

Industrial Christianity

1. Welcome to our next video lecture on Religion and Technology. In this lecture we will explore how Christianity addressed the religious needs and sensibilities of individuals afflicted by social and cultural disruptions created by the Industrial Revolution.

The first industrially mass produced object was a sacred object, the miraculous medal. It was commissioned by the Virgin Mary herself, in a vision to a young nun in 1832. Mary also provided the schematics for the medal, to be worn around the neck. She promised that it would bless and protect those who wore it from spiritual temptation as well as from physical illness and injury. Reports quickly spread of miraculous cures as well. By 1836, only four years later, a pamphlet could claim that just one company had already sold 20 million medals, 2 million in silver and gold, the rest “of a cheaper metal.” The pamphlet continues, that eleven other manufactures in Paris have sold the same quantity; at Lyons another four reported 40 million sold “and in many other cities, whether of France or foreign countries, the manufacture and sales are incalculable.”

2. The practice of wearing sacred amulets to both ward off the demonic and to cure disease and other misfortune extends back all the way to mimetic culture. We have found amulets in Neolithic archeological sites, across Europe as well as in Egypt and Mesopotamia. But prior to the industrial age acquisition of such medals required pilgrimages to sacred shrines or the performance of often demanding initiation rites. With mass production, they became readily available to everyone and were very cheap, often enough passed out for free as a means of evangelization.
3. Other sacred objects, especially rosaries, crucifixes and statuettes would soon follow suit. The mass production of religious objects became an “industry” in its own right.
4. Printing became another mass production industry with the invention of the steam powered rotary press. (1) Rather than having to hand press each piece of paper separately, even if in “octavo” sheets where each could be cut into eight separate pages, (2) now a steam powered drum could roll out pamphlets, newspapers, magazines and whole books quickly, voluminously and cheaply.
5. Such mass printing quickly led to the expansion of literacy to all social classes. Together with the mass production of paper from wood pulp over rags beginning in the 1840’s,

such mass literacy in turn led to the mass publication of “pulp” fiction, addressed to a mass audience. “Dime” novels in a variety of genres from romance and gothic to adventure and mystery, flooded the new market. Even magazines got into the act, offering novels in weekly or monthly installments. The logic of supply and demand were inverted. Now instead of content driving demand, demand for books and magazines increasing drove content creation. Magazines would pay authors by the word. And so authors such as Charles Dickens or Edgar Allen Poe could for the first time actually make a living just writing fiction.

6. Predictably the lettered, well educated and highly cultured elites worried at the lowering of standards, literary and moral, that such voluminous “pulp” fiction created. The established churches were no exception. The Protestant revolution had demonstrated that institutional Christianity could no longer control what was published and who read it. Rome had an “Index” of prohibited books banned to the laity. But with thousands of new titles rolling out continuously across Europe, such a listing became impossible. Rather it could only publish guidelines that individuals would have to apply themselves. In this way industrial mass production served to decentralize communication and authority more than ever.
7. On the other hand, numerous Evangelical societies were founded to exploit the new mass printing technology for positive ends, mass producing innumerable small, easily accessible “tracts” that could be purchased by congregations in bulk and disseminated freely as a tool for evangelization among the new urban, and increasingly literate, factory workers. So too missionary societies were formed to translate, publish and disseminate the Gospel throughout the world. The Religious Tract Society in England has published the New Testament and other religious writings in 120 different languages and dialects. Over the past 80 years it has published 2 billion copies of its annual pamphlets.
8. In the United States the Gideons are well known for passing out free New Testaments on street corners, and ensuring that there is a bible in every hotel room in the country. What is most striking about the Tract movement is their unprecedented faith in the printed word. Handing a bible to a stranger is itself to evangelize them. Leaving a bible in a hotel room is in itself a ministry to travelers. For Luther preaching the Word independent of any attendant ritual “works” could lead a person to Christ. (1) Now mere reading of the

word was accorded the same efficacy. (2) Not only is the meaning of the biblical text plainly accessible to any reader, but its saving power can also be found on the printed page.

9. Catholicism also invested heavily in mass print. Until the Second Vatican Council, the Mass was in Latin, a “sacred” language unfamiliar to the laity except in short memorable phrases. Hence the need for bells to let the congregation know when to pay attention. Following the Mass in a Missal, where Latin prayers were translated into English in parallel columns enabled the laity to be more consciously engaged in the ritual. Even now that all prayers are in English, most Catholic laity continue to pray along with a missal provided freely for that purpose.
10. So too, the success of the miraculous medal was quickly followed in Catholicism by a parallel mass production of sacred images enhance lay popular devotions on the periphery of institutional ecclesial control. Holy cards were printed by the millions, depicting a wide array of patron saints: those whose name you carried, those whose station in life you belonged to or those whose sufferings mirrored your own. While Protestants abhorred such a practice as idolatry, for Catholics they served more as mundane mementoes that could be used as book marks, or stuck into a bedroom mirror.
11. At a funeral, memorial cards, sometimes even with images of the deceased, were immediately and economically reproduced in quantities sufficient to freely distribute to all who mourned their passing, whether they attended the service or not.
12. Catherine Laburé’s Marian visions on which the miraculous medal was based was also but the first of a series of maternal apparitions by Mary to young peasant girls and even children as industrialization swept across rural Europe. Several would become popular pilgrimage sites especially Lourdes at the foothills of the Pyrenees in France, Fatima in rural Portugal, and most recently Medjugorje in Bosnia. They were but the most popular of dozens of cults and shrines founded by Marian visionaries. Mary’s message is consistently parental, both reassuring and scolding. She consoles the suffering and reassures them of Jesus and the Father’s love but she also warns them against succumbing to encroaching secularization. Her attention focuses less on the beatitudes, than on exorcizing the demons of industrial age secularism—people missing Mass, neglecting personal daily prayer, taking the Lord’s name in vain. Pilgrims, especially

those afflicted with illness and conditions modern medicine cannot yet cure flocked to these sites seeking miraculous deliverance. Medical investigations scientifically verifying cures alleged are widely disseminated among the devout, while secular critics would seek to debunk their miraculous nature.

