Religion as Refuge

1. The technological millennialism traced in the last video lecture predictably evoked a backlash. In my series of lectures on the co-evolution of religion and technology I addressed the romantic critique of the industrial revolution and evangelical movements to respond to the desperate material and spiritual conditions of the new urban working class. I closed that lecture with allusions to post World War I, Frankfurt School and Neo-Orthodox critiques of instrumental reason and mass consumerism. In this video lecture I shall study Heidegger's wholesale critique of modern technology whose essence he identifies with this inherently soulless instrumental reason. I shall then track contemporary extensions of Heidegger's root and branch critique to electronic and recent virtual technologies in the thought of philosopher/theologian Albert Borgmann, the journalist/social critic Nicholas Carr and others.

2. Heidegger's critique of technology reaches back all the way to the Axial revolution itself. For it was then, he argued, that nature became mute and humanity deaf. (1) Humanity transcended anthropomorphism but at the cost of an even worse anthropocentrism. Nature was no longer (2) humanity's other, let (3) alone its mother, but (4) its object, indeed (5) its raw material, at humanity's disposal. Beginning with Plato, the (6)alterity orientation characteristic of mimetic, oral and even scribal culture was increasingly split (7) into a detached objectivity and a willful subjectivity culminating, by the industrial revolution, in ultimately (8) value-free facts and (9) fact-free values.

3. The result, Heidegger laments, (1) is an instrumental reason whose logic is to dominate nature. He contrasts this "calculative" reason with what (2) he called "meditative" thought. Meditative thought is (3) qualitative rather than (4) quantitative, concerned more with the evaluation of (5) ends than (6) means. Meditative thought is (7) receptive rather than either (8) detached or exploitative. It identifies truth (8) with disclosure rather than (9) correspondence isomorphic with our own conceptual architecture. That is, it adopts an open attentiveness to reality, waiting and listening for beings to reveal themselves, rather than demanding the object to respond to our questions through experimental intervention or through imposing our own conceptual frame or grid on experience.

4. In religious terms, meditative thought is a contemplative beholding in which one is held by the way of be-ing revealed by the other. Thus, far from the detached observer of

science, the meditative thinker enters into and is transformed by the world opened up by the other. Or otherwise said meditative thought, rather than transforming the world, transforms the thinker. Drawing upon his native German Rhineland mystics, especially Eckhart, meditation is about (1) unencumbering ourselves of our own agendas and pre-conceptions; (2) accompanying an other rather than controlling it, (3) being with an other, rather than acting upon it as mere raw material. In short meditative thought seeks (4) to understand what is present before one, rather than determine explanations to predict and so control the "object", in German "*Gegenstand*" literally "what stands over against us," correlative to the scientific and/or industrial subject

5. To put this in terms of the communication typology I have been using to frame my study of the symbiosis between religion and technology, one could say that Heidegger's meditative thinking is a retrieval (1) of that primal mimetic contagion from others, and from things. Heidegger calls for us (2) to attentively care for things (3) from handmade craft artifacts such as pots to (4) living things such as trees and meadows,

6. to even Zen's mountains and streams. (1) His call is for us to enter an alterity relationship with things, (2) attending to what they have to reveal to us about their reality and the world we share.

7. Heidegger began as a theology student of Catholic philosophy, even entering the Jesuits for a short period. But he soon found analytical neo-Scholasticism as intellectually suffocating and spiritually paralyzing as the analytical neo-Kantian thought dominant in secular German Universities at the turn of the twentieth century.

8. Turning from Catholic philosophy and neo-Kantianism he discovered the evangelical, Soren Kierkegaard and used him as a lens to reread Luther and Paul. (1) He offered several university courses on the thought of Luther and Paul throughout the twenties.

9. In them he argued that, like Kierkegaard himself, both were resisting the axial objectivity characteristic of second temple Judaism and medieval scholasticism. Heidegger followed Kierkegaard in finding the same failings in classical Greek philosophy and Enlightenment thought. He decried the axial move to abstract theoretical reason as itself a "fall" from the "fear and tembling" of primal raw religious experience into the vacuous security of a detached and disengaged theological objectivity that in the end would only deify instrumental reason and ultimately industrial technology itself.

