowledge, but function only to condemn and never to save. Law and Grace do not represent two plans of God, but two phases of the same plan of redemption: preparation and fulfillment.

One Law, Indivisible, With Grace for All

There is only one Law, which must be accepted as a whole. The unity of the Law applies equally to either its total fulfillment in Christ or to the possibility that the Law remains operative after Christ. The Law cannot be subdivided into different sections such as moral, ceremonial and civil that were applicable before Christ and those sections still applicable after Christ. Any theological approach to the Law that states its partial effectiveness misunderstands the unity of the Law and the work of Christ that has already fulfilled

the Law in its entirety. One either keeps the whole Law or does not (Galatians 3: 10; James 2: 10; Matthew 5: 19; Deuteronomy 27: 1; 28: 1; 30: 8). Likewise, either Christ fulfilled the Law or he did not. Nowhere in the New Testament does it say the Law was partially fulfilled in Christ, leaving the Church to fulfill the rest. A change in one aspect of the Law, such as the Old Testament Priesthood, necessitates the inauguration of a new law and not merely a partial change in the old law (Hebrews 7: 12). Paul argued against the *Judaizers*, who imposed legal restrictions on Christians, that if they accepted one part of the Law they were "under obligation to keep the whole Law" (Galatians 5: 3).

Any return to the Law rejects faith in Christ and even creates a hindrance to the progression of the plan of God in history. The Book of Hebrews gives a dire warning to all who return to these former elements: "For if we go on sinning willfully after we receive the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment.… Anyone who set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severe punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has insulted the spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10: 26–29).

Does Retirement of the Law Mean God Changed?

The problem many express with notion of the Law's retirement is based on this conclusion: God cannot change, so how can He, in effect, repeal his own law? The Law was given in order to maintain Israel as a separate people who would act as a conduit through whom God would send his Messiah to reach the whole world. "When the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law" (Galatians 4:

4). *The Law was by its very nature temporary and conditional to Israel as an operative system in the history of God's plan of universal redemption.* Once the Law and Israel achieved their purposes, or were "fulfilled" in Christ they became obsolete (Hebrews 8: 13). The Law had an expiration date, a shelf life that only lasted until Messiah arrived. The Law played a preparatory role for the coming of Christ; it never had the power to save, but only to condemn in identifying and demonstrating human sin and inadequacies. Its function was to ready mankind for salvation. The Law is good and holy, but it is also obsolete and incomplete (Romans 7; Galatians 3).

Good News! The Law is Fulfilled in Christ

The Law was not abolished, repealed or revamped in any way in the new age of grace. Jesus himself says that he did not come to destroy [*katalyō*] or subvert the Law, but to fulfill [*plēroō*] it (Matthew 5: 17), which means to complete, to finish, accomplish or expire. Paul repeats Jesus' declaration by stating that "Christ is the end [*telos*] of the law," meaning he is the termination or conclusion of it (Romans 10: 4). Jesus does not change the Law nor add to it which he himself admonishes against (Matthew 5: 17–19). The Law was fulfilled in Christ, meaning he met all of its requirements and standards as well as the subsequent punishments for failure. He lived the Law for humanity, keeping it perfectly as our representative before God, and died for all of us, meeting its requisite punishment for sin. Jesus' last words on the cross "It is finished [*teleō*]" (John 19: 30), marks the completion and fulfillment of the Law and effectively completes all of its requirements, obligations or demands for us. Any attempt to place believers back under the Law, even partially, amounts to a rejection of the work of Christ. "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5: 4).

The Law is no longer operative because all its demands were satisfied. Its expiration date has matured and it is no longer in effect since the death of Christ. The Law then has no direct application in the new age of grace. The Law is to the Church what the *Articles of Confederation* is to the United States. They serve great historical value in providing a history that led to the creation of the U.S. Constitution and contain pertinent principles of government decentralization to learn from—but no one is obligated to abide by them any longer. As a system of government it has been retired. The Mosaic Law, like the *Articles of Confederation*, today serves a strictly instructive role; it retains an honorary position as *system emeritus*.

Although, the Law as a binding system has been retired in the plan of God's redemption, it serves an important role in the advice and instruction readers learn from it. The Law offers examples of righteousness and models of holiness. Paul noted that "whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction" (Romans 15: 4). He adds that the history of Israel serves as an example of learning for the Church today (I Corinthians 10: 6) and that "All Scripture is …profitable for teaching … and for training in righteousness" (I Timothy 3: 16). The Church looks back to the Law for guidance and for the meaning of holiness and righteousness, but never applies the Law in the same way as Israel did as a civil nation. The New Testament writers use the Law as examples of righteousness in the reiteration of the Ten Commandments (Romans 13: 8–10; James 2: 8–11). The Law must be used "lawfully" (I Timothy 1: 8) as instruction and not as a binding operating system.

To argue for subdivision in the Law such as ceremonial, dietary, moral, sacrificial, etc., in essence denies the Law's instructive capacities today. The Law is either obsolete in its entirety or it is operative in its entirety and if it is obsolete yet still instructive, it is instructive in its entirety today. The Law has not been abrogated, as if God

somehow made a mistake. Again it was fulfilled, and hence has accomplished its purpose; its *telos* and reason for existence has been realized. The Law was then retired; it serves now only to instruct in righteousness and to demonstrate sinfulness.

The Law never comes to the Church today unmodified from its original context in ancient Israel. If the so–called "moral law" was binding, then its enforcement and punishment must also be binding. Partial Law advocates must change the meaning of the Law to make it palatable. Every system that adopts an operative role for the Law modifies it to some extent through illegitimately subdividing the Law into convenient sections, in a clear case of selective morality, where only some principles from a given system are conveniently chosen and partially applied through abandoning its original meaning and context to fit a contemporary understanding. For example, Sabbath observance is now on Sunday instead of Saturday or the commandment against adultery applying to a monogamous Christian context instead of its original Hebrew polygamous one.

Without enforcement of the Law there is, in reality, no Law. The Church cannot honestly say it is somehow under the obligations of the Law if also does not keep its enforcement. This is where the entire operative approach to the Law breaks apart into utter incoherence in relation to the New Testament principle of grace. The penalty for most infractions against the Law was death by stoning and was often administrated by a civil and religious authority (Deuteronomy 17). Since the Church does not inherit Israel's civil authority, enforcement of the Mosaic Law becomes impossible[2]. (See my article on the prophetic voice of the Church here.)

As the premiere Law of all time, greater than the Code of Hammurabi, greater than the Qur'an, greater than Roman law (Galatians 3:21), the Mosaic Law offers itself as instruction and example for individual morality and civil society, but

requires no uncontestable obligation regarding its adoption and enforcement. The Law ceases to be a legalistic code that must be enforced to the letter upon pain of death. Instead, it *speaks* as the Word of God. *It now brings life instead of death.* In Christ "the ministry of death" transforms into "the ministry of the Spirit" and life" (2 Corinthians 3).

A New Commandment

Though the Law was fulfilled, accomplished and expired in Christ, and its requirements and penalties no longer directly apply today. This does not mean the Church lives lawlessly and without moral standards. The fulfillment of the Law in Christ means the fulfillment of the Law in his Body, the Church. Jesus and both the Apostles Paul and James stated that the commandment of love fulfills the Law (Matthew 22: 37–40; Mark 12: 29–31; Romans 13: 8–10; Galatians 5: 14; James 2: 8). "Love … is the fulfillment [*plērōma*] of the Law" (Romans 13: 10) The Church, as well as Christ, bring a completion and conclusion to the Law. Jesus left the Church with a new commandment of love that fulfills the old Law. Just as the old Law marked the distinction of Israel as a holy people from the rest of the pagan nations (Deuteronomy 28: 1–2), so the new commandant of love distinguishes the Church from a hostile world system: "A new commandant I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 14: 34, 35).

The old Law was not a failure, so that God had to begin again with a New Commandment of Love. The Law was as Paul said, "weak … through the flesh," (Romans 8: 3), meaning it was simply incapable of producing anything other than the recognition of sin and condemnation (Romans 7: 7–13). It could never save and transform humanity. For that purpose God sent his Son and "condemned sin …in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled [*plēroō*, completed, finished or

accomplished] in us who do not walk according to the flesh [sinful human nature] but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8: 4).

Because believers now have the Holy Spirit, they are new creations (2 Corinthians 5: 17) and the Law is accomplished in them. This does not mean Christians live perfectly as Christ did, but that there are no moral or legal requirements that they must meet as a sign of their acceptance by God; instead of living up to a standard, they live out of the sufficiency of Christ. They are guided by the Holy Spirit to accomplish the New Commandment of Love, also called "the law of the Spirit" (Romans 8: 2), "the law of faith" (Romans 3: 27), "the law of Christ" (Galatians 6: 2) and "the royal law" (James 2: 8), reflecting the image of God in Christ. *Jesus did not leave a legal code to regulate every aspect of life, like Moses; instead he gave the Church an orientation of love and freedom.* Law compels obedience through fear of punishment. It dominates the individual's will so that his choices are not his own. Grace inspires obedience through the revelation of God's love; "the goodness of God leads to repentance" (Romans 2: 4). Law is for the immature or those who cannot act responsibly without it. They need to be told what to do in external and institutional codes. Grace is for the mature who act according to the Law of the Spirit or the spirit of the Law residing internally in every believer. They live by the Spirit at a higher standard of personal accountability to God and not according to the letter of the Law (Matthew 19). Law is for the lawless, not the righteous (I Tim 5: 5-10).

The Internal Law of the Spirit

The Law of the Spirit expresses the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise that the Law will be written on the hearts of God's people in a new covenant after God fills them with his Spirit and forgives their sin (Jeremiah 31: 31–34; Ezekiel 36: 24–27; Hebrews 8: 7–13; 12: 24). Believers are not

accountable to the Law, but may approach God through Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest and Mediator between God and man (I Timothy 2: 5; Hebrews 4: 14; 7: 18-19). Grace supplies believers with a greater righteousness and accessibility directly to God, in contrast to the Law of Moses, because as grace fulfills all the requirements of the Law, it also provides both personal transformation and purity of heart through faith. It is not enough to simply *not* commit murder or adultery. One must not harbor hate or lust also (Matthew 5). The Law—is now internalized in believers through the Holy Spirit.

The new Law of the Spirit (i.e., the Law of Love) continues where the old Law left off. But this new law is different from the old because it can only be accepted by faith, a committed trust in the unseen Word of God (2 Corinthians 4: 16—5:7; Hebrews 11: 1—12: 3) as a gift of God's grace, which makes the old Law a law of works, not a law of faith (Romans 3: 27). Abraham understood that "the just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17). Anyone living righteously knew it even when they were under the Law—that keeping the Law was impossible, requiring grace (Romans 4). The Law required moral and legal perfection, complete and total obedience or works, requiring human effort in order to achieve acceptance with God. Any attempt to work one's way back to God on the basis of keeping the Law disqualifies one from salvation by grace through faith (Romans 3—5). "I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly" (Galatians 2: 21).

