Promise or Peril? Progressive Evangelicals, Technology, and Social Justice in the 1970s

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Abstract

Raising questions related to technology often raises ire on multiple fronts. Some think all technology is neutral. Others lean strongly toward purely positive or purely negative assessments. Yet many neglect the way that analyzing technology connects with other beliefs and commitments. This article seeks to ameliorate this issue and better prepare thinkers to recognize their own web of thinking by exploring progressive evangelical approaches to technology in the 1970s. This historical exploration highlights some key features of the ethics of technology that continue to impact the way Christians ask and answer these questions today, whether that is related to biomedical issues, military technology, or entertainment technology.

Keywords*: evangelicalism, progressive evangelicalism, technology, social justice, technicism*

Introduction

Christians must respond to technology. On one hand, this is obvious: look around, read the news, consider how quickly our world is changing—and our place within it. On the other hand, such an urgent statement seems to be an exaggeration. Christians "must" respond to technology? What is so new and urgent about our age? Is this response, this question, yet another example of modern progressivism—assuming that we are so far ahead of those who have come before that our questions are new, or more pressing?

How can we begin to understand how Christians have considered their engagement with technology in the past? One of the issues is that Christians have only dealt with technology on the periphery, as it has touched on other concerns. "Technology" almost always required an adjective for moral deliberation to occur: military technology, reproductive technology, and so on.[1] Today, it is more common to speak of technology in general, or perhaps "technicism"—supreme confidence in and reliance on technology and the solutions it provides to all sorts of human challenges.

If we look at some of these concerns, we gain great insight not only into how Christians should think about technology, but also about how technological reflection intersects with and depends upon other topics and beliefs. While we often think that we can deal with technology "on its own terms," our reflection inevitably connects to and depends on a host of other beliefs.

In what follows, I examine the technological opinions of one group of Christians, in hopes that doing so will lay bare their commitments, the interconnectedness of their thinking. Seeing

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these dynamics at work in others can help us begin to better analyze such connections in the arguments in our own time. Within the context of recent scholarly analysis of progressive evangelicals, we will evaluate articles on technology from the *Post-American* (name changed to *Sojourners*) in the 1970s for further insight into Christian evaluations of technology. And, perhaps, in better seeing this in our past, we will be better equipped to see these connections and commitments in our own thinking.

Progressive Evangelicals

In the current American evangelical landscape, we think we observe shifting sands. Studies show that more and more young evangelicals define themselves as progressive.[2] One rhetorical reaction to this phenomenon claims that these believers are hearkening back to the Social Gospel activism of Walter Rauschenbusch, an activism conservative evangelicals have rejected.[3] According to this interpretation, Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel had overemphasized the earthly results of the kingdom of God. By insisting on the importance of the church's redemptive role *within* society, Rauschenbusch and his followers had given up the substance of the faith in order to promote material results in the here-and-now. Seeing this shortcoming, evangelicals in the past realized the problems with the Social Gospel, shifted to focusing on the Fundamentals of the faith, and persisted in developing a political witness based in conservative theology and—usually—right-wing politics.

This emphasis led, according to this telling, to the rise of the Moral Majority and the consolidation of the Christian Right. Emerging at the end of the 1970s, this group really entered the political scene with the 1980 presidential election of Ronald Reagan.[4] As one recent historical narrative has it, these Christian Right evangelicals were a result of a rebranding of evangelicals at the hands of the likes of Billy Graham.[5] Others lay the development and influence of conservative evangelicalism at the feet of domestic politics in the 1930s and 1940s, as certain corporate interests manipulated evangelicals to back the free market instead of Roosevelt's New Deal vision.[6] Some charge that this group, however it developed and coalesced, has lost its priority on morality and family values in recent presidential elections.[7] What these interpretations agree with is the idea that the progressive impulse in evangelical Christianity was largely dormant during these years.

But is the answer that clean? Is the progressive impulse an anomaly, one dormant since the Social Gospel? Other recent scholarship on an important period of American evangelical history indicates that it is not. Some trace this progressivism back into the early nineteenth century,[8] but we will focus more recently. Anxiety about the Social Gospel certainly exists,[9] and it has prevented some evangelicals from taking seriously charges to engage social issues. However, the reality is more nuanced than the anti-Social Gospel rhetoric makes it. This fact has historical impact—the rhetoric may simply be wrong—but it also hurts those conservative evangelicals who buy into it because they fail to take into account a deeper progressive impulse within evangelicalism itself. But where can we see this impulse?