10. Working together with Protestant biblical scholar, Rudolf Bultmann, Heidegger "deconstructed" the early Pauline epistles to reconstruct the primal, originary experience of first generation Christian converts. Like Bultmann, he emphasized their anxious anticipation of the immanent return of Christ. Both interpreted these Christians as in the grip of an existential urgency to decide for Christ then and there, to die to their old way of life, now scorned as demonic, and be reborn to a new life of sacred meaning and purpose.

11. By contrast, the axial abstract theoretical wisdom of the world offered a false serenity. It was ultimately a narcotic, deaf to the urgency of the now, distracting people into a life of complacent consumption that left them empty of any real meaning. Authentic individuality, inspired by Gospel preaching, had been replaced by the anonymity of mass culture. In German terms, rather than being a "*Mensch*", a true individual, one fell into the generic identity of "*das Man.*" Or to put it in other words, industrial capitalism had commodified not only the world but the people in it. Christians, however while still in this world, were called to not be of it, but rather to transcend the "normal" consumer lifestyle of the industrial marketplace and live an original life of authentic meaning and meditative be-ing in the world.

12. Or to put it in the words of another contemporary German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who first fled the Nazis but then returned to Germany to be executed by the Gestapo days before war's end: "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves/ Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession…Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate."

13. Heidegger also drew upon Luther's condemnation of the late medieval church, and the axial scholastic theology grounding it, to make the same argument. Like modern technology's project of prediction and control, Scholasticism's complacent "theology of glory" must be deconstructed and overthrown in favor of Luther's existential "theology of the cross." For it is only through despair of the world that one can wholeheartedly commit to what one holds sacred, that is, to have faith in God alone and thereby experience the saving power of his grace. Meaning is only to be found through such a

leap of faith into the raw authenticity of a life lived without illusion before the existential vulnerability and contingency of mortal, human life.

14. Heidegger was not alone in Germany in calling for a rejection of industrial modernity in favor of a return to a pre-axial alterity orientation to the world. He was but the most philosophically astute and articulate among a number of German philosophers and social critics in promoting a nativist, neo-pagan revival of the German *Volk* which had been so humiliated by their catastrophic defeat in the first world war.

15. A mimetic scapegoat was needed to revive the German spirit and it was found not only in the person of the Jew, but in the perceived cultural decadence of the conquering West which the Jew personified. Heidegger's existential authenticity offered in place of the utilitarian life of the shopkeeper or the alienated worklife of the factory worker, a holistic, heroic way of being, the chivalrous warrior ethic of Kultur, characterized by courage, honor and self-sacrifice over the utilitarian marketplace ethos of Zivilization characterized by the narcissistic consumerism and soulless busy-ness of the democratic West.

16. This "philosophy of the German People" or *Volksphilosophie* was soon to be co-opted and exploited by the Nazis. They too appealed to a pre-axial Nordic religiosity complete with ancient and ancestral, runic and Aryan symbolism. They would recreate mimetic rituals of nighttime bonfires in the forest and large torchlit parades in the urban streets, designed to reconnect the populace to the new sacred—the German *Geist*.

17. The most dominant symbol of the Nazi movement was the swastika, an ancient Aryan sacred symbol of grace and blessing. It is a styled logo of a whirling cross, actually a whirling chariot wheel. It signified energy, dynamism, power. It was a symbol of the sun for the people of the sun, the light skinned Aryans.

18. Nazi liturgical priests, Joseph Goebels and Albert Speer designed imposing mass civic liturgies centered around the swastika surpassing in size and grandeur anything pre-axial Egypt, Assyria or Babylon could ever have offered.

19. Heidegger himself infamously fell under the Nazi spell for a short time, valuing it precisely as a movement of German renewal, but became disenchanted and disillusioned within the year. He quickly learned that the Nazis were only cynically exploiting the ideals and symbolism of *Volksphilosophie* for their own political agenda of domination

and conquest. The SS may have styled themselves as modern day Teutonic knights, but they were hardly meditative thinkers. (1) Badly burned, he subsequently withdrew from all political involvement for the rest of his life, retreating to his own primitive refuge in the primeval Black Forest where he could reconnect to what he held sacred and practice his craft of meditative thinking, composing the occasional oracular critique of axial civilization's forgetfulness of true Being.