Christians are not justified by grace through faith, only to be sanctified by works either the works of the Law or any other code of conduct. Theologically, Evangelicals typically divide the term salvation into three stages: *justification*, a positional salvation that can never be revoked; *sanctification*, a lifestyle that reflects justification, and *glorification*, the end result of salvation when believers are

restored to the complete image of God in the *eschaton*[3]. The Church often struggles the most with the middle stage of sanctification, asserting the need for a code of conduct as many Evangelicals do or even a sacramental merit system as Roman Catholics accept that measures the believer's progress and growth towards Christlikeness. Although most Evangelicals will hotly deny that they are setting up a new works salvation system in their codes, the practical effects are the same: justification is by faith and sanctification is by works.

The Ontology of Salvation

Grace represents a temporal discontinuity in the plan of God within an overall eternal continuity. The coming of Christ was a radical disruption in the nature of things (ontology) and punctuated history with grace. The new age of grace, only foreshadowed and hoped for in the previous time, was always in view in God's plan of redemption. But until the coming of Christ there was no tangible mechanism to dispense Grace to humanity. Law never acts as a means of salvation, even if there was someone who kept it perfectly, such as Saul of Tarsus (Philippians 3: 6) .

Good behavior does not eradicate the guilt of original sin, simply doing more good works to outweigh our evil ones will do nothing to accomplish salvation, which is the whole substance of the ancient debate between law and grace from Jesus and the Pharisees, to Paul and the Judaizers, to Augustine and Pelagius to the Reformers and the Catholics. It manifests today in the Free Grace Gospel versus Lordship Salvation position as well as the numerous attempts to reassert the principle of law in the Church to act as a hedge against *antinomianism* and moral *libertinism*.

The human condition remains so stricken with sin that only a divine intervention will save people from condemnation. No amount of good deeds—even if they were perfect—could erase the curse of sin inherited from the First Adam (Romans 5: 12–21).

Salvation must be ontological and not simply moral. There must be a change in *being* and not merely a change in *doing*. This means there must be a change in the spiritual condition of people and not simply a moral or behavioral change. God does not forgive sin without compensation for sin. Salvation requires more than just a divine act of will to rescue humanity, which then translates to morality and law (or contemporary manifestations of *moralism* and *legalism)*. This bears out in the New Testament in the struggle between law and grace or works and faith. One position focuses on *ontology* (the transformation of the spiritual condition or essence) and the other on morality (human effort or works). Salvation focuses on either God or man; either God saves humanity by grace or humanity contributes through its merits to its own forgiveness and restoration.

Human nature tends to self–righteousness and belief in its own ability to earn the grace of God expressed in morality and law, or what Paul called "works." Morality means the choices people make based on what they think is right or wrong. Law, that is "Policy" in human terms, is the morality of a few people enforced on the majority, through institutional and legally binding codes of behavior. The modern world has adopted a humanistic perspective that sees humanity as preeminent, not God; it has abandoned ontology and metaphysics.[4] In lieu of metaphysics, the modern world uses morality and law as a guide to life; it creates an understanding of God in its own moral image as glorified law–giver and not the Spirit who changes hearts, minds and lives. Thus Christianity and all religion are reduced to morality as opposed to faith, which is irrelevant to the modern world.

Christianity appears increasingly moralistic and legalistic where a code of behavior replaces living faith in God. This manifests in everything from health and eating rules and dress codes, to Prohibition and club or church membership; middle

class family values become identical with Christianity: ideals such as a high work ethic, patriotism, and belief in *Christian America*. Voting becomes a sacred duty, keeping the Ten Commandments becomes emphasized, along with political activism, and so forth. None of these are bad, but they are never a replacement for faith. Yet, they often are made the test of faith and their presence is often mistaken for a vital life in Christ. These things represent morality and even Christian morality, but morality should never be confused with faith and salvation. Salvation is not morality, it is an ontological change in the condition of the human heart and its relationship with God through the Spirit that is freely given and accepted by faith alone. Morality does not constitute the elements of faith, it follows faith as a natural consequence (Ephesians 2: 8–10), and must never be the measure of faith (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8; 10: 12–33).

Moralism: The American Heresy

The common sense approach to religion in America argues that people are responsible for their own actions and therefore can make amends for their misdeeds with good deeds. Although, this position is not false, we need to seek to correct and learn from our mistakes, it makes no difference to one's spiritual condition, which can only change by faith in the person and work of Christ.

Theologically speaking, most of the American Church has followed the classic heresy known as Pelagianism,[5] a belief that denies the inherent sinful condition. Pelagius the fourth century monk and arch opponent of St. Augustine argued that original sin does not exist as the guilt humanity inherits from the First Adam and that Adam's sin was his own. The human race cannot be held accountable for a sin they did not commit. People are born innocent into a corrupt environment and only become sinful after they have sinned. On the surface this doctrine appears rational and fair, but cuts the heart out of

the principle of grace and throws all religion back into a legalist and moralist mode. Without a notion of original sin, today called "radical evil," or "total depravity," or simply the "sinful human nature," it makes perfect sense that the way back to God is through being a good person or moral reformation. As theologian Paul Tillich noted "[Pelagianism] … is always effective in us when we try to force God down to ourselves. This is what we usually call 'moralism,'…. Pelagius said that good and evil are performed by us; they are not given [or an ontic condition, meaning we are not born into a state of sin; rather we become sinners through our own misdeeds or sins]. If this is true then religion is in danger of being transformed into morality."[6]

The principle of grace advocated by the Apostle Paul, St. Augustine and the Reformers radically opposes moralism and makes salvation a matter of a divine intervention in the human condition that can be received only by faith. Works do nothing to alter the human condition of sin and condemnation. No moral or legal remedy exists that will change our basic sinful selves. Moral transformation (works) follows faith, but has no causal effect on salvation or loss of salvation. What God gives in grace he will not revoke (Rom 8: 26-39; 11: 29). Grace is not an excuse or license for sin. Those who argue that way simply do not understand grace and its transforming effects on moral character, nor have they ever participated in it (Rom 6). "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace" (Rom 6: 14)!

Endnotes

1. For an article on how Millennial generation Americans display, among other traits, a tendency to be what sociologist Christian Smith dubs moralistic therapeutic deists, see: www.probe.org/is-this-the-last-christian-generation/

2. Lawrence Terlizzese, *Romney vs. Obama and Beyond: The Church's Prophetic Role in Politics*, Probe Ministries, 2012,

www.probe.org/romney-vs-obama-and-beyond-the-churchs-prophetic-role-in-politics/.

3. The time when God completes His plan of redemption.

4. Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 44.

5. Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 124-25.

6. Ibid., 125.

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"Why Does God Allow Natural Evils Such as Tsunamis, Hurricanes and Earthquakes?"

My question is about natural evils such as tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes etc. I feel like the problem of moral evil such as murder and stealing is solved by the free will defense but I haven't heard a good refution of why God allows tsunamis and other natural events to take out huge villages and kill children.

The so called "natural evils" such as natural disasters are only evil from a human perspective. Tsunamis and earthquakes are normal and necessary occurrences in nature. We could not live on planet earth without them. They shape the environment and contribute to an inhabitable planet. They are part of a normal cycle of nature, along with every other occurrence in nature such as volcanoes, floods and even disease and plague,

which is God's way of maintaining balance in the ecology, necessary for human survival. These natural occurrences only become evil when humanity gets in their way. This sometimes has to do with human choices and "moral evil." For example building huge population centers on known fault lines and danger zones and not taking proper precautions in construction or having an efficient evacuation plan and warning system in place. Humanity cannot do away with the normal cycles of nature because we need a healthy natural environment to live. But we can adjust ourselves to nature in order to mitigate some of its more deadly effects on civilization. New Orleans is the perfect example of human arrogance, neglect and apathy in the face of known dangers from hurricanes. This city did not take the proper precautions in building a technological defense against hurricanes when it was known for decades that it was in danger of a disaster. The Netherlands is an example of a country that did take the proper precautions in protecting itself from flooding and goes on to survive without incident. So should we blame God for the apathy of New Orleans? This means there is not a strict separation between natural and moral evil and that they are more interwoven than we realize or care to admit.

Now, many times natural disasters are not the result of human choices. We have two options. First, it is a judgment of God. Second, we don't know why, other than saying God has a purpose in this disaster that we don't understand, which is certainly an acceptable choice; that is how the problem of evil is explained in the book of Job. I am not averse to saying natural disasters are a judgment from God. The Bible has no problem calling natural disasters judgments—floods and earthquakes are perfect examples. This does not mean that every natural disaster is a judgment. I am only saying judgment is a possibility.

So there are three possible answers to your question. Natural disasters happen as a result of human choices. They are a

judgment of God or they happen for a reason we do not understand.

Feel free to follow up on any of these issues with me if you like.

Lawrence Terlizzese, Ph.D.

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Jesus Christ Superstar

Kanye West vs. John Lennon

“Who do men say that I am?” (Matt 16:16)

In 1966, rock star John Lennon said the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus.” Lennon made the statement in the context of his predication about the demise of Christianity; “Christianity will go,” he said. “It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first, rock ‘n’ roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary.” Lennon’s failed predication about the demise of Christianity, like so many since the eighteenth century, grossly underestimated the enormous appeal of Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the most popular figure in history and everyone wants a piece of him. Recent music artists tend to disagree with Lennon. The pop diva Kesha sings, “Got Jesus on my necklace.” Lady Gaga sings, “The three men I’m a serve my whole life is my Daddy and Nebraska and Jesus Christ.” In his

acclaimed single, “Jesus Walks,” a sort of Hip Hop gospel song, Kanye West raps and preaches:

> *I ain’t here to argue about his facial features*
> *Or here to convert atheists into believers*
> *I’m just trying to say the way school need teachers*
> *The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that’s the way I need Jesus.*

It is very reassuring to have Jesus on your team. There is a principle in marketing called “borrowed authority” where a spokesman such as an athlete or movie star endorses a product. Jesus represents the ultimate superstar whose intrinsic authority is borrowed to support every kind of religious and social movement. Even the apparent enemies of faith such as Secular Humanists claim to accept Jesus’ social ethics of peace and equality. Today cults and religions, Christian and non-Christian alike, all claim Jesus as their own or as a great teacher or prophet. Islam claims Jesus as a prophet and teacher of Islam who preceded Mohammad and predicted his coming.

The various images of Jesus may error in one of two ways, either in denying his full deity or neglecting his complete humanity. The biblical presentation shows Jesus Christ as the Word of God who became flesh (John 1). He is both Son of God and Son of Man. Traditional theology calls this the God/man union. This means Jesus is both fully God and fully man. This unity must be retained if we are to follow the Jesus of the Bible and not another Jesus invented by the spirit of the age to lend credibility to a given cause or religious movement.

Jesus once asked the apostle Peter, “Who do men say that I am?” Peter offered a very pluralistic answer: “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” The idea that Jesus was a prophet is not wrong, just incomplete. When Christ asked Peter again, “Who do you say that I am?” he replied that Jesus was not just another

great religious leader, but the incarnate savior when he said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:13-16).

