

## Religious Critiques of Industrial Technology

1. The late eighteenth century saw the emergence of a romantic push back against a perceived one sided apotheosis of scientific objectivity. Industrial capitalism's relentless optimization of efficiency and utility for all its material power and promise threatened spiritual decline and psychological degeneracy. Romantics would resist the hegemony of rational objectivity by imaginatively extending interiority to all things. Scientific detachment and industrial power needed to be complemented where not substituted for altogether by a private, interior life of deep feeling and passionate emotion not only for humanity but for nature, indeed the world as a whole. The world was not just becoming more rational; it was itself alive, indeed "waking up" to itself in us, through us and for us.
2. However with the rise of factory mass production, scores of laborers moved into the cities in search of a better life. In the Eighteenth century 90% of the population lived in the country. By the 1920's 90% lived in urban areas. Factories could not keep up with demand and wages could be offered at a bare subsistence level.
3. Indeed Thomas Malthus notoriously argued that subsistence wages for the working class were inevitable, as higher wages would only increase the working population proportionately to restore the "natural" equilibrium
4. Furthermore as factories multiplied, smoke and smog turned city air into "pea soup." Even as medical science progressed, overcrowded tenements and scant public sanitation caused industrial epidemics of cholera, typhoid and tuberculosis.
5. Romantics, religious, literary and political would condemn and often despair over this new age. This was not a utopian millennium but a dystopic apocalypse.
6. Religious thought followed suit, indeed often led the charge. Evangelical revivals in both rural and urban contexts preached an individual salvation of religious rebirth.
7. Membership in institutional Christianity was not enough. One needed to *experience* salvation through being "born again" and making a personal commitment to Christ as one's Lord and Savior.
8. Religious romantics, most notably Friedrich Schleiermacher, rejected the deist religion of reason in favor of a religion grounded in interior feeling and inchoate intuition. In contrast to the rational order and autonomy, held sacred by Enlightenment deists, the very

essence of religion Schleiermacher now argued, lie in a feeling of one's utter dependence, a sense of mystical union with the *hen kai pan*, the one and all.

9. For Romantics technology had indeed become a religion, but a false religion, an idol that enhances rational objectivity at the expense of personal subjectivity, utility at the expense of meaning. The industrial age was making a Faustian bargain, selling its religious soul, its authentic true self, for secular, industrial knowledge and power. Romantic critics of technology engage in how meaning might be restored or at least sheltered, like an oasis, in the nihilistic wasteland of industrial capitalism.
10. This oppositional view of the relationship between technology and nature, the secular and the sacred finds evocative expression in a poem by the nineteenth century Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, entitled "God's Grandeur:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And, for all this, nature is never spent.  
There lives the dearest freshness, deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with oh! bright wings.

11. Hopkins reconnects to the sacred through the natural landscape without and in what he coins a thing's individual "inscape" within. Concepts may define what a thing is but inscape, drawn from John Duns Scotus' "haecetas" or "thisness" defines the thing's individuality. Hopkins articulates this alterity relationship with all things in another poem:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each moral thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;

Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

I say more: the just man justices  
Keeps grace, that keeps all his goings graces  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –  
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

12. Christianities from across the confessional spectrum responded to the social disruptions and dislocations induced by mass urbanization and mass production. Evangelicals organized urban revivalist crusades, offering religious resources for finding meaning, purpose and identity in an increasingly impersonal society. New Christian movements also arose such as the Salvation Army and the YMCA. The temperance movement swept the country as a response to workers' lives ruined by alcoholism and workers' families destroyed by the domestic violence, abandonment, even suicide that would follow in its wake.
13. So too Catholicism, once having lost its own papal states with the unification of Italy , turned to a sharp criticism of the modern economy, in both its capitalist and communist strains. In *Rerum Novarum* (literally "The New Things") Leo XII offered a nostalgic neo-feudal ideal of the traditional organic society where all parts of society, rather than dedicated to the singular pursuit of profit, cared for the others and worked for the common good of the whole. Wealth and poverty, no more than grace and salvation, were simply the results of one's own efforts. (1) The 40 hour work week, a minimum wage, the abolition of child labor as well as care for the homeless and support for labor unions were all justified in terms of the needs of religion and family life for the urban masses.
14. Finally, mainstream Protestantism while embracing "modernism" preached a "social gospel." It was less industrial technology itself, but laissez faire capitalism that was the source of the new social evils.
15. There was also a strong conservative reaction within both evangelical Protestantism and Catholicism to attempts to reform translate traditional Christian dogma into the modern scientific paradigm. In the first two decades of the twentieth century conservative theologians at Princeton Theological Seminar published a series of pamphlets arguing

against “modernist” understandings of the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith. (1) They focused on five Christian doctrines all of which ran contrary to historical critical interpretations of sacred scripture, the touchstone of protestant religious authority:

- a. The divine inspiration and literal inerrancy of the bible
- b. Historicity of the miracles of Jesus.
- c. The virgin birth of Jesus
- d. The doctrine of the atonement of all sins through the crucifixion of Christ
- e. Bodily resurrection of Jesus

16. The literal inerrancy of the bible of course entailed the literal truth of the creation story in Genesis and so a rejection of evolution. Deists had taken modern science to be a literal study of the mind of God at work in his creation. Now religious faith and modern science were taken to be antithetical. Deism was tantamount to atheism. Indeed all modern theology was ultimately atheistic, however sincere its deluded proponents.

17. Tellingly, fundamentalists also reinterpreted millennialism as well. Rather than modern science and technology progressing towards the millennium at the end of which Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, modern science and technology is rather undermining Christianity and accelerating the degeneration of humanity into a time of coming tribulation from which those saved will be spared by a sudden “rapture”. Those “left behind” will have a second chance to repent in a final cosmic battle against the demonic. Once Satan is defeated once and for all, Christ will then return to render a final judgement to all and inaugurate the millennium. Thus for fundamentalists, salvation is not coming to birth through advancing technology but is to be found in traditional agrarian “family values” championed by American evangelicalism that industrial society has been disrupting and undermining altogether.

18. Catholicism legislated a similar condemnation of “modernism” even identifying it as “the mother of all heresies.” Indeed its criticism even extended beyond fundamentalist principles to condemn the romantic primacy of interior subjectivity over analytical axial scholasticism as well. Thus even evangelical revivalism was modernist in Catholic eyes, caught up as it was in the individualism of a subjective “immanentism.”

19. In the twentieth century industrial mass production would gradually alleviate the destitution and misery of the early years of the industrial revolution. However

philosophers and religious thinkers soon came to express concerns over the new affluence. Mass production with its attendant mass marketing and mass media was creating a rising mass culture in which sensibilities were homogenized and trivialized.

(1) In the name of individual fulfillment the masses were being spiritually consumed by their commodities. Advertisements portrayed preternaturally happy, popular and successful characters, iconic individuals using their products in the hope that such apparently rich, meaningful lives would be associated with their brands. With commodities fetishized, consumer culture was itself becoming a rival religion.

20. Frankfurt School philosophers decried the loss of authentic value, and neo-orthodox theologians preached that the Word of God comes not only to comfort the afflicted but to afflict the comfortable, to rouse mainstream affluent consumers from their spiritual complacency and awaken them to the urgency of decision for Christ and his cross over a culture of affluence.

21. In the following video we will look at two seminal thinkers whose critique of industrial culture helped to found the philosophy of technology as an academic field of study. Both will oppose an instrumental orientation to reality with a meditative, reflective ethos, characteristic of religion at its best.