CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Technology and Mystical Theology

Rik Van Nieuwenhove

In order to see how we could possibly link technology and mystical theology in one paper, I must first briefly explain what I mean by mystical theology. In the modern period mysticism and spirituality have come to be associated with privatised, immediate experiences of God. William James, in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, has both chronicled and furthered this understanding of mysticism in terms of an immediate, passive, fleeting and unmediated experience of the divine. As Denys Turner and others have pointed out, this preoccupation with ‘experience’ is deeply alien to the traditional patriarchic and medieval understanding of mystical theology. Imbued with an awareness of the divine transcendence, pre-modern theologians were suspicious of any claims of direct vision or experience of God in this life. (Ex 33:20) I share Turner’s reservations about an experiential reading of mysticism and I have argued elsewhere that ‘transformation’ of the human being may be a more appropriate category to describe the nature of mystical union with God. This transformation results in an attitude of detached involvement (I will attempt to clarify this oxymoron below) and this attitude can, in turn, only be properly understood in the light of some key doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the transcendence of God in relation to his creation on the one hand, and the belief that God assumed a human nature on the other. I will argue in this paper that the way the mystic relates to the created world in general may also prove of significance as to the manner in which we should relate to technology.

Several major philosophers in the twentieth century have taken issue with the unbridled development of technology. Heidegger exposed the dangers of a technological age in which calculative thinking becomes the only way of relating to the world. He criticised the circularity of consumerism for the sake of consumerism, the instrumentalising manner in which the human person relates to the world, and to which she herself succombs. This critique was further developed along Marxist lines by some of Heidegger’s pupils, such as Herbert Marcuse, whose book *One-Dimensional Man* was regarded in the 1960s as one of the most incisive critiques of contemporary society, describing a society in which growing productivity goes hand in hand with growing destruction, where demands for products that do not meet genuine human needs are artificially created, and where the rationality of the technological society, which propels efficiency and growth, is itself actually deeply irrational.

Marcuse was rather pessimistic about the possibility for change:

> The more rational, productive, technical, and total the repressive administration of society becomes, the more unimaginable the means and ways by which the administered individuals might break their servitude and seize their own liberation (Marcuse: 2002, 9).

Engaging with the tradition of Christian theology might suggest one way of relating to our world of technology that may prove both constructive and critical. Such an engagement with the Christian tradition should not, however, be construed as an alternative to the socio-critical analyses of the members of *Die Frankfurter Schule*; all too often mysticism has been construed in a-political terms, thereby depriving it of a critical dimension that can greatly enrich it, and is, in my view, implied in it.

In what follows I will first briefly develop this link between the transcendence of the Creator and the incarnation; secondly, I will examine in a somewhat more elaborate section the practical implication of this dialectic by looking at the notion of detachment, thereby hopefully casting some light on the manner in which we should relate to our world of technology.

*Transcendence, Creation and Incarnation*

The theme of divine transcendence is deeply embedded in the Judaic-Christian tradition. It found its most eloquent expression in the tradition of so-called apophatic or negative theology, developed by authors such as Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Scotus Eriugena, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, John of the Cross, and others. Sketching this tradition of negative theology, or how this emphasis upon the incomprehensibility and mystery of God relates to God’s revelation in Christ (which, nevertheless, retains a
mysterious, veiling dimension) is beyond the scope of this paper. I will merely refer to an intriguing essay by Karl Rahner in which he shows how the theology of creation and the belief in the incarnation allow us to account for key aspects of Christian spirituality (Rahner: 1967). Although Rahner’s focus may at first appear more limited – the essay dealt with the nature of Ignatian mysticism in particular – its outline is fairly representative of the Christian attitude to the world in general. Rahner wonders how we can make sense of the Ignatian fuga sacculi on the one hand, and the joy in the world on the other. How are we to understand that the joyous exuberance of baroque churches on the one hand, and the sacrifice of young Jesuit missionaries who died in agony in the bamboo cages of Tonkin on the other hand, arise from the same spirituality? How are we to make sense of this dialectic of utter self-abnegation, and radical involvement and commitment that characterises Jesuit spirituality? Rahner points towards divine transcendence and the incarnation to make this connection clear:

Ignatian piety is piety toward the God who is beyond the whole world and who freely reveals himself. In this (…) is to be found at once the reason for flight from the world and the possibility of an acceptance of the world (Rahner: 1967, 283). This orientation of detachment and affirmation (or, in Ignatian terms, indifferencia) allows the Christian to challenge the world without succumbing to escapism or denial of the world; similarly, the fact that God never coincides with any created thing or being keeps us from idolising anything in the world. Thus, a case could be made against those (following Nietzsche) who argue that Christianity renounces the world for the Beyond. On the contrary, the fact that God is both radically transcendent and yet freely identifies himself with the world in the incarnation of his Son similarly allows Christians to engage with the world without losing themselves in it; it allows them to challenge it without renouncing it. I will suggest that we should approach our world of technology in the same manner: technology should not become an end in itself; nor should it be utterly rejected in a utopian vein but it should be seen for what it is: an instrument to be put to a proper use.