The Humanist Tradition: Jesus as the Greatest Man

The emphasis since the Renaissance in Western thought has been on humanism. This means a stress in the arts and sciences on human dignity, freedom, and beauty as well as a renewed interest in the natural world as opposed to a transcendent emphasis on divinity or the authority of the church and the Bible as in the Middle Ages. Every age tends to portray Christ in its own image. In the Middle Ages, Christ is painted as King, divine and regal such as Pantocrator, ruler of all, from the sixth century. Today our view of Jesus reflects the humanist trend from Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (1498) all the way to the *Head of Christ* by Warner Sallman (1940), which is by far the most popular portrait of Christ in history.

The famous German poet Goethe noted the sensual power of *The Last Supper*, which represents “‘the boldest attempt to adhere to nature, while, at the same time, the object is supernatural,’ with the result that ‘the majesty, the uncontrol}led will, the power and might of the Deity’ were not expressed.”{1}

This represents the modern liberal Jesus, which has been popular since the nineteenth century. This view shows Jesus as a great man and moral teacher, a faith healer who preached social reform, the Son of Man, but not the Son of God. Modern culture tends to think about Jesus as the greatest man who ever lived rather than the Son of God.

This is also true of “The Quest of the Historical Jesus” of the nineteenth century debunked by Albert Schweitzer as modern people portraying Jesus in their own image as a good ethical

man, who did good deeds.{2} Despite the fact that the search for the Historical Jesus was shown to be biased towards modern views, it continues in movements like the Jesus Seminar and in the famous Baur-Ehrman thesis. Both argue for a historical Jesus who is not in the Gospels but is thought to be the earliest Jesus. They baptize Christ in contemporary culture by arguing that alternative views of Jesus preceded orthodoxy in the earliest Christian community. This presents another attempt to understand Jesus from a pluralistic perspective. The latest quest seeks greater diversity in our social ethics by presenting various views of Jesus.

A very human Jesus is not necessarily a false view, except if we say this is all that he was. So Jesus is the greatest man that ever lived, but he was more than that as well. He was also the incarnate God.

The Gnostic Jesus: The Great Spirit with a Message

There is no difference between the ancient world and the modern one concerning Jesus' star power. Yesterday's Gnostics, like today's, wanted the credibility of having Jesus attached to their movement without really accepting him as their Lord and Savior, once again tapping into his borrowed authority. Gnosticism was a second century heretical belief that has experienced a considerable revival since the discovery of some of their lost documents in 1945. Gnostics believed that the material world is basically evil, created by a demiurge [Ed. Note: "A supernatural being imagined as creating or fashioning the world in subordination to the Supreme Being, and sometimes regarded as the originator of evil," Dictionary.com] that departed from the Pleroma (the Gnostic view of God). The divine spark, or a piece of God, however, remains trapped in our physical bodies that can only be released through secret knowledge of divine messengers like Jesus.

A problem arises theologically when Gnostics reject the belief that Jesus had no physical body because the material world is evil. He only appeared as a man, like a phantom or hologram, but was really a divine spirit. Jesus was not a savior, but a teacher. Gnostics did not believe in salvation, meaning one is saved from sin by grace through faith. Instead, Gnostics taught enlightenment or the impartation of knowledge. People are not sinners, only ignorant of the divine spark within them.

Who was Jesus to the Gnostics? He was not the divine Son of God made flesh, but an elevated spirit being, an emanation sent to give special knowledge of how to ascend back to God. One of the greatest artistic expressions of Gnosticism comes from the modern Surrealist painter Salvador Dali in his depiction of Jesus in *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* (1955), which shows a transparent effeminate Jesus as a sort of exalted spirit god administering the communion table. Here Jesus is divine, but not human.

Modern Gnostics like Dan Brown, some Feminists theologians and Neo-Gnostic churches are attracted to the apparent androgyny, diversity, and collusion of opposites in the Gnostic concept of God, which depicted the emanations in the Pleroma as both masculine and feminine. This leads to the notion that Gnosticism was more tolerant of differences and individualistic and offered a prominent role for women because its theological nomenclature spoke of "God the Father" and "God the Mother."{3}

Yet the Gnostic belief system is antithetical to the entire tenor of the modern materialistic worldview. Most Neo-Gnostics adopt the psychological aspects of Gnosticism that appeal to the individual's sense of superiority to the world. It is the world that is fallen in Gnosticism, not the individual. It is the creator who is at fault, not people. The unacceptable metaphysical aspect of Gnosticism to a modern materialist worldview makes it obvious that Neo-Gnostics are grasping at

straws. They are looking for anything to validate their belief in diversity, androgyny, and individual superiority. What better person to turn to than the leading cultural figure of all time, Jesus Christ?

Arianism: Jesus the Creator Angel

Another major error in the history of Christian thought is named for its major proponent Arius (250-336). Arianism believes that Jesus was not equal with the Father but was a created being like an angel. In fact he is the chief of all the angels. Arius' famous line states "there was a time when he was not."{4} This means Jesus was a created being. All orthodox theology and teaching roundly rejects this view because it compromises the deity of Christ. In an effort to preserve the radical oneness of God, Arianism accomplishes the opposite by falling into polytheism. There is not one God, but two. The Father made the Son and the Son in turn made the rest of the world. It is similar to the modern view that says Jesus is the greatest man who ever lived with the added dimension of being like God but not equal to God. He is a god. This is one of the most common mistakes people make in their understanding of Jesus, even thinking that the term "Son of God" suggests an inferior station to the Father. The term "Son of God" means Jesus is equal to the Father (John 5:18).The Arian heresy was revived by some Unitarians in the modern Age, Isaac Newton being the most famous, but has been especially embraced by the cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses who argue vigorously for the idea that Jesus is not God but a created being.

The famous theologian Athanasius (298-373) argued that our view of Jesus must be tied to our salvation. If we get our view of Jesus wrong we will also misunderstand salvation by grace. Only God creates and only God saves, but it is humanity that must suffer the penalty of sin. But because people are unable to offer the sacrifice for sin God must offer it himself in human form to save us. The dual nature of Christ

solves this problem by making Christ the perfect sacrifice as the God/man. An angel is not capable of offering a sacrifice for sin. This is essentially what the book of Hebrews says: “He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs” (Heb. 1:3, 4 cf. Heb. 2:14-18).

New Age Jesus: The Ascended Master

The New Age Jesus is very popular today. This is the belief that Jesus is one of the greatest religious leaders of all time, an “ascended master” much like Buddha or Krishna. Jesus is not the unique Son of God but one of many divine incarnations. He does not come to deliver us from sin but to enlighten us. He came to show us how we can achieve God-consciousness or to help us realize we are God within. This is similar to Gnostic idea of a divine spark left in humanity after the creation of the world.

Because of this the New Age is often confused with Gnosticism. There are correlations, but there are also substantial differences between the two. New Age thinking is pantheistic. This means God equals the all pervasive force of the universe, which makes it more happy and world-friendly as expressed in the modern ecology movements that find God in nature. Gnosticism is not pantheistic, but radically dualistic; the world is evil and the individual is good but trapped in the material world. Gnosticism tends to be dark and foreboding with other worldly hopes of escape and ascension. New Age tends to have hope in the current historical continuum of change. There is a New Age of Aquarius dawning right around the corner. We don’t find that optimism in Gnosticism.

The New Age version of Jesus expresses another aspect of

Jesus' popularity among non-Christian religions as well as spiritual but not traditionally religious Americans. Like Gnosticism, it absorbs Jesus into its belief system, but it also acquires greater credibility for itself by adopting Jesus. Most of the popular views of Jesus are a way of accepting a semblance of spirituality without really committing oneself to the message of Christ as the only way to the Father. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6). The great offense today in Christianity is given by our belief in the exclusivity of Christ as the only way to God. Every alternative view of Jesus compromises this central idea, making Jesus one of many ways to God. The enormous popularity of Jesus need not create confusion. The Bible is very clear that Jesus is the Son of God and the only way to the Father. John Lennon and the Beatles have been relegated to the oldies station, but Jesus is still here and more popular than ever. We need to help refocus the culture's acceptance of Jesus as the greatest man and religious leader with the biblical message of salvation that says Jesus is the incarnate Word sent to save us from sin and restore us to the Father.

Notes

1. Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in History of Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 146-147.
2. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: MacMilliian, 1964).
3. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Bernard Simon, The Essence of the Gnostics (Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 2004), 203-220.
4. Quoted in Tony Lane, *Harper's Concise Book of Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 28.

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Romney vs. Obama and Beyond: The Church's Prophetic Role in Politics

Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese answers a common question of a Christian view of politics and government: How would a biblical worldview inform us on being in the world of politics but not of it? "Dr. T" models a critical yet engaged distance in assessing the beliefs of Presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Barack Obama.

Christian Government

During each new election season Christians ask, "What is a biblical view of government?" Does it teach Theocracy, Communism or maybe Democracy? The Old Testament does teach theocracy, which means the Priests ruled the people through the Mosaic Law. Later in its history Israel became a monarchy by its own decision under King Saul—a choice God was not very pleased with, but He accommodated Israel's demand (I Samuel 8).

The New Testament does not adopt theocracy because it applied only to the chosen nation of Israel; it gives no endorsement of any one form of government, but instead offers the Church a special role as a prophetic voice engaging any and all forms of government. There is no such thing as *Christian (civil) Government*, only *Christians in government*. Instead of creating a new system, the Church brings biblical principles to bear on all governments.{1} This position allows the Church everywhere to be actively involved in its particular political situation through maintaining its witness to Christ.

Israel and the Church

The role of Israel and the Church are often conflated in Christian minds, especially during the political season. Many still believe that Christians should create laws or vote for candidates that will bring us closer to a “Christian America” ideal. This is a revised version of an old notion of Christendom that joins church and state going back to the Constantinian Church which espoused a Christian Roman Empire. Some of our Puritan forebears held that America was the New Jerusalem. America as a nation replaces Israel as the people of God and the Church becomes a political entity like Israel.

In approaching politics, it is essential that we keep in mind the differences between Israel and the Church. Israel was a national people with its own civil law and identity. It was closed to the rest of the world and had to live in strict separation from the Gentile nations. Their call was to isolation, to establish Theocracy and to drive the Gentiles out from Canaan, a goal they were never really successful at accomplishing (Judges 1: 19, 28, 32). Israel was one civil nation among many civil nations and it was usually at war with those neighbors.

Israel foreshadowed the Church. They prepared the world for the coming of the messiah and the Church. Their history and law serves as an example or model of instruction for the Church (Romans 15: 4 and I Corinthians 10: 6), but the Church is not obligated to adopt Israel’s civil identity because this would violate her broader mission to reach all people (Acts 1: 8). The Church is called to political and cultural engagement with all systems and all people, not isolation. When the Church becomes a political or cultural system, it loses its message of grace through faith and reverts back to Law (Galatians 3). Faith cannot be legislated.

The Church could not be true to its universal calling if it was a political power like Israel because this turns its

mission into one of war and conquest, such as the Crusades in the middle ages, rather than conversion through faith (John 18: 36). Islam is a good example of a religion that does follow Israel's kind of political identity in the establishment of Sharia Law. The Church is not one nation, but one people among many nations, cultures and systems. It cannot afford to be a nation with its own civil law and government, which sets itself against other governments and other people. When the Church establishes itself as a political power it compromises its prophetic mission and loses its unique contribution to politics. Instead the Church has a more complex role in any system it finds itself in.

