

Faith, Hope, Love and New Technologies

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Trying to make sense of the ethical dimension of new technologies, Christian communicators have at least four hurdles to jump. They have to develop empathy with modern technologies and their impact on modern life; they need to find their way in a very complicated discussion about the general question of ethics and new technologies; they are faced with the question how different religions deal with such issues; and they have to make peace with the divisions within their own Christian community.

In order to begin, turn to your computer and 'Google' the topic under discussion. New technology: 611,000,000 hits; ethics and new technology: 16,000,000 hits; theological ethics 2,820,000; Christian ethics 16,300,000. If one tries to narrow it down to, for instance, nanotechnology: 2,515,000.

This simple computer exercise reveals what the word 'new' in this context means. Once upon a time the beginning of wisdom might have been to go to a library and collect material about a subject; now the beginning of wisdom is to enter a labyrinth of material and find a trustworthy guide inside that maze. The communicator's first task: rescue drowning students in an ocean of information. The exercise is frightening, but revealing.

Browsing through the Internet material one quickly notices how much smacks of propaganda. Straight information is hard to get. Lots of it is seduction or preaching. Scientists who proclaim that ethical questions will be solved almost automatically by science itself; philosophers who become eschatological doom-thinkers because the very newness of technology does not fit their categories; theologians of different traditions making it worse by joining the doom-thinkers in the name of God. Too often the arrogance of science and the arrogance of theology empower each other.

Communicators could expend all their energies in helping people find the hidden messages in all these sites.

As we know: propaganda is a fruit of fear: the propagandist does not trust the message to communicate by its own force. Many new technologies in the field of armaments, health, food and marketing are marketed with assertive if not aggressive methods. And on the other side the fear of new technology quickly leads to violence. See the emotions, the anger and the violence surrounding abortion clinics or the modern ballot-box. Fear is everywhere: new technologies endanger our old habits, norms and values. Some love that; most fear it.

Whether loved or feared the sheer amount of information the new technologies spout forth have a deep impact on us all. No wonder. We all experience the Gulliver syndrome: while the moon and stars have lost their distance, making us small as persons and as a planet, knowledge of infinitely small quantum particles make us unbearably big.

There is no escape from the mobility of the technological society, nor from the hasty style of living that comes with it. Nobody will do away with the avalanche of entertainment or the ever louder advertisements. Neither will we be able to keep the terrible twins of individualism and massification out of our house. And what is more, technology will make sure that we know what happens to us, how our experience of time, space and distance change. There is nothing reasonable we can do against it.

All new technologies are here to stay. They are part of our lives. Some gadgets we may decide not to use personally, but as citizens we shall have to decide on their place and function in our society: Pro-lifers still pay for abortion clinics, pacifists for precision bombs. That is where ethics are born: we say 'No!' and do the opposite!

This ambiguity is everywhere. Those opposing the use of modern technology because they fear its infectious intrusion into indigenous cultures find components of hightech unavoidable. Demos are fought with the same computers and cell-phones used for modern warfare and a capitalist market economy. We are the technologists and wherever we go we carry the germs of modern technology with us. Germs or blessings.

Another point: communicators, trying to understand the consequences of new technologies on our behaviour and thinking, have observed the different reaction of age groups: what is totally natural to teenagers is a different world to seniors. New technologies are the land of the young.

Theological ethics

Benjamin Sacks, the outspoken Chief Rabbi of the Orthodox Jewish community in Britain, writes in one of his books about the memory of an inter-religious prayer meeting in the US just after 9/11. It made a great impression on him. He noticed that, in spite of all the deep conceptual and theological differences between the major faiths, enough common spirituality emerged to covenant together for ethical issues. In any case there was enough ground to really dialogue together. And so he makes a passionate plea to understand the need for continuous and well-structured peace-negotiations between religions as essential.