13. A parallel contemporary phenomenon in evangelical circles was the rising popularity of faith healing. In both cases the meaning of a miracle has shifted from a wonder to behold that reconnects one to the sacred, to something that proves faith by confounding modern science.
14. The very scientific research which had earlier inspired and enhanced religious devotion among Deists now threaten to refute religion altogether after the new theory of evolution in the middle of the nineteenth century refuted the design argument for the existence of God by offering a natural mechanism to explain the complexity of nature. So compelling had the design argument become by the early nineteenth century, that its scientific refutation was seen on both sides as a refutation of religion itself. Earlier non-empirical arguments for the existence of God by Descartes and medieval thinkers simply disappeared from the discussion. Science and religion were now mortal enemies. But it was an uneven fight as even religious appeals to miracles are waged on scientific terms.
15. Religious belief became similarly anti-modern as the industrial revolution gathered steam, so to speak. Within Protestantism “Fundamentalism” arose as a movement to roll back modern theology. But ironically its very emphasis on the word-for-word literal inerrancy of the Bible only makes sense if the text upon which that word is printed is itself inerrantly translated, reproduced and disseminated to all, a feat only made possible by industrial mass printing and mass literacy. It is no coincidence that the fundamentalist movement was itself launched by a series of twelve tracts, mass published over five years, collectively entitled “The Fundamentals.” Financed by wealthy California oil barons, 3 million volumes were published and distributed freely in the early decades of the twentieth century to pastors, missionaries and other Christian evangelists.
16. At the same time the Vatican would dramatically condemn “Modernism” in theology as “the Mother of all Heresies” and go to great lengths to purify the Church of its demonic influence. Modernist theologians were expelled from seminaries and Catholic colleges. Priests, prior to ordination were now required to take an oath against modernism and to

report anyone with suspect views and attitudes. Modern philosophy and theology texts were banished from school libraries, or at least removed from general circulation and quarantined in a closed stacks that students came to refer to as “Hell.”

17. And yet here too, ironically, the theology that replaced modern romantic theology was itself an industrial age retrieval of Medieval scholasticism. Aquinas’ *Summae Theologicae* became streamlined analytical “Manuals.” Leading the reform of the Catholic academy was the German Jesuit Joseph Kleutgen, professor of both Philosophy and Theology at the flagship Jesuit university in Rome, the *Gregorianum*. He wrote both a nine book manual of philosophy entitled *Philosophie der Vorzeit*, and an eight volume *Theologie der Vorzeit*,” that is, philosophy and theology before the “*Neuzeit*” or modern age. In these manuals addressed principally for seminarians, the axial, scribal dialectic of question and argument was replaced by a formal analytical method of thesis and proof. And rather than starting with the question of God and his attributes, Kleutgen in his philosophy manual began with epistemology and ended with “natural theology.” Thus while the content refuted the “adversaries” of modern philosophy, its method was Cartesian.
18. Neo-Scholasticism then, like Fundamentalism, deserves to be considered industrial religions; (1) an industrial retrieval of medieval Christianity on the one hand and (2) Protestant evangelicalism on the other. Both bore (3) strong affinities to the age of mass literacy and corporate capitalism. (4) For both emphasized the literal truth of scripture. (5) Both employed apologetics addressed to a literate laity against encroaching secularism. (5) They both formulated clear and distinct definitions of doctrine justified (6) by empirical appeals to “evidence” from the biblical “text” as well as (7) the empirical record of miracles both in the life and ministry of Christ as well as in contemporary medical miracles among the faithful. (8) Both also formalized ritual like never before. Catholic priests were meticulously trained in detailed universally prescribed sacramental ritual. Evangelical revivals however effervescent they might appear to an outside observer, were routinized and reproduced at scale methodically engineered to produce mass conversions. Feeling and individual subjectivity were intensified in private often sentimental devotions to Mary and personal patron saints among Catholics. Faith healing and emotional testimonies to personal conversion played a parallel role in

Evangelical churches. Conversion had to be individually felt, as well as a personal decision to be authentic. By the early twentieth century, more radically emotional services were hailed as a New Pentecost. Holy Ghost Power and Marian devotions were renewing religious sentiment in an increasingly regulated and bureaucratized world, but even they were to be subject to institutional ecclesial supervision and oversight. Indeed Catholicism became more bureaucratic than ever, while fundamentalism became big business. Both would increasingly quantify evangelical success in the currency of conversions gained and churches built, like competitors in a religious marketplace.

19. Neo-scholasticism and Fundamentalism may have been anti-modernist in beliefs and values preached and published but their delivery was in both cases contemporary. If “*Lex Credendi est Lex Orandi*” that is, if the canon of a church’s beliefs arises from the way it prays, then both movements were industrial, modern anti-modernisms, that, however nostalgic, looked fundamentally forwards, not backwards, to the return of Christ and the millennial advent of the Kingdom of God.