In The World but Not of It

Christians are in the world, but not of the world. Jesus prayed that his followers will not be taken out of the world, but that they be sent into the world and kept from its evil (John 17: 15). The Apostle Paul argued similarly that we must maintain our association with people in the world, even immoral people—and not to isolate ourselves (I Corinthians 5: 9, 10). He says, "the form of this world is passing away," an awareness that creates in us an "undistracted devotion to the Lord" in every area of life. We are to participate in the world, but not get too attached to it. We "should be as those who buy, but do not possess…and those who make use of the world as though they did not make full use of it" (I Corinthians 7: 31-35). We bring awareness of the temporal nature of the world.

The Prophetic Role of the Church

The Apostle Peter states that the Church is a unique people of God, "a people for God's own possession" or a "peculiar people" as the King James Version says, called to proclaim the truth. He exhorts Christians to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness…" and to keep our "behavior

excellent” in the world. (I Peter 2: 9- 12).

The Church lives differently in society by setting an example. As God’s special people, the Church is called to witness His truth to the world, including to the government structures. This means that the Church works within various systems, something Paul accomplished effectively in his use of Roman Citizenship and with his appeal to Caesar (Matthew 17: 24-27; I Peter 2: 13-20, Romans 13: 1-7, Acts 16: 35-39; 23: 11; 24 and 25).

In preaching the Word the Church acts as prophet to “the world,” the societal structures arrayed against God (Romans 12: 2). This includes all political systems under satanic control (Luke 4: 5-8). A prophet brings a timely and meaningful message of relevance. He has insight to speak to a particular situation. For example when Nathan the prophet spoke the Word of the Lord to King David in confronting David’s sin of murder he held him accountable for his behavior (2 Samuel 12: 1-15). The Bible teaches us through this example that the political powers are not absolute. *The king is not God*, a radical statement in ancient times.

Prophets call people back to obedience to God. They were the conscience of the nation. Likewise, the Church acts as prophet through active participation, but with an attitude of critical distance.

Critical Distance

Critical distance does not mean isolation or withdrawal where we go live in the woods and wait for the world to die. It means involvement in everything the world offers, especially politics, but with an approach from a *different perspective*, an eternal perspective. Criticism means Christians work from within society and offer a perpetual challenge to the status quo that reflects a Christian conscience; it never arrives at a final form of society in which it is completely comfortable.

This is an important, albeit an uncomfortable, role to play. It can never endorse any system uncritically because this acceptance negates the fact of the inherent evil of the world and announces the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth. The Church then is swallowed in the world's identity. This reflects what happened in the Christian Roman Empire and in the Christian America ideal, which is often the ideology behind so called "Christian Conservative" political activism. The United States is identified with Christendom as "a Christian country." Criticism in this sense does not simply entail a good word of advice, but active participation guided by an ethic of love (Matthew 5: 43-48; Romans 13: 8-10). This may manifest in working to repeal an unjust law or establishing a new law that meets certain needs in society, but especially the needs of the weakest members of society, who cannot speak for themselves and are powerless. This reflects a Christian conscience of concern for others, rather than just ourselves. Laws must protect those who need the most protection, rather than empower those who make it. Law is the enforcement of the personal morality of its makers (hence, when people say you "cannot legislate morality," that's an absurdity).

Perhaps the greatest example in recent times of the Church's prophetic voice in American politics was in bringing attention to the cause of the unborn in its efforts to stem the tide of abortion, both in its political activism and through nonpolitical work of advocating adoption as an alternative to abortion. Another good example was the American Civil Rights Movement when it spoke against racism and the unjust social structures in American society.

Just as the Old Testament prophets held the king accountable to the Law of God—*the king is not God*—so the Church reminds the world of its limitations, that its systems have flaws and must allow for improvement. *The world is not yet in the kingdom of God.* There is no perfect system any more than there

are perfect people. There is always room for growth and change. Only in the kingdom of God does change and growth cease because it is no longer necessary in the final state of perfection (Revelation 21).

Democracy offers a better system for Christians than Communism or Theocracy because it reflects an ideal of freedom, the basis of love and faith. But it has flaws, such as the tyranny of the majority (de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*). Nor is democracy "the end of history," a popular idea after the Cold War, arguing that democracy has emerged from the ideological struggles of history to become the greatest and final system. Nothing will succeed it. The post–Cold War world has reached the end of history, or the end of struggle and the end of change.{2}

There is every reason to consider that democracy will perish from the earth if its people grow complacent and do not defend it or practice it and any idea to suggest that it cannot perish on the basis of a metaphysical law of history will only contribute to that complacency. There is never a final system of society in which the Church refuses to adjure and criticize toward change because that entity would then be equal to the kingdom of God.

Romney vs. Obama

We apply the same standard of *critical distance* in voting for our favorite candidate or party. Voting is often the choice of the lesser of two evils. This popular maxim expresses the same idea of critical distance as long as we understand that the choice of the lesser evil is still a far less than perfect choice. Critical distance includes self-criticism.

Most people choose a candidate who comes closest to their own position and then largely ignore their differences. Critical distance will not dismiss the differences because through it we hold ourselves accountable by seeing our blind spots and

recognizing potential problems. We show humility and responsibility through admitting the limits of our own position and choices.

Many contrasts exist between Governor Romney and President Obama, not least of which is personal religious belief. Ironically, Evangelical Christians largely ignore this issue, though each candidate's views represent a serious difference as compared to biblical Christianity. In the past, Evangelicals have stressed the importance of personal belief. After all, most people hold to a particular political and economic view because of their religious views, not despite them.

President Obama reflects Liberation Theology in his belief that government must act as champion of the people. This should be done, in his view, by elevating the condition of the disenfranchised into the middle class, mainly through economic redistribution, but also through religious pluralism, toleration of minorities, woman's rights and gay rights. Liberation Theology adapts Christianity to a socialist political agenda that uses government as a tool to free people from oppressive social structures such as capitalism, racism and patriarchy. There is a strong emphasis on social justice, radical equality and group sin, meaning the structure of a society is to blame for its problems rather than the individual, who is a victim.

Governor Romney styles himself as a stalwart defender of free enterprise informed by Mormon beliefs that reflect traditional American values of family, faith, and work ethic. Government must protect those values from its own encroachment in order to maintain the middle class. Although Mormonism is radically different from Evangelical Christianity in its doctrinal formulation, it accepts similar social values, which stress personal responsibility and initiative.

Although, no election can be reduced to one issue or to

personal beliefs, these considerations' potential impact cannot be disregarded. Behind Obama stands a Liberation Christianity that has and will continue to benefit from his re-election. A Romney victory will lift the cultural status of Mormons in America from outsiders to the mainstream. In the past, the election to the Presidency of a member from a group struggling for recognition in mainstream America received a stamp of approval at the highest level of political office that gave them increased cultural recognition and cache . The election of one of your own to the Presidency is a sign of arrival. President Kennedy's election to office brought American mainstream acceptance to Roman Catholics, just as President Carter brought it to Evangelicals and President Obama brought the full acceptance of African-Americans, so a "President Romney" will create a greater cultural awareness and acceptance of Mormons.

The contemporary political logic of the American system says put your criticism out there during the primaries, but put it away once a candidate for your party is chosen. You're supposed to fall in line behind him or her. Christians often follow the same logic and refuse to entertain criticism of our chosen candidate because it suggests a preference for the opposing side. The lack of criticism generally continues through our chosen candidate's administration. Problems and faults are usually blamed on the other side and Christians become as politically polarized as the parties. This surrenders any critical distance gained and the Church loses its unique contribution for political advantage. It's like Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of soup (Genesis 25: 27-34). We can in good conscience choose a candidate that we do not completely agree with *if* we retain our criticism of him. We should participate, yet with reservations.

Critical distance can tolerate voting for someone of a different faith if he is a better choice than the alternative, but it cannot live with softening its differences in order to

win an election or modifying its convictions for political gain. Evangelicals are faced with a difficult choice, not between Liberation Theology or Mormonism, but whether or not they will retain their doctrinal critique and rejection of Mormonism, when those differences threaten its economic and political interests.

Recently, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association dropped Mormonism from its cult list. And the language of "values" between Christians and Mormons grows indistinguishable, so that now "Christian values" are somehow equated with "Mormon values" and a vote for a Mormon is a vote for "biblical values." The greatest "value" for Christians is the deity of Jesus Christ, which most Mormons do not accept. Evangelicals and Mormons share a similar political agenda in preserving the free enterprise system and in protecting the traditional American family ideal, which they both consider preferable to the creeping socialism of the Obama administration. There is no need to drop the hard and fast differences between Christianity and Mormonism; Christians can work with anyone if we effectively practice *critical distance* at the same time.

So, it comes down to retaining our prophetic role as members of Christ's Body—not as much who we vote for, but why and how.

Notes

1. Kerby Anderson, "A Christian View of Politics, Government, and Social Action," *Mind Games Survival Course Manual* (Plano, Texas: Probe Ministries, 1998), www.ministeriosprobe.org/MGManual/Politics/Gov1.htm

2. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992). The idea of the end of history here is really a Hegelian version of Christian America, just as the idea of progress, the foundation of Fukuyama's argument, reflects a secularization of the older notion of the idea of providence that founded "Christian America." Both identify

either Christendom or the Western World with the kingdom of God, the final form of society. One is traditionally religious in its conception and the other secular.

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What is Technology?

Dr. Lawrence Terlizzese uncovers a disturbing new view of technology: not as neutral, but a way of life that objectifies everything, including people.

The Neutrality View



Most people take a favorable view towards technological progress; new cars, cell phones and computers – what's not to like? They embrace technological innovation as a plus despite the suspicions of questionable things like cloning, genetic engineering and nuclear weapons. But what is technology anyway? Do we really understand this all-embracing phenomenon directing human history? We often take for granted that we think we know the answer when in fact the meaning of the greatest social mover of all times remains elusive. When it comes to defining technology we are beset with the problem of defining more than just a word, but a concept and whole way of life and worldview.

The typical definition of technology these days says technology is neutral, suggesting that technology is nothing more than tools that people use as needed. Technology is a means to an end and nothing more. All objects are separate and disconnected. They are neutral and value-free, right? Tables, chairs, and light fixtures have nothing to do with each other

and express no values in themselves and are completely determined by our use. They are simply objects at our disposal and present no moral problems so long as we use them for good. We can pick up a hammer and use it, then place it back in the tool box when finished. The hammer has appropriate and inappropriate uses. Hitting nails into wood is one of the acceptable uses of a hammer; using it to play baseball is not acceptable. So long as we act as good moral agents we use our technology rightly, or so we think. This definition is so widely accepted that we have trouble ever questioning it. When faced with morally questionable uses of technology we fall back on this old cliché: "technology is neutral," and that settles all disputes. We are all familiar with this popular view and embrace it to some extent. The problem is not that the cliché is so simple or popular, but that it is so wrong. Philosophers have been telling us for decades now that the neutrality of technology definition is wrong and dangerous because it blinds us to the true nature of technology.