We see the complexity of the issue if we glance at the years immediately prior to the rise of the Moral Majority. Right before Jerry Falwell and others created this Moral Majority and helped

elect Ronald Reagan, evangelicals did indeed stand on the cusp of broad political and cultural influence. However, the evangelicals that were in that position in the 1970s are not the ones you might expect, and they were not the ones who eventually became widely known. In other words, you might guess that those evangelicals on the cusp of political influence at the start of the 1970s are the same ones that gained it at the end of that decade. You would be wrong.

David Swartz's *Moral Minority* traces the rise and decline of what he calls the "evangelical left" in the 1970s. The book follows an interesting tale: rooted in the 1973 "Thanksgiving Workshop," it traces the key participants of the emerging evangelical left. The "Thanksgiving Workshop" produced a document called "The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern." The *Washington Post* reported that evangelical activists sought to "launch a religious movement that could shake both political and religious life in America."[10] As Swartz summarizes, "The year was 1973, nearly a decade before the height of the Moral Majority, and the assembled activists were strategizing about how to move the nation in a more evangelical direction through political action."[11] Such language would strike us as likely applying to the Moral Majority. We might expect them to have been writing about the evils of abortion or the need for prayer in schools. But this "moral minority," as Swartz names them, had a different set of concerns.

The document highlighted several important themes. God's claim on the believer's life is complete. Love, justice, mercy, and forgiveness should mark Christians. These marks should lead believers to champion racial justice and to attack materialism. The document notes the significance of America's role in international trade and development, the problems with trusting in American military and economic might, and the temptation to give religious loyalty to the nation. The relationship of men and women receives attention. The document concludes with an emphasis on the gospel, eschewing particular political parties, and stated hope in the imminent return of Christ.[12]

Swartz's work traces how the group that created this document contributed to the evangelical left in the 1970s. What's particularly interesting—but takes us too far from our task to develop—is what Swartz identifies as the reason for their failure. In brief, the progressive evangelicals failed because they fractured along gender, racial, and ideological lines.[13]

While Swartz organizes his study based on the personalities, Brantley Gasaway focuses on the particular issues that these leaders addressed. In particular, he focuses on "the three most prominent progressive evangelical voices over the past four decades: *Sojourners*, Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA), and *The Other Side*."[14] He argues that these three sources reveal that progressive evangelicalism was both a coherent and complex religious movement[15] that centered on a core set of defining theological principles—biblical authority as primary, necessity of personal conversion to faith in Jesus' work of atonement, and dedication to evangelism and humanitarianism.[16] Gasaway's thesis focuses on the development of a "public theology of community" as a political philosophy: "That is, based upon perceived rights and responsibilities that flow out of humans' communal nature, they developed a set of theological convictions about public affairs and politics that shaped their efforts to promote a just society."[17] The book then covers racism, feminism, abortion, homosexuality, poverty, and American nationalism and militarism. Gasaway argues that "their public theology and dedication to social justice

for *all* community members—especially the poor, marginalized, and victimized—underlay and unified progressive evangelicals' respective positions on these social and political issues."[18] Referring to the "Thanksgiving Workshop" group that Swartz focuses on, Gasaway argues that they thought to be faithful to the Bible means to have "equal concern for people's temporal needs and the pursuit of justice through social and political activism."[19] (How "equal concern" can be measured, especially in the attention and energy different groups gave to these factors, remains unspecified.)

To return to our interests: how can these progressive evangelicals help us better understand a Christian analysis of technology? While neither Swartz nor Gasaway isolate the progressive evangelicals' approach to technology, we do see it coming into play with adjectives—technology relates to feminism and family issues, to war, and to poverty. We will consider those connections in turn, but first we will utilize Gasaway's methodology and explore technology in the *Post-American* (later, *Sojourners Magazine*) through the 1970s. How did these progressive evangelicals think about technology, and how did it relate to their other concerns?