20. A later disciple of Heidegger, Albert Borgmann, would apply Heidegger's critique of industrial technology in less oracular fashion, in the clearer analytical prose of contemporary American thought.

21. His retrieval of Heidegger's philosophy of technology is particularly insightful in moving from a global critique of axial thought to the study of particular modern technologies, especially mass produced electronic appliances and the consumer way of life they enabled. Borgman draws a fundamental distinction between (1) a device and a (2) simple thing analogous to Heidegger's distinction between instrumental and meditative thought. A device is designed to be (3) convenient and (4) efficient, (5) ideally it requires no attention at all, but operates unobtrusively in the background. A thing on the other hand is (6) challenging to use; it (7) asserts its presence before you. (8) It has a reality of its own that (9) lies beyond our full control. Devices on the other hand are (10) designed to be safe and reliable, as well as (11) to save time and effort. (12) Using things take work, for we encounter a reality other than our own. Borgmann argues that the extent to which we live in a world of devices, life may be pleasant, but empty; it is the very kind of distracted, anonymous, ultimately meaningless life of Heidegger's *das Man*.

22. Borgmann contrasts instrumental activity in the world with what he calls "focal practices". Instrumental activity is a (1) means to an end, (2) a goal or reward external to the activity itself. (3) Again, convenience and efficiency are the measure of its value. (4) Easier, (5) quicker, (6) cheaper is (7) better. Multitasking better yet. (8) What counts is the goal achieved though, of course, the goal itself is only valued as a means towards further goals. A value in a focal practice on the other hand is (9) inherent to the activity itself. Its value lies in its very performance. (10) The means is the end, so to speak. (11) Its measure lies not in productivity but (12) in enrichment. Time is not so much spent as enjoyed. It is not about a desire to satisfy, but the joy and delight that comes from the

activity itself, in its own right, independent of any other benefits that might also accrue in its performance. It short it applies to activities that are not (13) even better if half as long and (14) twice as easy. (15) Efficiency is a bug not a feature. For the activity (16) itself contributes meaning to life.

23. Take for example the difference between running for exercise and jogging. If I run for exercise, the treadmill is a perfect device for me. I never have to worry about the weather or the terrain. In fact I can control the degree of incline. I can monitor my pace, my heartbeat, calories spent, distance covered. And I can do it all while multitasking— watching television, or even reading a magazine. Its more convenient, more efficient, more comfortable that running outdoors. If running is merely a means to an end, a treadmill is for you. On the other hand, if you run because it reconnects you with nature, relaxes your mind, restores your perspective, than a treadmill won't do. If I run while chatting with a friend or while exploring a new trail; if I could care less about my speed or distance covered; if I actually enjoy the challenge of running in the cold, or the rain what good is a treadmill?

In short, the value of a treadmill lies largely in whether the value of running is instrumental or inherent in the run itself. Is it a means to a end external to the run, such as being fit or losing weight, for which I may someday find a better, that is, even more efficient means, or is the goal of my run to enjoy a good run? Are the means itself the end?

24. If the latter, then running for you is what Borgmann identifies as a focal practice, focal because it engages your attention, or (1) turns your attention to meditative reflection. It is defeated if you divide your attention through multitasking. As a practice, it takes practice--knowing the terrain, where to run, how to run a given trail, when in the day it's best to run. Running as a practice is an art. Running on a treadmill for exercise is at best a skill, one quickly and easily picked up. Treadmills are designed to be user-friendly

25. Borgmann worries that with all the devices in our world we are losing touch with the world beyond our own ego and our own desires, the material and social world that encompasses and transcends us. And in so doing we are losing touch with religious reality as well; we are losing touch with the sacred, with what gives our lives their meaning and value, what gives us our direction and identity.

26. Borgmann refers to practices as focal, not only because they focus our attention, but because of the term's connection to our primal past. Focus comes from the Latin where it refers to the hearth. The hearth was the central place, the focal spot in the homes of ordinary people from the first human settlements ten thousand years ago down to the dawn of the industrial age. It was around the hearth that families gathered to eat. Offering light at night, it was also a place to relax and share stories. In the winter it may also have been the place around which people slept and the altar fire in which sacrificial offerings were burnt. The hearth then was the focus of family life, just as the campfire was the focus of the tribe in hunter-gatherer bands, where in addition to heat and light, it provided shelter from wild beasts and a sacred space around which religious rituals were conducted. No wonder that fire was the primal manifestation of the divine in religions around the world from the remotest reaches of our mimetic past to the present day.