*Detachment and Involvement*

The Christian assertion that the transcendent God has radically identified Godself with creation (and humanity in particular) by assuming a human nature, has profound implications for the attitude of the Christian towards the world, including the world of technology. In brief, the Christian will both be detached from, and involved with, the world. As I hope to show, dying to the world and its idols (which is essentially a dying to self-centredness and possessiveness) implies a new and more authentic engagement with the world.

Augustine had already given a classic expression of the way we should relate to the world and God by making the distinction between *fruit* and *ult* (i.e., between ‘enjoying’ and ‘using’). We ‘enjoy’ things when our will finds rest in them because it is delighted by them for their own sakes; and we ‘use’ things when we refer them to something else we would like to ‘enjoy’. In other words, when we ‘enjoy’ something it becomes an end in itself. What makes our life so miserable, Augustine argues in De Trinitate X, 13, is nothing but using things badly and enjoying them badly. Indeed, only God is to be ‘enjoyed’ while all created things should be ‘used’. Augustine’s terminology may at first seem somewhat misleading. He does not mean to suggest that created things can be ‘abused’ or merely used for selfish purposes. When Augustine states that only God should be ‘enjoyed’, he means that only God should be our ultimate concern and he warns us against idolising anything created. The distinction between ‘enjoying God’ and ‘using things’ therefore does not imply hostility or indifference towards created things; on the contrary, we should love them for God’s sake, that is, with a free and unpossessive love that allows them to be. In On Christian Doctrine, I, 4 Augustine illustrated the distinction between use and enjoyment by referring to a journey: if we want to return to our home country, we would of course need ships and other means of transport to get there; if however the experience of ships and the delights of the journey were to captivate us to the extent that they become an end in themselves, and we lose interest in getting home, we are ‘enjoying’ that which we should merely be ‘using’. Augustine is not suggesting that we should not find pleasure and satisfaction in this world but he points out that we should get our priorities right: enjoying the things of the world should not be our ultimate and only goal. Rather, in our dealings with the world we should always relate to God: all our dealings with the world should entail a reference to God. This implies a non-idolatrous engagement with the world.
This theme of a proper way of relating to God and world was developed from the beginning of the fourteenth century onwards in terms of a transformation of the human self—especially in the writings of Eckhart, Jan van Ruusbroec, John of the Cross, and others. For instance, in his Sermon 2 Intra vit Issus... Eckhart argues that the human soul should become virgin and wise at the same time, that is, we should both be detached from the world, yet engage with the world in works of charity.²

It needs to be emphasised that Eckhart’s well-known ideal of detachment (Abgeschiedenheit) does not refer to a specific emotion or experience beside other experiences. Rather, detachment functions as a category of experience, that is, it shapes all our dealings with the world, all our emotions and experiences. Detachment does not mean that instead of loving creatures, we should now love God — for this too would be reducing God to the status of an object of human created desire. Nor does detachment for Eckhart refer to the fact that we should become desireless. The problem is not human desire but its possessiveness: “The strategy of detachment is the strategy of dispossessing desire of its desire to possess its objects, and so to destroy them” (Turner: 1995, 183). In short:

Detachment, for Eckhart, is not the severing of desire’s relation with its object, but the restoration of desire to a proper relation of objectivity; as we might say, of reverence for its object (Turner: 1995, 183).

Being aware that God should not be appropriated or instrumentalised to suit our own needs will change the way we relate to God, and therefore to ourselves and the world. We should love God and God’s world the way God loves it: not out of a self-serving need but out of sheer gratuity. Thus, detachment does not imply a negative attitude towards creation. On the contrary, the selflessness it implies allows us to treat creatures in a nonpossessive manner, i.e., the manner in which God himself relates to them. Speaking of the birth of the Son in the soul, Eckhart states: “I am often asked if it is possible for someone to advance so far that neither time, multiplicity nor matter are obstacles to them anymore. Yes indeed! When this birth has truly taken place in you, then no creatures can hinder you anymore. Rather they all point you to God and his birth.”³

