Social Progress in a Technoreligious World

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What is the place of religion in work for social progress? This question often produces widely divergent responses, with some seeing religion mainly as a source of conflict in societies, and others pointing to the role of religious people and communities in important work for peace, and social welfare. The truth is that there is no single story that tells us all we need to know—"religion" is too big an umbrella to allow summary judgments. Religious communities may be a source of harm, or a source of beneficence, or something in-between; likewise religious belief systems may provide a firm grounding for progressive ethical action, or be detrimental to individuals, groups or environments. To grapple with the place of religion in social progress, you have to tell many different stories, and explore the diverse contexts in which these divergent outcomes are produced. One thing is clear. A one-sided focus, emphasizing only conflict, or only harmony, isn't enough.

Inspired by Cian O'Donovan's and Johan Schot's "Crafting Stories," this essay offers perspectives on science and technology in modern religious life. Religion is often posed in opposition to both science and technology, which for some makes it anti-

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progressive. Yet all technology, as Schot and O'Donovan remind us is sociotechnical; science too is always co-produced with society. So rather than assume opposition, it makes more sense to look closer at the ways that contemporary religious life is entangled with science and technology, including everything from day-to-day spiritual practices, to theological pronouncements on globally-significant problems like inequality and climate change. Leading off each section will be two brief but provocative stories to think with, stories that can help us explore the place of religion in social progress, both what it is, and what It might be.

Technoreligious lives

In the 1950s when Oral Roberts, the American Christian evangelist, had expanded his ministry to the radio, he encouraged his listeners at a certain point in his program to put their hands on the radio as he simultaneously touched his microphone, so as to share the prayer and receive a special blessing.[1] Later, he would ask viewers of his television show to do the same. As a preacher, Roberts had practiced the laying on of hands in revival tents around America, a moment of physical contact between the supplicant and the spiritual leader meant to provide healing and blessings. Roberts translated this tactile, physical practice through the newer medium of radio and television, bringing his message, and in the view of himself and his followers, the blessings of contact to more people than would otherwise have been possible. For Oral Roberts, as Margaret Grubiak explains, worship via media technology was no compromise with authentic prayer, but rather a vitally important ministry.[2]

In contemporary Brazil, Padre Marcelo Rossi, a charismatic Catholic religious leader, combines medieval Jesuit breathing exercises, with vocalizations and modern techno-music, in order to provoke an integration of inner and outer spiritual experiences, body and mind, in the act of worship. José Maria A. de Abreu explains that Rossi devised his program in response to concern from charismatic Catholic leaders that

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[1] Margaret Grubiak, "An Architecture for the Electronic Church: Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma," *Technology and Culture* 57, no. 2 (April 2016) 380–413. Grubiak relates this story based on the work of David Morgan, *The Lure of Images: A History of Religion and Visual Media in America* (London: Routledge, 2007).
[2] Ibid.

media like radio or television could only transmit the intellectual aspect of worship.[3]
They feared losing the integration between body and mind so central to their spiritual
practice. Padre Rossi's exercises, broadcast on the radio, are meant to induce physical
response in the form of goose flesh, as well as a transcendent sense of integration and
harmony with oneself, with God, and with others. According to de Abreu, Rossi has
many followers, granting wide visibility and followers for the charismatic Catholics who
once merely a small religious group operating on the fringes of society.

      What does social progress look like? In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen
famously argued that the proper goal of development was not so much a particular
yardstick of income or economic wealth, but rather the freedom to live a life one has
reason to value.[4] Much of the work done by the International Panel of Social Progress in
the development of *Rethinking Society for the Twenty-First Century* focused on
pragmatic questions like the nature of work, institutions for health and social welfare,
political participation and similar concerns. The stories above suggest another angle to
the idea of progress however, one that recognizes and grapples with the reality and
centrality of spiritual aspirations in the lives of many people.

      I admit that when I first read of Oral Roberts and his radio prayer, I scoffed.
Surely, touching a radio was not "really" prayer, I thought, isn't prayer meant to be
purely mental? The rest was just trappings, right? Wrong. The limiting assumptions I
carried with me prevented me from understanding the character of Oral Robert's
ministry or that of Padre Rossi for that matter, and why the physicality of their spiritual
practices (even if mediated through immaterial radio waves) mattered to them, and to
their followers. Roberts, Rossi, and others like them have spearheaded new forms of
religious community, communities that are larger, made up of many people who would
never come into contact with each other personally. Some saw these developments as
good, others as problematic. As all of us have come to recognize after the social media
revolutions of the last twenty years - secular or religious, media-based communities that

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[3] José Maria A. de Abreu, "Goose Bumps All Over: Breath, Media, and Tremor," *Social Text* 26 (September 2008): 59–78.
[4] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).