27. But today we cook on stoves or in ovens. After all, they cook more evenly and reliably, their heat can be closely calibrated and timed. They are even self-cleaning! We can also leave things on the stove as we attend to other chores, even go shopping. We do not need to worry that our stove will burn down the house. An oven may be a necessity for rich and meaningful family dining, but it is hardly a candidate for the sacred. The oven is a mere means to that end. The easier, quicker and cheaper its operation the better.

28. For Borgmann, as well as other social critics such as Nicholas Carr and Wendell Berry, virtual technology only exacerbates this tendency more than ever. In virtual reality our world is literally dematerializing before our eyes. In unencumbering us of the limitations and frustrations of human life, virtual technologies threaten to sever us altogether from anything and everything that would transcend our merely human world.

29. Virtual reality not only appears increasingly real, it is often seen to be even better than real. It offers an even more graphic Faustian bargain, an exchange of reality itself for knowledge and power or in religious terms a redefinition of the sacred just as knowledge and power. Its proponents may offer the guarantee of a happy life, but its critics will claim that it comes at the price of a meaningful one. It offers weightless freedom in exchange for weighty substance, grounded in a real world of significance and consequence.

30. Nicholas Carr for example extends Borgmann's distinction between instrumental activities and focal practices to a third category: wholesale automation, where one can not merely multitask, but one can offload tasks altogether to smart devices. Taking off from what Borgmann had referred to as "commodious," user-friendly devices, modern conveniences, as we call them, most radically exemplified in the home furnace, autonomous smart devices, do not demand less attention, but no attention whatsoever. This is beyond multitasking to full delegation of a task to a device programmed to work for us, usually in the background.

31. Consider smart cars that are currently in beta testing. As still in testing, there is still an operator in the car monitoring its functioning as it drives itself. But of course once fully operational there will be no human driver. Should an unexpected emergency occur, its passenger will not have the situational awareness to react intelligently in time to intervene and override the automatic piloting mechanism. In fact for a disengaged, otherwise occupied passenger to even attempt to override when startled is likely to make the situation worse. Thus, autonomous vehicles will be designed so that passengers cannot override the controls; they won't have steering wheels in them at all.

32. Automated smart cars do not make driving easier; they eliminate the need to drive altogether. Humans will be riders not drivers. Thus any value or delight inherent to and unique to the practice of driving will no longer be accessible. That way of being in the world will simply be gone. And soon enough forgotten.

33. Carr laments the loss of such value and virtue that automation will being in its train. Like Borgmann he worries that the values up to now inherent to human existence itself may wither, some even lost altogether.

34. Take boredom. With smart phones at the ready, there is always something to do. One need never be inactive. (1) One might choose not to check the phone while waiting for the bus or elevator or friend to show up. But it's a choice and for most of us already, it's a deliberate choice. However critics fear that the loss of enforced inactivity, the loss of being bored, will lead to the loss of solitary reflection as well. For when you have nothing to do, that is still something you can do, something you may even feel forced to do in such a situation, (2) you can think, reflect, or just daydream. And for those who choose to always remain active, they will never learn the value and virtues of such solitary musing

or imaginative whimsy. To an axial mind, for whom "the unreflective life is not worth living" such a loss is demonic. Without solitude to cultivate interior "depth" their very identities will be "shallow," or in religious terms, godless.

35. Or take writing itself. Heidegger had written a manifesto against typewriters. Typing transforms the manual inscription of personal expression into a mechanical reproduction of standardized print. He complained that in typing one does not feel the material resistance of the paper to the pencil or manage the flow of the ink onto the page. One cannot craft one's own "hand." Is it any less of a loss for the writer than being unable to cultivate one's own "voice"? Perhaps unnoticeably, but all the more insidiously, to Heidegger's mind, it furthers the mass anonymization of industrial culture. And sure enough, handwriting is no longer even taught in our nation's schools. Kids learn to write on computers.