The notion of detachment (desasimiento; negado en todo) occupies perhaps an even more prominent place in the mystical theology of John of the Cross. John was exposed to Thomistic theology during his stay at Salamanca, one of the main centres of learning in Spain, and we find traces of Thomistic and Pseudo-Dionysian apophatic theology throughout his works (such as in The Ascent of Mount Carmel, III, 12, 1; II, 8, 1-4; The Living Flame of Love, 3, 48). John is, as is well known, one of the most radical exponents of negative theology, and frequently states that, in comparison to God, creatures are like nothing. For John, detachment refers both to a process of transformation and the result of this process. The soul must, in response to God’s grace, strip itself of everything creaturely; it has to cast out all things unlike God, all alien attachments. When nothing contrary to the will of God is left in the soul, it will be transformed in God (The Ascent of Mount Carmel, II, 5, 4).⁴ God necessarily fills the void created by the abnegation of all creaturely attachments in the dark night of the soul. Thus the soul becomes divine ‘through participation,’ inssofar as this is possible in this life (The Living Flame of Love, 2, 33-34; 3, 46; The Spiritual Canticle, 22, 3). John compares the transformed soul to a clean and polished window illumined by the ray of divine grace. Creaturely attachments are like stains that obstruct the divine ray (The Ascent..., II, 5, 8).

For John also, detachment implies an ultimately positive and healthy attitude towards creation. The detached soul acquires a new freedom in which it can love all things with an unpossessive heart. Detached people:

obtain more joy and recreation in creatures through the dispassion of them. They cannot rejoice in them if they behold them with possessiveness, for this is a care that, like a trap, holds the spirit to earth and does not allow wideness of heart. In detachment from things they acquire a clearer knowledge of them and a better understanding of both natural and supernatural truths concerning them. Their joy, consequently, in these temporal goods is far different from the joy of one who is attached to them, and they receive great benefits and advantages from their joy. (...) Those, then whose joy is unpossessive of things, rejoice in them all as though they possessed them all; those others, beholding them with a possessive mind, lose all delight of them in general (The Ascent..., III, 20, 2-3).

We can only establish an authentic relation with the creaturely world and our fellow human beings if we model our life on that
of Christ. In a remaining fragment of Letter 33, written in October 1591 (a few weeks before his death) to a discaled nun, John admonishes her to ‘have a great love for those who contradict and fail you, for in this way love is begotten in a heart that has no love. God so acts with us, for he loves us that we might love by means of the very love he bears towards us.’ The love that God bears towards us should, of course, be seen in the light of the christocentric inspiration of John’s theology – a theme that I cannot further develop here.

What has hopefully become clear is that the Christian relates to God and the world in a very distinct manner. Because only God should be our ‘ultimate concern,’ nothing creaturely should become a source of idolatrous attachment. However, this does not mean that creaturely things are therefore a matter of indifference to us or to be (ab)used solely for our selfish purposes. On the contrary, once we have become detached (which, as I argued, implies a dying to self and possessiveness), once we have abandoned all our creaturely idols (money, honour, pleasure, consumerism, the nation,...) only then can we re-engage with creaturely things in a non-possessive manner, and relate to them in a proper manner in which we allow things ‘to be,’ and treat them with the respect that is due to them. This obviously also applies to our technological world: borrowing the Augustinian terminology referred to earlier, technology is there to be ‘used’ as an instrument, but it should not become an object of ‘enjoyment’ or ultimate concern. A critique of a technological society in which means are being pursued without reference to any intelligible goals or genuine human needs is implied.

Concluding Observations
The philosophy of the later Heidegger explicitly drew on the tradition of mystical theology (especially the Eckhartian Gelassenheit, translated as detachment or releasement) to express a new attitude towards the technological world. Heidegger wants us to affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us:

We let technical devices enter our daily life, and at the same time leave them outside, that is, let them alone, as things which are nothing absolute but remain dependent upon something higher. I would call this comportment toward technology which expresses ‘yes’ and at the same time ‘no’, by an old word, releasement toward things (Gelassenheit zu den Dingen) (Heidegger: 1966, 54). This releasement is, however, only a promise of dwelling in the world in a different way – a promise that can only be realised when we are drawn out of our ‘normal’ (calculative, instrumentalising) way of thinking by another understanding of being, by becoming open to a new or traditional practices that remain immune to the calculative manner of thinking (Dreyfus: 1993, 308-315). Heidegger is notoriously vague as to how this is to come about. In his last interview (Der Spiegel, May 31, 1976) he famously claimed that ‘only a God can save us.’ Forty years earlier, Heidegger had been of the view that national socialism could have acted as such a God. To a Christian this can only be a disastrous form of idolatry, and in need of radical critique. Still, given Heidegger’s Catholic background, it is not surprising that we find echoes of Christian theology throughout his works and his works have proven an illuminating partner in dialogue for theological thought in the twentieth century (Caputo: 1993). Both the hints and lacunae we encounter in Heidegger’s writings should encourage Christian theologians to re-engage with the Christian mystical tradition and draw out its implications for the manner in which we should relate to God and his creation, including our world of technology.

Endnotes
3. Sermon 59 according to J. Quint’s numbering. A translation by O. Davies can be found in, Eckhart, Meister, (1994), Selected Writings (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), 227-228.

Bibliography