lack mechanisms for accountability, and that offer at best distant contact between members can produce troubling outcomes.[5]

Yet emphasizing only the dark side of such communities makes it impossible to understand how these technoreligious practices may be so valued by many, and how they may act as important sites of spiritual activity or meaning-making. Religion and spiritual life is dynamic, and may be reproduced and reconstituted in new and unexpected ways in dialog with technological change. *Rethinking Society for the Twenty-First Century* notes:

> religion is far more than rituals, institutions, and belief systems. It involves day-to-day activities, in some cases bodily practices, and forms of communication. These daily activities, like all things may work towards beneficent or harmful ends, depending on the context, yet for many they are a primary context through which moral meanings are made, and remade on a daily basis.

Around 80 percent of the world's population professes some form of serious spiritual belief system, a number that appears to be increasing, not decreasing. Because religious aspirations are so central to the lives of so many, there are significant consequences for social justice if we dismiss, or misunderstand the ways that religion figures into individual lives. For many people, religious communities and spaces are places where moral conversation and direction are worked out. With the shift of those conversations to broader communities in virtual spaces, the act of moral deliberation is subject to all the same problems, and possibilities that social media offers. Although religion is not the sole lens through which moral commitments are defined and understood, for many, it is a mightily important way to conceive of, and live, a life one has reason to value:

> Social progress requires a society to engage in moral deliberation and moral judgments. It is not simply a matter of finding the right technological formulae. Imagining what a society could become requires reaching beyond oneself, beyond the mundane everyday world. Progress implies a sense of meaning and purpose that has, even if unstated, moral valence. There are many ways such

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[5] See for example Whitney Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

moral deliberation and transcendent imagination can be fostered, but for much of the world's population religious communities and religious rituals are the spaces in which humans are called to the work of this-worldly transformation.[6]

The rhetorical contrast between mere technological formulae for well-being, which I read to be primarily economic, and the striving for meaning and purpose which inspires much spiritual life emphasizes that progress requires something more qualitative than economic measures, a point Sen made as well. But the rhetorical framing of that distinction as "technological" vs. transcendent is unfortunate. It tends to obscure a significant dimension of everyday religious life apparent in both of the brief stories starting this section, its sociotechnical nature. Religious and technological lives may be co-constituted. As Bryan Larkin and Charles Hirschkind have argued, this is a story of the technological becoming the sacred, and it is a story we need to understand if we are to grapple with the character of modern religious lives in the context of social progress.[7] Although the vast majority of religious communities in the world continue to be constituted in fairly traditional ways, new media spaces of spiritual activity create new kinds of communities, which face all the same dangers and difficulties as secular media communities of a similar type. In that respect they may indeed become sites of conflict.

But we should not fall into the trap of assuming that all such technoreligious undertakings are inherently pathological, spiritually inauthentic, or unsuited for any kind of moral deliberation. Instead, the resolution to religious conflict will in all likelihood be similar to the resolution of conflict produced by social media more broadly.

Enlightenment Baggage

In the early 2000s, an Islamic NGO sponsored a reforestation and watershed improvement project in a village in Sumatra. The scientists involved in the project themselves professed no religious beliefs, but they organized the work such that the environmental education would be accompanied by Islamic spiritual teachings about care for the environment. The NGO offered training to local Muslim clerics and invited

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[6] *Rethinking Society for the Twenty-First Century*, chapter 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).
[7] Charles Hirschkind and Brian Larkin, "Introduction: Media and the Political Forms of Religion," *Social Text* 26 (September 2008): 1–9.

them to speak at the local mosque about the issues of clean water and healthy forests,

while scientists trained villagers to do biodiversity surveys and provided their own input

on the methods for improving the water situation in the village. The program was quite

successful, with local women taking up the with enthusiasm the Islamic principles of

care and the scientific work to stabilize their watershed. Project organizers argued that

the combination of religious and environmental education provided a stronger social

foundation for these new practices than environmental education alone.[8]

In the late 1990s, the Hopi and Navajo nations in the United States brought a

court case against a ski-resort operator who was pumping treated sewage in the form of

artificial snow, on a mountain they held sacred. The judge ultimately ruled against the

Hopi and Navajo nations, arguing that because religious belief was a purely internal

thing, no material harm could actually pose a threat to their religion.[9]

The challenges that some find in connecting religion to social progress are bound up with what I am calling here Enlightenment baggage. One element of this baggage is the now completely discredited notion that social progress inevitably involves a retreat of religion from public into private life, and ultimately, a withering of religious thinking altogether.[10] Looking at the world today, religion and religious practice are far from withering, and many have questioned the logic that equates modernization with the passing away of religion.[11] Religious studies scholars in particular have demonstrated that thesis is untrue in practice, yet there lingers in wider academic discourse a tendency to treat religion merely as a masking enterprise, a strategic deployment of belief to cover up "real" political motivations. In this way of thinking religion is little more than a form of cynical manipulation. My point here is not to say that such things never happen, but rather to point out that this way of seeing religion, or this kind of story, makes it difficult to understand the more complex place of religion in public life.