The Holistic View

The second view of the nature of technology, held mainly by philosophers, we call the "holistic view." This view states that the "neutral view" is false because people hold to it as a means of justifying every type of technology. The neutrality view blinds us to the true nature of technology, which is not value-free. The lack of understanding regarding the true nature of technology creates a serious problem for a society so heavily influenced by technological development. As sociologist Rudi Volti says, "This inability to understand technology and perceive its effects on our society and on ourselves is one of the greatest, if most subtle, problems of an age that has been so heavily influenced by technological change."{1} Technology is understood as a social system. We can also call it a worldview, a philosophy of life that sees all things as objects, including people. Instead of defining

technology as disparate tools unconnected to each other, philosophers have suggested a more comprehensive definition that says technology does not mean neutral objects ready for use at our convenience, but a way of life that informs and controls everything we do. In other words, technology is a belief system with its own worldview and agenda—more like a religion than a hammer.

This belief system is often called the *essence of technology* or *spirit of technology* and cannot be seen in technological objects because we cannot see the entire system by looking at individual parts. We must grasp the spiritual essence before we can understand its technical parts. The "neutrality view" looks only at parts rather than the whole and misses technology's true nature. This is a lot like looking at the tires of your car or its engine parts and thinking you now understand a car from seeing separate pieces of it and never seeing how the whole thing fits together.

The holistic view understands technology as a way of life and spiritual reality that shapes all our thinking. Philosopher Martin Heidegger gives the example of how the Rhine River exists not as a river, but as a source for electricity. Everything becomes stuff ready for usefulness.{2}

Technology really means an interconnected system rather than a neutral tool. The neutral definition blinds us to the true nature of technology and prevents us from mastering it. Heidegger argued that "we are delivered over to [technology] in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularity like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology."{3}

Technology as Spirituality

The neutrality argument reassures us that we remain in control

of our means rather than our means controlling us. It does not allow us to find the essence of technology in everyday technological objects such as cars, computers, or screw drivers and baseball bats; rather, technology is a way of life and thought that creates a universal system. Technology means the grand accumulation of all the different technological parts into a global system.

Technology is a system of interlocking systems. As philosopher Jacques Ellul said, "It is the aggregate of these means that produces technical civilization."{4} Technology is our modern frame of reference that speaks of the profoundly spiritual and not the strictly technical. If we look at individual everyday technologies we will miss it. Instead we must see past the common objects to the larger global system that comprises technology as a social process. In the technological system both humanity and nature have no separate standing or value outside of technical usefulness. People are simply resources to be used and discarded as needed.

This view reveals the depths to which technology shapes our thinking by informing us and conforming us into the image of the machine, which represents the greatest example of technological thinking. Everything is understood as a machine and should function like a machine including the government, the school, the church and you! Bureaucracy is a social machine.

The machine is predictable. It has no freedom. It follows mechanical steps, or linear logic. Step one leads to step two, and so forth. Any deviation from its programming causes chaos and possible break down, which is why the machine is the worst possible analogy for human beings to follow. Yet this is the basis of the entire modern conception of life.{5} People are not machines that can be programmed; to adopt this conception reverses the role between humanity and its machines, making people conform to the image of the machine rather than vice versa. Machines are our slaves. They do what we tell them to

do. They have no will, feelings or desires. Philosophers tell us that the natural relationship between people and machines is in a process of reversal so that we are becoming slaves to technology. We may control our individual use of technology but no one as of yet controls the entire system.{6}

Neutrality as Modern Myth

Nothing can be explained by the neutrality argument, not even the meaning of "neutrality." It is simply not possible for any technology to be neutral; even the most primitive tools such as fire or stone axes take the form of their designers. Every technology bears inherent values of purpose and goals. Fire has value for a particular reason, to clear the land, cook food, keep people warm and ward off dangerous animals. By their very design, all inventions and tools reflects our values and human nature. Philosopher of Science Jacob Bronowski argued that "to quarrel with technology is to quarrel with the nature of man."{7} Technology is an extension of ourselves and expresses human nature, which is never entirely good or bad, but ambivalent. Our technology reflects who we are and nothing more; it is not divine, it will not save the human race; but neither is it animal, but fully human, whose nature is always ambiguous, capable of great acts of kindness and mercy as well as cruelty and evil. People can be self-sacrificial and giving and self-destructive and greedy. There will always be good and bad effects to our inventions. They are a double edged sword that cuts both ways and it is our responsibility to discern between the two.

The modern bias in favor of neutrality reveals our protectionist tendencies towards all things technological. How is it that sinful people can produce morally neutral technology? We would not say that about art. "Oh! All art is morally neutral! It is all a matter of how you use it!" Yet the same creative forces go into producing technology as art. Is there anything neutral about the works of Caravaggio, Da

Vinci or Picasso? Why then should there be anything neutral about Facebook or MX missiles?

This appears simple enough, but as modern people addicted to our latest toys and novelties we have difficulty admitting we may have a problem. We don't like to think that too much Facebook might be causing young people to be further isolated from the community because they are more accustomed to relate electronically than in person, or that email actually reduces our ability to communicate because of the absence of tone of voice, body language, eye contact and personal presence. TV and film may have a surreal effect on its message, giving it a dream like quality rather than communicating realism.

Controlling Technology

The solution is not to abandon any of the incredible inventions of the modern age, but to recognize their limits. It is the sign of wisdom that we understand our limits and work within them. We should proceed along a two tiered path of questioning and the application of values. Ellul said that "It is not a question of getting rid of [technology], but by an act of freedom, of transcending it."{8} The act of questioning is the first act of freedom; by becoming aware of the problem we can assert a measure of freedom and control. Through critical questioning we recognize our limits and thus we are able to exercise a measure of control over technology.

We should develop technologies that reflect our values of freedom, equality and democracy. For example, Ellul did envision in the early 1980's the potential use of computer technology in a way that would create a decentralized source of knowledge that would maintain the values of democracy. We know this now as the internet. However, as Ellul also argued technology cannot change society for the better if we don't change ourselves. The computer can also be used to bring in stifling State control.{9} We will never have a perfect

technology that has no problems, but we should be visionaries in how we think about technology and the application of our values to it.

Limits serve as a warning to us. It is obvious that society has progressed in many ways thanks to advanced technology, but society's spiritual regression shares the same condition as advancement. We have not become better people because we live in the twenty-first century rather than the nineteenth century. Without a renewed spiritual and moral framework to direct our development and give new purpose to the system, technology may become the source of our own destruction rather than improvement. An inventory of advancement compares starkly with the litany of potential catastrophe. We have eliminated disease, but also created dangerous levels of overpopulation. We live longer and more abundant lives materially, but are pushing the natural world into extinction. We are able to travel quicker and communicate instantly, contributing to world peace and understanding, but have also developed the weapons of war to unimaginable levels of devastation.

Without a moral framework to control technology and understand its ethical limits we will go down a path of losing control of technology's direction, allowing it to develop autonomously. This means it will develop in a predetermined linear direction, like a clock that will inevitably strike midnight once wound up. That direction as we have seen moves inexorably closer to the mechanization of humanity and nature. With the right value-system we can begin to reassert control. The choice is yours. Where do you want to go?

Notes

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3. Ibid., 4.
4. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. by John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 2.
5. John Herman Randall, Jr. *The Making of the Modern Mind: A Survey of the Intellectual Background of the Present Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 227.
6. Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine; Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966); Idem, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970); Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Lawrence J. Terlizzese, *Hope in the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005).
7. Jacob Bronowski, "Technology and Culture in Evolution," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1. 3(1971): 199.
8. Ellul, *The Technological Society,* xxxiii.
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Prometheus, God and Film: 10 Science Fiction Movies with a Theological Theme

Dr. Terlizzese looks to see if we can find a Christian worldview perspective or, at least, questions which need theological answers in a number of popular science fiction movies. He finds some good themes and bad themes and offers advice on how to view movies of all types.

Sci-fi films have never been more popular than they are today. Witness this summer's offerings: *Prometheus* (see below), *Chronicle*, *The Hunger Games* even the comic book–inspired *Avengers* and the romantic comedy *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* feature elements of science fiction. And like most arts and literature, they contain elements of theology. This genre borrows a basic aspect of the Christian worldview concerning the value and meaning of individuals in a world of technological conformity.

Sci-fi combines a somewhat biblical understanding of mankind with an almost religious belief in technological progress. This fuels the popular fear that technology will rob people of their souls or individuality. The modern technological worldview is rooted in *materialism*: it affirms that people are basically machines who can be objectified, categorized and manipulated as any other object in nature. One film scholar notes this connection:

> *Scientism opened the doors for a mechanical view of mankind. . . . We are no longer special, no longer sacred – neither the form (body) nor the mind. "Let us conclude boldly then that man is a machine, and that there is only one substance, differently modified, in the whole world. What will all the weak reeds of divinity, metaphysic, and nonsense of the schools avail against this firm and solid oak?"[Le Mettrie]. [Sci-fi] arises out of the tension between this kind of "rude" scientism and the Christian cosmology. Scientism "robs" humans of their very humanity and makes them out to be biological machines, much like the alien children in Village of the Damned. {1}*

Reaching a Popular Audience

The sci-fi genre asks, What is human nature?{2} In light of technological advance, how we define humanity becomes more crucial as technology changes not just the natural world, but

humanity itself. It has become imperative not only for philosophers, but for everyone to ask, how is technological advance transforming human nature? The failure to perceive change caused by new technology creates a serious problem for an age so enormously influenced by it. Sci-fi movies serve as a philosophical treatise for average people who are not professionally trained, raising questions and issues that would otherwise be lost on the common person because of their intolerable abstraction.

The movies speak the common language of our times. When teachers want to make an idea concrete or illustrate a point, they grope for an example from a popular movie. Most people love movies and to be able to relate abstract concepts through such a relevant medium will certainly create a profound effect.

We normally think of sci-fi as promoting innovative technology that holds out optimistic promise for the future of mankind. This is generally true of print media produced by popular writers like Jules Verne, H. G. Wells or Isaac Asimov. However sci-fi film has taken another tack by appealing to commonly held suspicions of technological progress. An optimistic view of progress views new technology as a liberating force destined to lift the burdens of work, cure disease, improve communication and free humanity from natural limits. A pessimistic view takes the opposite direction; instead of liberation it fears that new technology will create a new form of enslavement and dehumanization that will rob people of their individuality or their very souls.

Given the popularity of movies and the latent theological premise of many sci-fi films, the following list presents an incomplete, but important sample of theology in sci-fi movies. It is intended to help Christians read the movies from more than a literalist perspective by paying attention to the metaphors and symbols that constitute their meaning. These movies may contain objectionable material, but more

importantly, resonate with redemptive themes worth analyzing.

Movies are cultural day dreams, serving as modern folklore and morality tales. They signify a shared message of hope or fear not always transparent without analysis. So let’s get started!

Prometheus, 2012

Humanoid aliens seed earth with their DNA that creates humanity. They leave clues behind on how to find them in a distant galaxy. When earthlings discover their origins they uncover a plan for human extinction, revealing that the gods are hostile towards their own children. The movie raises classic theological and philosophical questions such as, Where did we come from? Why are we here? And, where are we going? Though never distinguishing between wishful thinking or religious truth claims, it presents faith as a choice for meaning, even in the face of the most hostile conditions. The cross remains a prominent and enduring symbol of hope and human redemption. Humans are worth saving and are not genetic mistakes that deserve extinction.