Communicators as sponsors and organizers of sustained and universal dialogue is what he asks for. And he is joined by such leaders as the tireless Dalai Lama, but also by Christian voices in the last decades. The frightening deterioration of relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims

give this plea extra urgency. It is strange that in our world so few of these meetings take place and when they do, they remain so incidental. Scientists often complain that politicians do not listen to them until they are recruited for immediate projects. If that is not the case, their warnings and advice are usually politely disregarded. Rabbi Sacks writes that the most important thing communicators can do is to create cells of permanent dialogue everywhere.

This underlines the task of religious communities. Usually, when society needs churches, mosques and synagogues to calm down protest, they are quickly invited, but they are not regarded – at least in most western countries – as important partners in ongoing dialogue. And yet that is where a theological contribution to the new technologies will take shape. Theologians – of all religions – need to be liberated from their isolated positions in order to discover what they know! Ethics and theology in all their facets are not meant to be an exercise in otherworldly spirituality. These are not escapist or refugee activities. Their contribution is societal: they are given (or invented, as agnostics would say) to make people human, to serve society and so honour the One they call their Creator.

If communicators are able to make these dialogues happen and so to refurbish religious communities as houses of common learning and dialogue, they will make a tremendously important contribution to our societies.

Science-based technologies

It is not necessary to write extensively about science-based new technology. As I already stated we are all aware of the fundamental changes taking place in the last century and in this one because of the immense explosion of science and technology. Between cosmology and nanotechnology, between computers and transmission in all areas of thinking and behaviour our world would hardly be recognizable to our grandparents and even our parents. The best scientist may modestly claim that the more we know, the less we understand.

Logically our norms and values have undergone changes as well. By 'our' I refer to the values of the rich world: morality has never been the same after the discovery of contraceptive devices, household technology is changing the role of women, new arms have changed the norms of warfare, community feelings have changed because of the high mobility of people, home entertainment has increased individualism, neighbourhoods have lost their coherence. The social fabric of unions, clubs, sports associations, churches, has changed and is often in the danger of disappearing.

More than increased mobility and prosperity, our perceptions of time have undergone great change. Everything is happening so fast that thinking about the consequences inevitably lags behind. While we are still meditating about the consequences of modern abortion practices and

the desirability of IVF for older women, decisions are made here and there about cloning and the medical use of children's organs. These medical ethical problems are difficult enough, but we are simultaneously faced with many others: starvation as an unwanted effect of liberal market policies; an ever growing world population; deterioration of the environment and energy – and water shortage.

None of these questions allows for a careful and leisurely process of thinking. It all happens at the same time and all of these subjects are vital to our survival. Lack of time becomes endemic, the offer of leisure-time activities, the ever increasing number of new books, the demands simultaneously made on us by family, work and friends: it all causes many people to suffer from more stress than they can take.

For communicators it means new skills: not to produce even more but to facilitate people to meet, trust each other's expertise, divide work and attention. At first sight it may look as if the new technologies give us more time; in fact they all require such attention that they cost us time. One can see older people struggling with their new technologies: the way in which the cell phone works or their new camera or their computer; one sees children so intrigued by computer-games that they have no time left for playing outside.

Our ethics have little to offer in this respect: how does one learn - and teach - slow living?

Technological dependence

We are only the second generation working with tools we can no longer repair. Or worse: the workings of which we do not understand. To see these tools only as instruments is difficult: no wonder that many people talk to their computers as if were they human. The arrival of robotic helpmates will increase our dependence on technology even more. In fiction this has already led to a stream of modern Frankenstein books with one important difference however: they do not fantasize about mechanical men and women but describe them.

Soon medical operations will be done by machines. They already diagnose better than humans. The ethical question then becomes: what, if we put ourselves for medicare in the hand of machines, keeps us from ending life mechanically? And what happens when careful discussions about euthanasia, for instance, are overtaken by medication that is officially described as preventive medicine but in fact brings about a gentle death?

Here again communicators face a delicate task. Modern technology, especially where it penetrates the personal and family spheres, raises emotional reactions. People do not like to be invaded in the realm of norms and values. So, once again: facilitating communication means spurring people to work on meaningful relationships. In turn this requires knowledge of the facts.