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[8] J. McKay, "Lessons Learned From a Faith-Based Approach to Conservation in West Sumatra," *Asian Journal of Conservation Biology 2* (2013): 84–85.

[9] Rebecca Tsosie, "Indigenous Peoples and Epistemic Injustice: Science, Ethics, and Human Rights," *Washington Law Review* 87: 1133–64.

[10] E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by K. E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1912 [1995]).

[11] See discussion on this in *Rethinking Society for the Twenty-First Century*, ch. 16.

A certain strain of Enlightenment thinking, one which I emphasize was not universally held, even during the peak of the actual Enlightenment, cast science on one side and religion on the other, an interpretation which strategically ignored the deeper histories in which science and religion were mutually reinforcing activities. Moreover, much scholarly focus on religion has framed it as entirely mental/intellectual and thus internalized, and principally immaterial.[12] Emphasizing the otherworldly content of some religions, for example individual relationships with a deity and the afterlife (an emphasis which itself only makes sense for a certain subset of religions), this approach relegated to the background important this-worldly dimensions of religious lives, where day-to-day work in the world is also understood as having a bearing on spiritual life. The story above about the Sumatran reforestation project is telling in this respect. In Islam, understanding the afterlife, and the preparing individuals for their experience at the moment of death is, to be sure, extraordinarily important to a person's spiritual development. Yet this life—living in a way that respects and advances Allah's plan for the world—is equally important. The success of the reforestation project is easy to understand with this context in mind. Caring for this world, and people in it, is a valued spiritual activity—exploring how this caring extends to the environment is by no means a stretch, and indeed a topic of some interest to contemporary Islamic thinkers.[13]

In the case of the Hopi and Navajo lawsuit, Enlightenment baggage that separates the physical from the mental was deployed in a way that reinforced harmful racist and colonial practices, and inflicted, and so far as I know continues to inflict, damage to a sacred site and to the Navajo and Hopi peoples themselves. To be sure, we can imagine the judge ruling rather differently if the resort operator had, for example, spread treated sewage inside a Christian church. Yet even so, that the rhetoric of religion as "purely mental" was available as reasoning in this case, speaks to the ways that this mode of Enlightenment thought, and its problematic assumptions about the nature of religion and the material world, can reproduce injustices. Rebecca Tsosie, a

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[12] On the interaction between religion and science, see for example Keith Thomson, *Before Darwin: Reconciling God and Nature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). For a recent, helpful collection of essays on the relationship between science and religion over time, see Gary Ferngren, ed., *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

[13] See for example Ali Mohamed Al-Damkhi, "Environmental Ethics in Islam: Principles, Violations, and Future Perspectives," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 65 (February 2008): 11–31; S. Nomanul Haq, "Islam and Ecology: Toward Retrieval and Reconstruction," *Daedalus* 130 (2001): 141–77.

legal scholar, argues that cases like this point to a form of epistemic injustice, where the ability of the Hopi or Navajo to speak for their own beliefs and to assert the material, spiritual significance of place is negated (in the context of racist and colonial traditions) by a judge whose intuitive sense of religion is embedded in Enlightenment binaries between mind and matter, transcendent spiritual life, and pragmatic everyday living.[14] Telling stories that challenge such Enlightenment baggage is essential for working towards justice.

The case of climate change offers a dramatic example of how misunderstanding the complexity of potential connections between science religion can result in lost opportunities. It is no mystery that some opposition to climate science and denial of climate change comes out of the American evangelical Christian community, a reality which tends to foster the idea of science and religion as inherently at odds. Yet this is at best a highly partial story, and in global terms even fairly misleading. It turns out that denial of climate change in evangelical communities actually differs only slightly from other white, middle-class religious groups in the United States.[15] Young Americans on the other hand, of whatever religious conviction, are less likely to deny climate change, and more likely to see environmental action as necessary. Worldwide, non-American evangelical Christians are more likely to not only acknowledge the reality of climate change, but to advocate environmental action as a necessary spiritual activity, as expressed for example in the Capetown Commitment, a document produced by the international evangelical community.[16] When Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* advocated for action on the environment, that may have surprised some. But both Orthodox Christians, including the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, and the Catholic church in fact have since the 1970s advocated environmental action in the context of spiritual obligation and duty.[17] Both institutions have asserted that caring for the