36. Wendell Berry, a poet and essayist is also very critical of virtual technologies. In an article explaining why he wouldn't buy a computer, he repeats many of Heidegger's criticisms of the typewriter. But of course word processing is even worse. No material thing need ever be involved. Writing could remain virtual throughout the process, from composition to publication. And if the reader purchases not a book but rather access to an electronic copy to download onto an e-reader or i-pad, the text would never be a concrete material thing. Dematerialization is complete.

37. Furthermore, Berry argues, that to use a word processor would require his being connected to the grid. He would need an internet connection, thereby inevitably sacrificing some of his autonomous agency, some degree of his privacy, some measure of his security. He would have to enter the virtual world and, in however attenuated and hybrid a form, he would have to adopt a virtual way of being in the world. All the demons of the networked virtual self would loom to threaten his authenticity.

38. Finally Jean Baudriard wrote a seminal critique in 1994, at the very dawn of the virtual age, entitled "Simulacra and Simulation" in which he raised concerns about what has come to be called "hyper-reality" in which simulacra and simulations are "better than the real thing". By simulacra he means technologically produced artifacts which do not mirror actual things, but a perfect version of things, that is a version that perfectly meets our expectations of what something should be and do. Disneyworld is the epitome of

such a hyper-reality. (1) As depicted in an earlier image, its Main Street is a simulacra of small town America. It does not replicate the main street of any actual small town, but it has the look and feel of everything Americans nostalgically expect the Main Street of a small town to have. Analogously a VR race car simulation gives the sights and adrenaline rush of driving a high performance sportscar with no training and none of the risk.

39. The concern with hyperreality is that in perfectly satisfying our expectations, without any limitations or evils to challenge us, there is no opportunity for learning or growth. Hyper-reality effectively "freeze-frames" our current expectations and values.

40. And if it is "authentic experience" that is itself being simulated, has it too become a commodity? Has it become a hyperreal experience with no reality to encounter or challenge us? Or to put it another way, while a fun place to visit, would anyone want to live in Disneyland's iconic small town?

41. Or take the Venetian Casino in Las Vegas where one can take a godola ride. Indoor air conditioning, no flies, everyone speaking English, great customer service, could this not be even better than the real thing? To religious critics, a virtual perfect world is hardly perfect, but if anything demonic, devoid of meaning, or better put perhaps, even meaning has become simulated, not "real." In short-circuiting transcendence, hyper-reality becomes an idol.

42. On the other hand, religious criticisms of virtual life need to take its hybridity into account. It's rarely the case that a new technology becomes a full substitute that renders older technology obsolete. Most of the time the new technology serves to supplement the older technology, enhancing it in some ways (which is what drove the innovation in the first place) while keeping its parent as a niche technology for what it continues to do better than the new.

43. For example tourists visiting Pompeii can use 3D VR reconstructions overlaying what are now only ruins. Might this experience of hyperreality not actually enhance engagement in the materially real ruins before them?

44. Thus Ong notes that writing did not make face to face oral conversation and preaching obsolete, but if anything gave us more to talk about. So too the internet is not making

texts obsolete, but actually enables anyone to self-publish, leading to even more texts than ever

45. Also critics need to be careful not to compare the best of the old with the worst of the new. Social media for example should not be evaluated against heart to heart intimate conversations or fake news with vigorous debate. (1) The oral analogue of social media is rather gossip, oral reputation maintenance and tracking. Is social media worse than gossip? That is the apples to apples comparison.

46. So too, religious critics also need to be wary of criticizing virtual religious activities on literate, axial religious measures. Famously, Plato, in the persona of Socrates, wrote an oral critique of writing, warning that literacy would undermine memory, the central value of oral pedagogy. Point taken, but the very point of literacy was to make memory less necessary. Surely literacy is better evaluated on its own terms. Too often religious criticisms of virtual media measure them on *literate* criteria. These may well be the most obvious concerns for those raised as literate individuals as the virtual revolution begins, but at some point, virtual technologies too will need to be measured on their own terms. This applies particularly to virtual religion. Going forward what will matter most is not how well or poorly virtual religion inspires literate Christians, but how well it will resonate with and serve the religious needs of future digital natives. In the next video I turn to one of the most important questions for virtual religion, religious practice and the prospects for virtual ritual.