The Terminator, 1984

Robots represent both hope and fear of technological aspirations. They symbolize the incredible potential of technological capability and human replacement. Robots are mechanical people that embody the fears of extreme rationalization. Cartesian philosophy identified reason as the definition of human nature, which takes its final form in the computer. Robots are nothing more than embodied computers. Sometimes the movies picture them as our slaves and protectors. Robots enable people to live work–free lives as with Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet* (1956) who undoubtedly depicts the most iconic and loveable of all movie robots. However, most robots represent something evil and ominous as in *The Terminator.*

The premise states that computer intelligence Sky Net became

self-aware and immediately perceived humanity as a threat and initiated a nuclear strike. Some people survived to fight back and achieved ultimate victory led by the messianic figure John Conner sent to rescue humanity from techno–enslavement and termination. Human victory over the machines necessitated that Sky Net send a robot agent back in time to eliminate the mother of the rebel leader. Commentators read the plot as loosely based on the story of the Birth of Christ. *The Terminator* encapsulates the abiding fear that mankind will one day destroy itself through the use of its own technology. That which was meant to enhance human life will one day annihilate it. The need for salvation remains paramount as the last installment *Terminator Salvation* (2009) indicates.

The Matrix, 1999

In the not too distant future Artificial Intelligence (AI) becomes self–aware and identifies humanity as a threat and initiates a war, a common theme in science fiction. Humanity burns the atmosphere to create perpetual darkness in order to block the sun and deny the machines a power source. The machines respond by turning people into batteries and growing them in a huge incubator, kept alive in a vegetative state through feeding them the blood of the previous generation and by sending false impressions to the brain that simulate a normal existence. Billions of people are given fabricated lives in a huge computer–simulated world called the Matrix. Zion, the only surviving human city, awaits deep underground for their savior Neo, rescued from the Matrix and believed to possess the power to fight the machines within the Matrix and free mankind.

In addition to the obvious messianic overtones the series presents a complicated patchwork of different religious ideas from Christianity and Buddhism to Greek mythology as a counterpoint to the Cartesian philosophy that reason alone ultimately defines human nature. The computer best embodies the logical conclusion of rational thought and the loss of

human freedom that results from the universal acceptance of rationalism. *The Matrix* demonstrates an acute historical irony in rejecting rationalism and looking to premodern religious ideas to define human nature and provide meaning to life, even though these ideas are considered anachronistic in a secular and technological age.

The Book of Eli, 2010

The Book of Eli presents an explicitly Christian message of obedience to the voice of God in describing the spiritual journey and act of faith by the blind nomad Eli. Set in a post–apocalyptic world of the near future, a drifter finds his purpose in life through committing to memory the *King James Bible*, then spending thirty years traveling across the wasteland to an unknown destination. Along the way Eli encounters a ruthless mayor seeking the power of the book for his own political ends. In addition to the spiritual journey the movie depicts the dark side of faith when used to control and manipulate others.

The Invasion, 2007

The Invasion is an excellent remake of the original science fiction masterpiece *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, 1979) in which spores from outer space take over human bodies by emptying them of free will and any unique qualities as individuals, making everyone soulless and identical. The message is clear: that a world without free will may be more peaceful and happy, but would be horribly inhuman. What price are we willing to pay for peace, security and harmony? If these qualities are not derived from love then we do not have a world worth living in. In the absence of freedom, a nightmarish world of automatons pretending to be humans assumes control. They are bodies without souls. In the chilling words of the original movie, “Love, desire, ambition, faith–without them life’s so simple.”{3} This may be life in unison, but it is more like the life of a grove of trees all

getting along rather nicely. This movie franchise argues for the idea that love and choice are essential aspects of our humanity without which life loses it purpose.

Planet of the Apes, 1968

This 1960's protest film decries the potential genocide of nuclear war. Astronauts find themselves stranded on a strange planet where apes rule humans. The movie has several themes including the debate between evolution and creation, science and religion, church and state relations as well as racism and offers an accurate commentary on humanity as a creature that wages war on all those around it including himself. It is rare to find any movie that weaves so many themes into its message, while not revealing its main point until its climactic surprise ending.

The Day the Earth Stood Still, 1951

We do not need to see films based on the Gospels in order to find Christ at the movies. The presence of a Christ–like figure is usually signified when a heroic character with extraordinary powers dies and comes back to life, such as in the case of Klatuu, the representative of a galactic alliance who visits earth during the Cold War and warns that we must turn our efforts to peace or face annihilation because earth poses a threat to the rest of the galaxy. Humanity's technical abilities now exceed its self–control, which will end in disaster if it does not turn to peaceful ends.

Star Wars, 1977

Science fiction generally focuses on the power of reason and technology. *Star Wars* follows a different tack, making faith and religion central. The movie sets the action in the familiar device of good vs. evil, but adds the dimension of faith being more powerful than technical ability in the promotion of both good and evil. The *Star Wars* franchise contrasts with that other perennially popular space melodrama

Star Trek, which often belittles notions of God, faith and religion. Based on the secular humanism of its creator Gene Roddenberry, technology or human potential trumps faith and religion. In contrast, *Star Wars* derives from the ecumenical ideas of George Lucas, where faith represented by "the force"—for better or worse—is more powerful than raw technological ability.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind, 1977

Everyman Roy Neary experiences a close encounter with a UFO that sends him on a journey to discover its meaning. In the process he acts erratically, causing his wife Ronnie to leave him with their three children. The further he delves into the mystery, the more he discovers the truth behind his encounter: that extraterrestrials have visited earth and are seeking him out along with a select group of others. The movie vaguely resembles John Bunyan's famous allegory of the Christian life, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Aliens often represent transcendence in the movies, either as angelic messengers or demonic powers. *Close Encounters* may be interpreted as a spiritual journey that seeks out a higher purpose in life beyond mundane existence.

2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968

2001 lives up to its reputation as the greatest science fiction movie ever made. The movie begins with a tribe of hominids on the brink of starvation. An extraterrestrial force endows them with the gift of technology in the form of animal bones used to hunt for food and murder their opponents. The action then moves to outer space when the murder weapon is flung into the air and transforms into a space ship, suggesting continuity between the earliest technology and the most advanced.

Mankind finds itself on the brink of encountering extraterrestrial (ET) life near Jupiter. A small crew travels to the location of a beacon with the assistance of an onboard

supercomputer, the HAL 9000, who (he is strangely human) becomes threatened by the crew who want to turn off his higher cognitive ability. HAL murders the crew except for one member who escapes and finishes the mission. After his encounter with the ET, Commander Bowman converts into an angelic figure, or star child who returns to earth. Director Stanley Kubrick comments on the meaning of this scene when he says of Bowman, "He is reborn, an enhanced being, a star child, an angel, a superman, if you like, and returns to earth prepared for the next leap forward in man's evolutionary destiny."{4}

The star child is the first of a new race representing a spiritual rather than technological change. "Kubrick's vision reveals technology as a competitive force that must be defeated in order for humans to evolve."{5} The message of *2001* is that, though technology assists humanity in survival, it also threatens human existence.

A Final Word

Humanity now needs a spiritual transformation, not more technology, in order to survive. Although we find this theological message in an unusual source, it still represents an important warning we have yet to heed.

Notes

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3. M. Keith Booker, *Alternative Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture* (Westport CT: Praeger, 2006), 63.

4. Stanley Kubrick quoted in Thomas A. Nelson, *Kubrick: Inside*

a Film Artist's Maze (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 133.

5. Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 99.

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"Is It Wrong to Baptize in the Name of Jesus?"

Did the Apostles baptize wrong in the Book of Acts since they baptized in the name of Jesus?

There is a debate that says believers must be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28: 19) rather than in the name of Jesus only as the Book of Acts records. The Jesus-only people are also modalists which means they do not believe in the Trinity but in Jesus Only, hence they baptize only in his name. The confusion lies in the different formulas for baptism in Matthew and Acts. The solution is that either formula is acceptable since they are both Biblical. What is not acceptable is the modalist theology behind the Jesus Only belief that denies the personhood of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Lawrence Terlizzese, Ph.D.

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Welcome to the Machine: The Transhumanist God

Authorized Dreams Only Please!

Have you ever wondered if scientists could build a giant machine to solve all the world's problems? Or better yet, why not just become machines and get rid of people all together? Imagine it: no more worries, sickness, war, drug addiction, or poverty. We can solve the world's problems by simply getting rid of people. This sounds fantastic but is actually the goal of the new religion of Transhumanism, which wants to replace the human race with machines.

 The wisest man once said there is nothing new under the sun (Ecc. 1:9). Despite all our modern innovation and progress, the age-old desire of mankind to become God remains the same. This new religion is steadily gaining ground, perfectly fit for our hyper technological twenty-first century. Transhumanism's beliefs are simple, but their implications will be revolutionary. They want to transcend our mortal bodies and create a super intelligent godlike human and machine hybrid, called a cyborg, or something like the Borg from *Star Trek*. This super machine will solve all our material and spiritual problems by curing disease, extending life expectancy indefinitely, and providing for a meaningful existence through creating a continual sense of euphoria in the brain. There will be no limits to what this super man/machine will be able to do. *All we need to do* is surrender our wills to achieve universal peace and happiness.{1}

Pink Floyd used to sing, "Welcome to the machine. What did you

dream? It's alright we told you what to dream."{2} In the brave new world ruled by the cyborg, dreams will all be programmed and peaceful so as not to upset the inhabitants of utopia. With this hybrid technology, someone will make our decisions for us.

All technology expresses its creator's values and represents a certain view of the world, and how things should be. It is anything but value-free. The question for us is, who will decide what the future will be like in a technologically determined age?

You are What You Worship

Technology shapes the human conception of itself and its relation to the world, including our view of God. In a mechanical age, it is not surprising that people conceive of themselves and others as machines.{3} Human relationships are reduced to efficiency and usefulness or to convenient arrangements. For example, marriage is already largely viewed as an economic contract between two people who may not have anything else in common, rather than as a sacrificial commitment.

Transhumanist philosophy takes the modern mechanistic view to its ultimate level of altering humanity to become a machine. The idea that we become the thing we worship finds greatest expression in the twenty-first century. Those who worship idols become like them (Ps. 115). Those who worship money become greedy. Those who worship drugs become addicted, and those who worship the machine will become a machine. In the past, philosophers and poets often used the machine as a metaphor of dehumanization and alienation from modern life; modern society was thought to function like a machine.{4} This means in a machine culture, people feel like numbers or spare parts and therefore entirely expendable. Individual meaninglessness in a mechanistic society will be realized in

the very near future, so that individuals will be spare parts and completely assimilated. The future super computer will offer humanity everything, except the freedom not to choose assimilation.

The machine represents the ideal existence, even the ideal being. The idea of "salvation in the machine" derives from modern thought in a deistic and Unitarian God who created a clockwork universe.{5} Transhumanism has simply transposed that deity into the machine itself and removed the Clock Maker. Now it's the clock they worship.

Transhumanism affirms artificial selection instead of natural selection. They believe that through science and technology, humanity can direct the cause of evolution. Humanity controls its own evolutionary process to reach a perfectible state. Instead of millions of years to evolve a new species, it will be done in decades, maybe even in one generation.