Can communicators secure conversations and debates about the facts rather than ethical theories? Will they have enough courage and know-how to force their community to face these new facts and not pretend ignorance? A recent series of studies in the Netherlands brought to light that many parents – and the parental society – do not know how their children experiment with new technologies, be it in the form of the Internet, drugs or sex. Apparently parents are so ignorant as to imagine that a new world can emerge but that a new generation can ignore its demands and chances.

The same is true of many religious communities. New technologies have given new insights in the history of religion, the development of sacred texts, the many ways in which culture and a particular religion are interwoven. For many people these developments have been a liberating experience, but churches are slow to incorporate what they know into their teaching and pastoral work. So they became responsible for the loss of millions of members who cannot reconcile the tradition of their church with their knowledge of science and technology.

Even today theology in many quarters is at war with science and the number of scientists who have found a meaningful relationship with religion has diminished drastically. In Europe Christian churches have lost almost all contact with scientists, after having already lost contact with most artists and workers. Someone called religious communities ‘castles of ignorance’ and even if that is too strong, religious communities will have to work hard not to let the accusation become a true description of their actual situation.

Theological ethics and Christian ethics

Christian ethics are a widely discussed and emotional subject. For most Europeans, secularised as they are, the very term recalls moralism and domination of some sort of dogmatic faith. Christian ethics are seen as a work out of the Ten Commandments, interdictions rather than guidance and certainly not as the promises they wanted to be. Nietzsche and Marx set the scene to understand Christian ethics as a demand for compliance with the authorities, powerlessness, obedience and a retreat from ‘the world’. The opiate of the people.

I know that such a picture is unfair to the many exceptions to that generalisation. Many examples to the contrary can be given, both in the academic community and in all kinds of renewal movements. Yet, Christian ethics as resistance to injustice, openness for renewal and courageous acts of sacrifice are the hallmark of a small minority in an ocean of compliance and moralism. Great names in the history of Christian ethics all belong to people who suffered persecution and ridicule in their own churches during their lifetime. Francis, Erasmus, King, Abbé Pierre, Bonhoeffer, all of them were initially treated as holy outsiders and mostly recognised by a next generation rather than their own.

In the New Testament ethics are not very homogeneous: Jesus himself was a nonconformist student of a nonconformist tradition of Jewish prophets and teachers. His relation to the actual leadership and the prevailing understanding of the faith was problematic. He belonged to a school

of thought in his tradition that had been always there but never very popular. That is how he went about, preaching freedom for the people in a patriarchal society, testing the validity of theologians, insisting that ritual and tradition should serve the people rather than dominate them, breaking through the walls of excommunication and nationalism. His claim to continue the teaching of the great prophets of Israel brought him in a continuous conflict with the powers that were. He was arrested and executed because of his conflict with the majority of Jewish leadership and the Roman Occupier.

It did not take long for that Jewish nonconformist community to become a new religion. The documents of the early Christian church, beginning with some of the youngest scriptures in the New Testament itself, show a rapid institutionalisation of the Christian faith. For whatever honourable reason the writings of St Paul have elements of restrictive ethics (women, the State, politics, gender relations, sexuality) that have characterised churches ever since. The utterances of popes, synods and church appointed teachers speak a clear language: here is a religion at work rather than a movement within a religious setting.

Since then origin and what follows have remained in conflict. The Christian tradition remains one in which traditionalism and renewal are engaged in a never ending tussle, sometimes resulting in a downright state of war, complete with scaffolding, hangings, burnings and shootings..

Even today this duality remains: most newsworthy church items in the media pertain to that conflict of Tradition and Renewal. Often churches speak about new technologies in the language of old: magisterial and old-fashioned. And often negative. Within the churches and especially in the ecumenical movement the other voice is heard. Lay experts contradict 'the official standpoint' of their church. Law and Order over against Imagination and Renewal. That struggle which has very old papers and is reminiscent of the days in which the churches had the final word on ethical issues. Now the magisterial utterances of churches confuse the outsiders and often anger the insiders.

