

Willem B. Drees (ed.), *Technology, Trust and Religion: Roles of Religions in Controversies on Ecology and the Modification of Life*. Leiden University Press, Amsterdam, 2009, pp. 320, ISBN 978-9087280598 (pbk). Review doi: 10.1558/arsr.v24i3.369.

Technology, entering all areas of life at an unprecedented rate, has generated ethical and social debate on its role, and the ethical and policy measures required to guide and direct the vast possibilities that technology/ies in all arenas of human life open up. Contemporary technology not only determines and shapes how we do something but also what we do. The consequences of contemporary technology are morally relevant as well as morally ambiguous. *Technology, Trust and Religion* brings religion to the ethical discourse surrounding new technologies, and examines whether and how world religions could offer guidance and moral checks in evaluating the potential and actual benefits and harms resulting from novel technological advancement.

The insightful and comprehensive introductory essay by the editor Willem Drees succinctly brings together the relevant themes of technology, values, religion and trust. Trust in this sense pertains to the matter of where the authority should be placed for assessing the moral, social and ecological aspects of technology. Does it lie with scientific experts and engineers or with the public at large? What role could religious understanding play in pluralistic societies where religion has almost been divorced from participating in public debates?

The rest of the book is divided into four sections, each with three or four articles. The articles in the first section deal with broad questions of the interaction between religion and technology. Szerszynski contends that, with the emerging global debates on environmental degradation, religions have acquired a special position in directing human behavior toward more humane living. The author believes that in monotheistic religions, the transcendentalization of God separated Him from mundane reality, turning human beings into the sole agents of this domain. The author's views can be contested by the understanding that all monotheistic religions emphasize God's hand in running worldly affairs. While things of the world might not be divine, as in animistic religions, still they do not become as profane and subject to plunder as the author argues. For instance, in the Islamic tradition, the notion of *amanah*, in which the world and everything belonging in it is considered a sacred trust to be used responsibly and wisely, for worthwhile ends, is not consistent with the author's claims for monotheistic religions.

In 'Technology and What it Means to be Human', Smedes puts forward the idea of technonature to overcome the separation and antagonism between nature and artificial artifacts. The unnaturalness of technology, according to him, is not that unnatural, on closer examination, and is the only nature we can subscribe to in the rapidly growing technosphere. In the last article of the section, 'Technophilia: Internet as a Vessel of Contemporary Religiosity', the Internet is used as a case study to show our expectations of technology and how it shapes social and religious sentiments and anticipations. The author cites sociologists to argue that religion is no longer confined to its traditional structures. In the secular social sphere, familism, individualism and technology represent religious sentiments, as sources of veneration and determining individual and social values, beliefs and expectations. Technology in its religious form is considered the agent of human salvation, delivering their hopes of a better life and world and thus becoming the cultural measure of truths and ideals. Technologies are considered to overcome the 'uncertainties and shortcomings of the human condition' (p. 62) and to provide a hope for regaining our lost divine status.

The second section contains articles related to religion and the environment. In the first article by Watling, eastern and biblical religions are studied to find any plausible advice they may suggest with respect to the environment and ecology. This is followed by a study of Deep Ecology, which has both scientific and spiritual elements to it, providing deeper insights into an otherwise impoverished reductionist science. In 'Religion, Nature and Modernization in China', the author explores the transition of China to modernity that involved the strenuous relationship between science, which considered nature to be objective and value free, and the ancient religions, which considered nature to be sacred. In the third article, Kadaplackal proposes his theological thesis of human beings as 'created co-creators' to balance the two positions on the spectrum, one that emphasizes the unique features human beings possess and the other that places importance on human beings as created, humble stewards of earth. This thesis has implications for how human beings will use technology and for what ends. In the final article of this section Clingerman argues for a restoration of spirituality to the Christian understanding of nature as an antidote to environmental crisis.

The third section, 'Morality and the Modification of Life', has two case study-based articles on animal biotechnology and GM food, and the remaining two articles explore the theoretical dimensions of the meaning of life, care and compassion in the biotechnological context of life extension and enhancements. 'Substantial Life Extension and Meanings of Life' captures the core philosophical problems related to the development and use of cutting edge biotechnology. The author raises the question of whether life extension is a good thing in itself. By pondering the meaning of a meaningful, happy life, the author muses whether too long a life may defeat the purposefulness and meaning in life, suggesting that when we have indefinite time to reach our goals, the goals lose their significance.

The last section has articles on the themes of trust, authority and public discourse regarding technology. There are themes from political philosophy that explore the role of religions in debates on technology policy, the environment and so forth. The first and the last articles of the section vehemently argue for the role religious wisdom could play in inspiring generosity, compassion and the overcoming of narrow selfish interests. Materialism, individualism and market economics which represent secular ideas are as much based on faith as values and morals derived from religious legacies, argues 'Deep Pluralism: Interfaith Alliances for Progressive Politics'. All in all, the book is a good resource for anyone interested in the theoretical and pragmatic aspects related to technological culture and the vision behind, as well as the moral questions opened up by, the multiple possibilities offered by new and cutting edge technologies.

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