The Singularity Is Near

Transhumanists expect the merger of humanity and machine around 2045 in an event they call the Singularity. This means artificial intelligence (AI) will equal or exceed human intelligence and there will no longer be any discernible difference. Humanity will lose all distinct consciousness and consider itself as one being.{6}

Humanity then must change itself genetically to keep pace with AI. This will create a giant planetary super organism that knows no distinctions. Humanity will merge with the rest of nature through genetic engineering, and nature will become indistinguishable from the machine. We will no longer know the difference between organic and inorganic, or natural and artificial, something already prevalent today in cities, weather patterns, and food production.

A super organism looks something like a beehive, anthill, or

termite mound; various individual cells work together as one. So by mid-century Transhumanism envisions total global unity, not at the political level between states, but ontologically and biologically. We will have evolved into one massive planet—truly Spaceship Earth, completely interrelated and interdependent, like an anthill. This will be the technological version of the kingdom of God or the Transhumanist version of the millennium.

Ray Kurzweil and the Singularitarians believe people will eventually be able to upload their consciousness into a computer and live forever. [Note: for an intriguing Christian perspective on this idea in a compelling novel, Probe recommends *The Last Christian* by David Gregory.] The religious nature of this movement is obvious in its millennialism or belief in the coming perfect society, and also in its belief in progress and immortality. Critics call the Singularity "the rapture of the nerds," indicating its close connection with religious belief and millennial expectations. The Singularity represents religious belief for computer geeks. The acceptance of progress and human perfection makes Transhumanism the heir of modernity, with its ideal of technological utopianism and its mechanistic view of the body. It's modernism with a vengeance.

The Artilect War

The future may not bring the perfection of the Singularity, but the disaster of the Artilect War. An Artilect is an artificial intelligence or super computer. AI researcher Hugo de Garis predicts that the Transhumanist vision will be disastrous and will result in gigadeath (the death of billions of people). He hypothesizes that by the end of the century, Cosmists, or technically modified people, will want to build Artilects to join with humanity, but that Terrans, or unmodified people, will oppose their construction because it has no benefit to them. A nuclear war will ensue, probably

initiated by Terrans as their only way to stop Cosmists.{7}

Jacques Ellul once remarked that "the technical society must perfect the 'man-machine' complex or risk total collapse."{8} There is no other place to go but up. If the current human enhancement project fails it may prove to have devastating effects for the future of the human race, and if it succeeds the human race faces techno-enslavement or pseudo-extinction by being transformed into another species.

Will the Singularity really happen? It is very possible. Or maybe the Artilect War will happen instead. Perhaps technology will bring the apocalypse instead of utopia. It is all science fiction right now, but science fiction is often correct in the broadest terms. Recall Jules Verne's vision of space travel to the moon in the nineteenth century when people thought it was pure fantasy and laughed because there was no way to break earth's gravitational pull. But his work inspired a generation of rocket scientists to find a way to do it, and within a century man was walking on the moon. Something considered impossible was achieved.{9}

A basic principle of futurism states that anything is possible to achieve within twenty years given the resources to do it. And the Bible states that nothing is impossible for humanity in a unified technological society. Gen. 11:6 says "Now nothing that they imagined will be impossible for them." This of course is talking about Babel, but I think it demonstrates the fact that the discussion of a transhuman transformation should be taken as a credible threat and should be addressed by the church.

Ethic of Limits

The essence of Transhumanist philosophy revolves around the idea that there are no natural or divine limits to what technology can accomplish. It serves the basic technological

imperative that says what can be done should be done! This view unleashes all restraint and frees us from all limits, and is one of the greatest examples of the church's cultural captivity since we do not present a different view of technology from the rest of society.

This maxim is obviously dangerous because any limitless action leads to self-destruction as a natural corrective. Humanity cannot presume to be greater than the natural limits arrayed against it, such as death or the scarcity of resources. Humanity must learn to live within boundaries.

Christians are called to respect limits and the right balance in its use of technology, between its misuse and its non-use. In an age of limitless technology the church must present an ethic of limitation. This means finding limits to technology, such as limiting computer use, limiting driving, electricity, or even not upgrading. This may seem small, but in trying to discover a workable ethic of technology, it represents something we can do right now. The widow's mite (Mark 12:41-43) will not solve the church's budget deficit, but should be given anyway because it was something she could do, so an ethic of limitation remains a course of action open.

An ethic of limitation only becomes obvious when the situation appears desperate, such as with nuclear weapons, where not even one mishap can be afforded. Other examples consist of over-eating, drug addiction, over-fishing or hunting, or any activity that exhausts natural resources. Because people did not practice limits to begin with, they are now faced with a real possibility of collapse or catastrophe. We must discover the limits to any technology, if we are to use technology correctly and benefit from it. The history of the Tower of Babel teaches that if mankind does not practice self control, God will impose limits Himself in judgment (Gen 11:1-9).

Notes

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Bitter Controversy Concerning Whether Humanity Should Build Godlike Massively Intelligent Machines (Palm Springs, CA:Etc Publications, 2005).
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9. Howard E. McCurdy, *Space and the American Imagination* (Washington DC:Smithsonian Institute Press, 1997), 9-27.

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2012: Doomsday All Over Again

Progress or Regress

It is the end of the world again. The world was predicted to end at least eight times in the past 30 years, from the Jupiter Effect in 1982 to what became a common punch line, "88 reasons why the rapture will happen in 1988." Then there was the granddaddy of all false apocalyptic prophecies: the millennium bug of 2000, when it was widely held that all computers would fail at the turn of the millennium. Let's not forget the two failed predictions of the end in 2011. Now the world faces yet another prediction of the end with the Mayan calendar prophecy of 2012. In an age of super–science, computers, space travel and accelerating progress, why are people fascinated with the end of the world?

We have all heard the phrase "What goes up must come down." This captures the popular attitude towards progress and regress. Americans believe strongly in human perfectibility and the inevitability of technological progress. This idea states that as technology moves society from its primitive state to an advanced condition it will eventually improve, bringing a better tomorrow. The world is getting better and

better. Faith in progress provides the engine for all the accelerating technological changes from space exploration, media, computers, to science and medicine. Historian Robert Nisbet noted the essential role of progress in our belief system when he said that progress does not represent one aspect of modern life, but in fact provides the keystone idea and context for the entire modern worldview, including democracy, equality, social justice and, of course, science and technology.{1} The modern world does not exist without the belief in progress. Technological improvement makes no sense without the larger *telos,* or purpose of history, guiding it. Simply put, all of this innovation leads to a utopian future.

So we are left with the question, If America is so progressive why is it so obsessed with the end of the world or *apocalypticism*, a belief that is not progressive, but regressive? This view of history does not move toward a utopian society of universal peace, ease and convenience, but rather toward calamity. Progress and regress share the same view of history. Any belief in progress necessarily has a regressive interpretation. They each look at the same circumstances and data and draw complementary conclusions. One sees the dawn of a great society, the other sees the end of the world. They represent complementary ideas in the same way life and death complement each other. What lives eventually dies, so what progresses will also necessarily regress.

All people intuitively know that they will die one day; so then society, the collective "person," knows it too must one day die. If progress takes place we know that its opposite, regress, will also happen. Regressive thought states that the progress we take for granted potentially has a downside and in fact will result in something catastrophic. Our society will one day come to an end. It cannot live forever any more than an individual can live forever in a mortal body. We know that what goes up must come down. The current obsession over the end of the world in movies, such as *2012*, *Melancholia* and

Contagion or wildly popular novels such as the *Left Behind* series, the predictions of popular preachers or the Mayan prophecy all cater to our regressive and pessimistic side. This is not as bad as it first sounds. Death creates the foundation of all religion, philosophy and culture as attempts to provide answers for our questions and solace in times of doubt and need. The reality of death causes people to look for the meaning of life. Christians need to harness the regressive side of culture because it warns of imminent danger and offers the opportunity to introduce people to Jesus Christ. Regressive thinking, like the knowledge of our own death, makes us all aware of our need for God and the Savior. Believers must take advantage of this primal consciousness of the end to tell people about what the Bible says concerning the end of the world and the return of Christ. But in order to do this successfully we must first establish guidelines on how to identify false prophecy.

What the Bible Says

Today people are searching for the meaning of life in the wrong places, such as the prophecies of Nostradamus, astrology and, again, the Mayan prophecy of 2012. It is a sign of the end times when there are many false prophets talking about the end of the world (Matthew 24:11). The false prophet shows that people are aware that the end is near.

There are two rules in Scripture that will help believers identify false prophets, which should be followed without exception. First, prophecy *must never set a date regarding when the world will end*. Jesus spoke clearly about the signs of His return and the end of the world when He said, "But of the day and the hour no one knows" (Matthew 24:36). Anyone who comes to you with a firm date as to when the world will end such as December 21, 2012 should be avoided. Cultists continually violate this cardinal rule. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses have predicted the end of the world eight

times between 1914 and 1975. Popular radio preacher Harold Camping predicted the end in 1994 and twice in 2011. The speculation surrounding the year 2000 was much like it is today over 2012. Scientific evidence was proffered predicting that all computers would fail at the turn of the last millennium. This warning was taken very seriously by most people who made preparations for the potential disaster, demonstrating the pervasive sentiment of impending of doom.

However, many Bible-believing Christians also fall prey to the error of date–setting, even if this practice is often veiled in vague language and logic. For example, when prophecy experts identify leading political figures as the Antichrist, such as Hitler, Mussolini or Saddam Hussein, they engage in false prophecy. This approach will invariably get us into trouble because it starts the clock ticking. If Saddam Hussein were the Antichrist, then logically Christ should have returned before the end of his life, since the Antichrist is the precursor to the coming of Christ (Rev. 6:2; 2 Thess. 2:3). However, we know that did not happen. In this way, identification of the Antichrist with any leading figure becomes false prophecy.

How much better it would have been to say Hussein was *like* the Antichrist or prefigured the Antichrist, rather than identify him as the Antichrist. This simple switch in focus spares us the humiliation of false prophecy, but retains all the power of moral denunciation that apocalyptic thinking offers.

This leads to the second rule of indentifying false prophecy: *all prophecy must have a moral imperative*. This means people should not engage in speculation and prognostication for the fun of it. A biblical approach to prophecy gives a warning about future judgment and a chance to repent: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3; see also 2 Thess. 2:1, 5-10). Prophecy engages in denouncing moral outrage, which is why it couches things in

the strongest possible language. To say that the world is coming to an end or that someone is the Antichrist gets a lot of attention, but requires a moral cause to justify its claims.

If the prophecy gives a date and it lacks the moral imperative, then the prophecy reveals itself to be false and sensationalistic. The Mayan 2012 prophecy fails on both counts. Although it causes us to contemplate the end, it sets a date and offers no reason for why the world should end. It is simply doomsday all over again!

Notes

1. Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 9, 171.

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See Also:

- 2012: Is the Sky Really Falling?

Christianity, Zen and the Martial Arts

Zen and the Martial Arts

In the beginning of the movie *Enter the Dragon* Bruce Lee admonishes his young disciple to feel, not think! He wants to

see “emotional content,” not anger, in developing his practice. Technique is like a finger pointing a way to the moon, but we must not focus on the finger or we will miss the heavenly glory. Lee sends his pupil away after several slaps on the head, convinced he has mastered the lesson.