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[14] Tsosie, "Indigenous Peoples," 1133–64.
[15] See *Rethinking Society for the Twenty-First Century*, ch. 16.
[16] "The Cape Town Commitment," The Lausanne Movement, www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment.
[17] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* Papal Encyclical letter, retrieved from Vatican City, Italy, http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf; See also "Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew", *New Perspectives Quarterly* 15, no. 1: 4–8; and *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

environment is also about caring for divine creation and caring for each other, essential duties in Christian belief systems. Pope Francis's writing may have been especially pointed, and the emphasis he gave environmental matters certainly raised eyebrows within the church. But the content of the encyclical builds on deep theological traditions. The Catholic Church is not alone in being concerned about environmental issues, and promoting action among believers. Although indigenous traditions are diverse, many embrace a relational view of the world that integrates people, including in some cases ancestors and descendants, animals, plants, and sometimes inanimate objects into meaningful relationships with each other.[18] It is no surprise then, that such groups, long critical of framings that portray the non-human world as nothing more than a collection of "natural resources", have embraced climate activism, both in order to preserve traditional ways of life in the face of environmental exploitation, but also to assert the intrinsic value of these relational logics for creating sustainable, and meaningful lives.

What all of this means in a pragmatic sense is that the possibility of productive partnerships between secular actors and religious actors on behalf of climate is not only possible, but likely, so long as it is clear where interests overlap. For example, in *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis argues strongly in favor of environmental justice, but against massive "climate engineering" projects, and biocentric worldviews that accord no special place or moral authority to human beings. Groups working on the basis of those last two points would not find a willing partner in the Catholic Church, although those advocating (for example) recycling, less materialistic lifestyles, or work to help those in poverty on the front lines of climate change just might. Likewise, although some American evangelicals deny climate change, others have embraced environmental activism, including for example the Evangelical Environmental Network.[19] This group admits the reality of climate change and advocates for environmental restoration and clean energy on the basis of the interests of future generations. The key for this group is

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[18] See for example Merata Kawharu, "Kaitiakitanga: A Maori Anthropological Perspective of the Maori Socio-Environmental Ethic of Resource Management," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 109 (2000): 349–70; Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, *A Yupiaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2006); Clint Carroll, *Roots of Our Renewal: Ethnobotany and Cherokee Environmental Governance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[19] www.creationcare.org; Also see Katherine K. Wilkinson, *Between God & Green: How Evangelicals Are Cultivating a Middle Ground on Climate Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

the way protection of the environment accords with their own pro-life commitments. Intergenerational justice therefore might be a shared ethical foundation on which to build cooperation. Interfaith organizations, such as the American and Canadian group Interfaith Power and Light, show how cooperation on environmental issues between groups with significant religious differences is both possible and effective.[20]

Why try for such partnerships at all? Apart from the "all hands on deck" moment we are facing with climate change, the reality is that religious communities have extraordinary reach and provide motivation for believers that purely secular approaches may not be able to match. Recognizing that religious communities may embrace science as a spiritually valuable practice, or tool, and that they have significant spiritual investments in this-worldly problems, can pave the way for meaningful working partnerships that extend the reach of progressive actors.

Conclusion

Chapter 16 of *Rethinking Society for the Twenty-First Century* sums up its key findings this way:

> we argue that researchers and policy makers pursuing social progress will benefit from careful attention to the power of religious ideas to motivate, of religious practices to shape ways of life, of religious communities to mobilize and extend the reach of social change, and of religious leaders and symbols to legitimate calls to action. The continuing need for critical but appreciative assessment and the demonstrable benefits of creative partnerships are our standout findings.

I would add to this that in thinking through the place of religion in contemporary life, we must understand its pervasively technological character as well. Technologies or the consequences of those technologies may spur re-thinking of moral commitments and spiritual commonplaces; they might be necessary media for making moral lives in the contemporary world possible, or constitute a formidable challenge to human flourishing. They might provoke conflict or serve as a focal point around which compromises can be reached. Humanistic scholars of technology emphasize that the technological is always

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[20] www.interfaithpowerandlight.org/.

social and the social is always technological. We should not be surprised to discover that religious lives and technological lives are entirely entangled. As we grapple with the project of creating social progress, it is worth taking the time to explore how assemblages of religious and technological lifeways themselves are productive of human flourishing, or the lack thereof, of lives that people have reason to value or which prevent valuable lives from being possible.

About "Rethinking Society" on *Technology's Stories*

This article is one of a series of contributions drawn from or inspired by the International Panel on Social Progress. The IPSP is a global academic initiative of more than 300 scholars from all social sciences and the humanities who have contributed to *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century* (https://www.ipsp.org/), a report on the prospects for social progress today. This special collection for Technology's Stories marks the publication of the report and offers important insights from a cross-cutting IPSP theme that sought to examine the role of science and technology, as it contributes—or not—to social progress.

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