The modern ecumenical movement taught churches much about their own prophetic tradition and brought them to positions that were quite new to them (racism, colonialism, the arms race, global free-marketing etc.). To many that is a positive development even if the churches have to learn to speak not only about new positions but also to speak in a new tone of voice. They easily make the mistake of assuming the old language of the Magisterium even for quite new points of view, and assume an authority that they have long since lost. Ethics have become a dialogue of people willing to relativise their own position and to remind their partners in the conversations that they have made gruesome mistakes in the past.

In the biblical tradition ethics always begin by an awareness of failure. Pride and presumption are to be mistrusted. Where a humble contribution to an ongoing debate is called for, a triumphant declaration of the will of God coming from such an ambiguous institution is quite counterproductive.

Getting rid of Plato

The nature of ethics has changed from a deductive to an inductive discipline – and science based technology has made that happen.

For a long time, from the days of Plato until the idealist philosophers of the 18th/19th century, ethics was an academic discipline trying to apply universal truths to specific situations. The essence of reality lies in the realm of ideas or dogma. The particular is not to be trusted. Not so any longer. Science teaches us to work with an inductive search for the right decisions in ethical questions. Let us begin looking at the facts and analyse how we got here. If existing values are working, fine; if not, let's be pragmatic about it.

In terms of the great problems of our day we cannot ignore the pluralism of culture, of religion and politics. Absolutes do little to help us; they also lead straight to strife and war: what is regarded as absolute cannot be discussed. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not universal. Not in acceptance and certainly not in practice. Yet, it is the closest we have to a set of rules which may become universally accepted one day. Until that time we shall analyse, listen, debate and decide.

For communicators it is one more incentive to keep the debate open, to make sure that discussions on the issue is not given up and that they include all the people concerned and involved: philosophers, theologians, law makers, economists and the victims of the issue at hand. It may well be that new questions of technology will generate more than one answer, simply because we do not know yet the results are of the decisions we make. A complicated world will have to live with an ongoing discussion rather than with once-and-for-all answers. An attitude of willingness to change, to correct and to refine is more important than being prepared to die for yesterday's absolutes.

The Christian contribution to this ethics debate may be different from what people expect of that religion, but quite welcome: faith in a God 'who makes all things new', acceptance of a leader who broke through fixed positions all the time and who invited the most unlikely partners to dine and speak. Keen awareness that even the most important of his disciples made mistake after mistake, even while he was with them, is a good starting-point for the ethical discussions we have to carry on in our day.

Be wary of institutions

It is easy to be cynical about the institutions that, in the last century, were developed to ensure ongoing dialogue, like the United Nations family, Parliament of the World's Religions, the World Council of Churches. Reason enough for cynicism: it is true that what was intended to serve dialogue and cooperation has often been used for power-play and self-interest: confidence in others is not the institution's strongest point.

Yet, these institutions have also brought about real leadership, which did not put its trust in threats and menace but in a patient search for understanding and persuasion. Threats and menaces may contain armed conflicts; they also foster hate and enmity. So, even if for a time an ethic of containment may work, it must give way, eventually, to a strategy of reconciliation and forward-looking healing, of trust and confidence. Blessed are the peacemakers, i.e. men and women ready to meet personally, become acquainted, perhaps even become friends in order to get away from the abuse of power for personal or national gains.

It seems to me that this is the heart of modern communication. In the world of NGOs, single-issue organisations, churches and trade unions, it has been shown that enmity and prejudice cannot resist earnest personal contact. If one looks through the records of the 20th century, it is the courage of persons willing to meet – confidentially and fair – that has prevented and ended wars more than the brave soldiers who died for it. In a broken world police, judges and jailors are necessary and will always be, but they are the people of last resort in peace processes.