This scene illustrates the close connection between the martial arts and Zen Buddhism. Lee’s lesson was entirely Zen in approach. Its object was the perfection of a kick technique with enthusiasm; a mere mechanical performance was insufficient. The student must feel his art as well as accurately execute it. This means the technique should be as natural and unconscious as breathing. It must become second nature. On the other hand, Lee’s object lesson was not really about kicking but feeling as a means to enlightenment or nirvana, a state of realization that the self does not exist.

But does practicing the martial arts mean we must also adopt Zen Buddhist practice as well? Can we separate the martial arts from Zen practice and belief and embrace a Christian approach? In order to do this we must first distinguish the goal of Zen from the martial arts and then see how the martial arts may be practiced from a Christian perspective.

Zen believes that words cannot adequately convey meaning. They are only the sign posts on a map and not the destination, or the finger pointing to the moon but not the moon itself. Zen relies on flashes of insight connected to feelings or intuition. Zen adopts the Taoist view in world religions asserting that “he that knows does not speak and he that speaks does not know.” This means that the truth or enlightenment they are seeking cannot be expressed in words. It cannot be found in a book such as the Bible in Christianity, the Koran in Islam, or the Torah in Judaism, or

even the sutras found in other forms of Buddhism, but must be experienced. They have little place for theory, but stress action and encounter with the practical world. Buddha mind transmits only to Buddha mind. They do not just talk about Nirvana but viscerally pursue it.

Zen means a way of meditation, a method for attaining enlightenment, not gradually as in other sects of Buddhism, but suddenly through shock and illogic. Zen practitioners are the shock troops of Buddhism. Zen monks are known for their acts of irreverence by burning Buddhist scriptures or defacing statues of Buddha, all designed to demonstrate their protest against theoretical learning. Truth is found in ordinary life and the practical as illustrated by the movie the *Karate Kid* whose main protagonist must sand the floor or paint the fence and wax the car before he can learn to throw a punch. Karate was not something that could be learned from a book.

Zen in America

In their practicality Zen adherents are not unlike Americans, which explains Zen's popularity in the United States as part of the counter-culture movement of the 1960s. Americans do not like theory, metaphysics, and laborious arguments, but are practical, to the point; action oriented, not cerebral. Americans are pithy in their word usage and prefer axioms and pearls of wisdom succinctly stated as opposed to the long winded arguments of scholars and professors.

Zen relies on dialectical thinking or paradox to frustrate traditional logic in order to shock its followers into realization. Zen uses the *koan*, an insoluble riddle that can only be understood through persistent contemplation and application to one's life. For example, a famous koan asks, "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" The smart-alecky response of snapping your fingers together like Bart Simpson will earn you a smack on the head or a rap with a bamboo stick

from the master and a seat at the back of the class.

Zen does not emphasize detachment from life, as earlier Buddhism did, but the embrace of life. People learn not by retreat but through immersion. There is no sacred and secular distinction as in traditional religions, a point a monk may prove by burning a statue of the Buddha and declaring, "there are no holy images."{1}

The koan is learned by intuition and cannot be articulated in words. Koans are not meant to have strict logical answers you can verbalize, but only understand for yourself in meditation. Pointing to a flag waving in a monastery, the monk says, "What is moving, the flag or the wind?" The answer is neither; the mind is moving.{2}

Zen appealed to soldiers in Japan and was adopted by the military creed known as Bushido where it was mixed with the martial arts around AD 1300.{3} It is this Japanese version that is most familiar to Americans. However, Zen originates with the Indian sage Bodhidharma who brought the message that cannot be spoken to China in AD 520.{4} In Zen we see a clear connection between Taoism, the ancient Chinese religion, and Hinduism. Both believe in a similar view of God as ultimate reality or the impersonal principle of the universe. In popular culture we know this as "the force" from *Star Wars*, the active energy of the universe that animates all things. In theological studies we call this pantheism or the belief that all things are God.

Separating Zen and the Martial Arts

Legendary history says Bodhidharma brought the martial arts with him in the spread of Zen across China, but modern scholarship notes that the martial arts were practiced in China prior to the coming of Bodhidharma.{5} The founders of the famous Shaolin monastery were probably military men who

retired to monastic life in AD 497, and most monks came from the general population where the martial arts were already practiced before the spread of Buddhism. Monasteries were sources of wealth in ancient China and required defending. The martial arts scholar Donn Draeger also notes that the martial arts were established in Japan prior to the acceptance of Buddhism, and the joining of these two practices represents a modern innovation.{6} These historical facts lead to the conclusion that the martial arts were practiced centuries before the arrival of Zen.

The martial arts or fighting arts have a long and diverse history in ancient China, India, and Greece that certainly precedes Zen or the founding of Shaolin and long predates the Samurai by thousands of years. These arts include hand to hand fighting, wrestling, boxing, and weapons use such as sword fighting and even gladiatorial combat training.

There is certainly a synthesis created between Zen and the martial arts in Shaolin and later in the Code of the Samurai, but the fighting arts of all kinds precede Zen. Historically speaking there is no intrinsic connection between Zen and the martial arts. People practiced these arts before Zen and will continue to practice them without Zen today.

Also, philosophically speaking there is no necessary connection between Zen and the martial arts. Zen is a method to achieve enlightenment through shock and illogic that awakens followers into the realization of unity of essence with ultimate reality, which means emptying and loss of self. The martial arts, on the other hand, were developed for the practical reason of self-defense, sport and warfare.

Given the austerity, paradox, practicality, and composure of Zen disciples in the face of death, the warrior appears naturally attracted to it as a philosophy. Draeger points out that Zen contributed to the fighting technique of the Samurai by helping him empty his mind of all distractions and prepare

him for the rigors of military life. It enabled him to transcend mere physical technique.{7} However, there is nothing intrinsic to either system that makes their practice necessary to each other, any more than fencing and the fighting techniques of the knights of the Middle Ages must involve Christianity. Zen's contribution to the martial arts is a convenience or incidental and not a philosophical necessity. This means the two can be logically and practically separated without harm or inconsistency to either system. It is possible to engage in martial arts without eastern religious philosophy. What Christians are responsible for, is to find martial arts instructors who teach the techniques without the Zen aspect.

Christianity and Zen

A basic principle of apologetics is finding the common ground between two different systems. This includes similar things such as beliefs and morals. This allows for a conversation and friendship to develop. Do not underestimate the power of friendship and empathy. In the final analysis we are not about winning arguments, or breaking bones for that matter, but winning people, individuals whom God loves; the hardest hearts can be softened by a little kindness and understanding.

There may be many points of contact between Christianity and Zen such as love, truth, realism, and even paradox, but the one I find most interesting is individualism. Both beliefs place a strong emphasis on individuality and respect for individual dignity in terms of self-discipline and self-defense, a common ground where both Christians and Zen Buddhists alike share their interests in the martial arts. And we must make it clear that the martial arts are not the sole province of Zen teachers. Christians and Zen Buddhists simply have a common interest in these techniques for the purpose of self-growth, exercise, and sport. One need not be either a Buddhist or Christian to perform the martial arts, but both

may use them for their own purposes.

The second principle of apologetics is to define the differences between the two systems and seek for the resolution in Christ. There are many differences between Zen and Christianity. Zen is a faith that seeks enlightenment through self-realization that there is no self. Christianity does not pursue enlightenment, but salvation. Buddhism believes that the individual self is an illusion, but Christianity believes the self is very real and very sinful. Christianity seeks to reconcile the self to a personal God through Jesus Christ. Christianity does seek to empty the old sinful self and replace it with a new self made in the image of Christ. This is not accomplished through works or meditation or following the Eightfold Path, but strictly by faith.

Buddhists do not believe in a personal all powerful God, but an impersonal force. Christians believe in a personal creator God who stands outside of the created world, making reconciliation impossible in terms of human effort. Buddhism stresses the importance of human works, discipline and right attitude and actions to achieve Nirvana. Christianity says salvation is impossible unless God saves us. Buddhism wants to empty the mind and escape the world of change. Christianity wants to save the world for the glory of God and fill the mind with his word.

“The Buddha” means “one who is awakened,” which suggests that his title is self-earned and self-appointed. All that the Buddha accomplished has come from “within,” from his own abilities and merit.

“The Christ” means “the chosen one,” which suggests that his title was given to him and not earned. It comes from grace and from “without” or “outside” of him. One man leads to a system of works and the other to a system of grace. This point should never be confused.

Christianity and the Martial Arts

The primary problem for Christians in approaching the martial arts is violence. The martial arts are fighting techniques that can be used for several purposes: the most obvious is self-defense, then exercise, and finally sport.

We approach these techniques with the same Christian principle that we use in our approach to any other subject: we are free in Christ! Paul declares that we are saved in Christ and the world is ours. “For all things belong to you, whether . . . the world or life or death or things present or things to come: all things belong to you and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God” (1 Cor. 3:21-23). This means we use the gifts and talents at our disposal not for self-glorification but for the glory of God. Remember the first principle of Christian love: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” (Matt. 22: 37). Practice the martial arts with a commitment that reflects love for God. “We do all things for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Let the two greatest commandments guide your behavior: love God and your neighbor as yourself.

These principles do include self-defense. It is not unloving to defend yourself or an innocent person from an unjust attack. Self-defense has been an accepted point in Christian theology for centuries. This principle has been part of “just war thinking” and simply means Christians are justified under certain conditions to defend themselves and innocent people against aggressive parties who will take advantage of them. In fact, not to defend ourselves or the innocent through inaction when we are capable of intervening to stop or prevent assault is equally considered as wrong as the assault itself.

The martial arts present a much more suitable and even peaceful alternative to self-defense than say a handgun, whose ease of use can be lethal. In the martial arts one has the advantage of training and discipline that act as a hedge to

immature and reckless behavior. It takes years to learn these skills and with it one is taught self-control, discipline, and values, especially the value of human life.

What is completely unacceptable is the idea of training remorseless killing machines, like the sensei from the *Karate Kid* movie who taught his pupils to crush their opponents and "show no mercy." Such a view will only lead to your own destruction. For it is not without reason that Jesus said, "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). But, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matt. 5: 7). Mercy is the hallmark of the Christian. We learn in order to serve, just as Jesus said, "The Son of Man has not come to destroy life but to save it" (Luke 9:56). Those pursuing martial arts should use their skills in the service of life to achieve discipline and protection and to offer themselves as role models of dignity and responsibility to the younger generation.

Notes

1. John Lewis, *Religions of the World Made Simple*, rev. ed., (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 49.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 50.

4. Houston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 128.

5. Salvatore Canzonieri, "History of Chinese Martial Arts: Jin Dynasty to the Period of Disunity." *Han Wei Wushu* (February-March 1998), 3 (9); Ibid., "The Emergence of the Chinese Martial Arts." *Han Wei Wushu* (23).

6. Donn F. Draeger, *Modern Bujutsu and Budo* (New York: Weatherhill, 1974), 128.

7. Donn Draeger and Robert W. Smith, *Comprehensive Asian*

Fighting Arts (Tokyo: Kodansha International, LTD, 1980), 95.

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