Modern ethics are made in conferences and committees. A new process has been discovered: ethical concerns start with committed experts, meeting almost informally, then they are carried from small, usually international consultations to larger conferences. In that process courageous politicians are 'picked up' who bring such concerns finally to the political arena. In the course of the process, ethical convictions and arguments are formulated, polished, corrected and tested. An important sideline is the protection of courageous ethicists who live in dictatorial countries.

Ethical Lobbying has been born. Questions about medical ethics have been raised this way, and so have concerns about natural resources, the environment, poverty and arms.

Have patience

It is wise not to look on this process of continuous ethical development with too high expectations. It is the only promising sign we have for work on the survival of the planet, but it creates much resistance among those who have to make decisions: nationalism rears its head from the beginning. Few politicians see their way to an authentic international posture; especially in traditional democracies – where all enthusiasm for the more refined workings of people's participation and growth have declined – it is tragic to see how the ideal of democracy has become a fight for group interests.

People are adept at ignoring investment in timely solutions; we would rather pay ten times the cost of neglect than once the cost of timely action. It makes us a tragic species.

On the other side of the coin of nationalism we find the absence of respect for specific cultures. Powerful and rich nations, aware of a problem in weaker lands, tend to go after them without much respect for the legitimate identity of their opponents. When countries or cultures are coerced into changing their own (perhaps foolish) ways, a new threat to peace and justice is created. There would have been no Hitler without Versailles and no Pol Pot without colonialism.

Between identity and respect, between raw self-interest and willingness to change lies only one instrument: conversation, dialogue, common study, care for others. That instrument requires much patience. Some of our real problems like poverty, gender justice, acceptance of homosexuality, are not mastered in one generation: without consistently executed long-term planning ethical propositions are quite useless.

New ecumenical priorities

A plea for a new ethical ethos, couched in a broad dialogue in which both respect for one's own identity and the need for renewal are given shape, requires Christians to take a hard look at the future of the ecumenical movement. The very nature of ethics as a process of ongoing dialogue on present-day problems requires Christians to engage in such a dialogue outside of one's own small community.

In the 20th century the ecumenical movement made a great impact on the churches and their ethical thinking. It gave attention to the various traditions but approached these from present-day challenges. In the Ecumenical Movement ethics opened a door to unity which dogmatics tried to keep closed.

What stagnated was the issue of institutional church union. The few reunification processes that came about took years and years to reach no more than intermediate goals. My own church worked for 40(!) years on reunification with two other churches in a country with more a hundred denominations.

It was as if the Holy Spirit herself warned us that Christian unity in theological terms is not institutional in the sociological sense: what is needed is a conciliar movement in which people bring the richness of their own identity to a process of renewal of society.

Christian ethics has become the specific contribution to the ethical thinking of all religions and certainly also of all humanist traditions. When churches speak of the Uniqueness of Christ, without whom there is no salvation, they do not have to refer to the need of all human beings to recognise Him in order to be saved. Of course there is the uniqueness of Christ, as there is the uniqueness of Buddha and Mohammed, and all the followers of these men will rightly insist that the world (the creation, if you like) can only be saved if the contribution of their faith is brought into the efforts of all to safeguard and maintain a planet which is in grave danger.

It is in that common effort that we shall learn to renew our own faith. It is the bringing together of different identities which will serve unity. Unity not for its own sake but for the wellbeing of all.

Finally...

An inductive approach to modern challenges demands the active employment of all of humanity's spiritual forces: open, willing to listen in respect, a sort of spirit inspired athletic games. It is good that several of the participants believe themselves to be the best and the ultimate winner of any spiritual contest: such belief in one's own excellence is good! It makes for more zeal and more concentration on the questions at hand.

Christian ethics will come to the meeting of religions with its own specifics: a trust in the God of Love, the belief of the greatest prophet being the lowest servant, the knowledge that God's Holy Spirit blows where she likes to inspire, comfort and judge, and an insistence that all religions care for the wellbeing of the planet: in short, faith, hope and love.

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