Technology

In the summer of 1972, Dick and Joyce Boldrey published "Technocracy and Women's Liberation" in the *Post-American*, less than a year after its founding. Their article highlights the relationship between technology, economics, and sex. They introduce the idea of "technocracy," by which they mean the United States' dominating powers, which have the characteristics of being centered on the economy (as the main goal), short-range (in their consideration of effects), and undemocratic (in that decisions are concentrated in the hands of very few men).[20] Technocracy exploits women, as evidenced by a growing gap between men's pay and women's pay (which had been decreasing). This technocratic effect concerns Christians because we are charged with caring for the widows, which should extend to single women, working mothers, and others. Instead, technocratic institutions have mechanized industry, removed it from the home, and diminished the significance of women. The work women do in the home is minimized and downplayed, and the work women do in the technocratic institutions themselves is not fairly compensated.

The Boldrey's treatment demonstrates the close connection between economic concerns, the relationship of the sexes, and technology. They identify "technocratic institutions" as something larger than specific technological applications, but an overall approach to society that carries values with it. We see here an avenue for evaluating technology, not based on the specific, concrete use, but on how industries develop and impact family life and the relationship between the sexes. This argument reminds me of Wendell Berry's famous essay on his household economy, which included his dependence on his wife for her typing skills.[21] We will look more at implications later, but one thing to note here is that we cannot consider the relationship between the sexes in modern America without being willing to evaluate the economic and technocratic systems within which people find themselves.

Not only does technology impact the way we understand economic systems, but technology as

a governing logic extends below other problems that we experience.

William Stringfellow wrote one of the most in-depth and wide-ranging indictments of technology and technocracy in *The Post-American* and *Sojourners* in the 1970s (the *Post-American* became *Sojourners* in January of 1976). His "Technocracy and the Human Witness" (November 1976) advances an important argument regarding the ills of society commonly recognized by his colleagues at the time. He points at the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandals, calling both of them "symptoms" of a larger crisis.[22] According to Stringfellow, "Since World War II, technology superseded industrialization as the dominant institutional and ideological power in society."[23] We now have a "technocratic totalitarianism" in which the predatory principles of technocracy rule.

This technocratic totalitarianism is widespread. It is visible in media, in surveillance, in subversion of other governments, in banking, and in weapons. Stringfellow argues,

> It is critical to understanding the totalitarian implications of advance technology that one realizes that priority is assumed by technical capability over human discretion in rendering budgets, in making policy, and in ruling society. The basic social premise, under the impact and momentum of technology, is putting into practice whatever becomes technologically feasible. It is the application of every technical capacity, without regard to human critique or control, and without regard to empirical benefit for human life or moral consequence for society.[24]

He points to the example of the atomic bomb: it was made because it could be made. The result is that "humans become adjuncts to technology—robots or puppets deprived or inhibited in the use of the very faculties which distinguish them as human."[25] In fact, technocracy encourages a passive "spectator posture" that does not fit with true human flourishing.[26]

While pointing out the new elements of technocracy, Stringfellow acknowledges that these issues are part of the human situation. He concludes his article by talking about the Fall. He states, "Biblically speaking, that death, incarnate and militant in many forms in an advanced technocratic society such as America, is no novelty introduced by technology, but has been characteristic of every other society in every other era."[27] The Christian call then is the same as it has been: resistance to the status quo, whether that be the status quo of politics or economics or anything else in society.

This larger notion of technology emerges briefly in another broad-ranging interview. In a conversation including about a dozen "young evangelicals" in 1975 Lane Dennis speaks of America's "technological society." He states, "It is quite apparent that technology can be both extremely dehumanizing and very liberating. I am concerned from a theological point of view just what human wholeness means, and how our biblical understanding of that relates to how we live in relation to technological society."[28] Dennis does not develop the point at length since it occurs within a larger conversation, but he does point to the importance of simple living and independence from modern technology. Otherwise, technological society may take over. This "technological society" emerges in various ways, but one of the most obvious—and ominous—is in the narrative of national security.

In February 1977, Wes Granberg-Michaelson published "Curiouser and Curiouser Bomb

Logic," which tied the development of weapons technology to the idolatry of nationalism.[29] In short, he argues that the logic surrounding the use of nuclear weapons and the continued development of them can only be explained by the idolatry of nationhood, spurred on by bureaucratic, technological, and corporate interests.[30] While brief, this piece highlights the company that technological development often keeps: nationalism and economic corporations. Fuller exploration awaits us, but we can briefly flag here the fact that similar arguments about national security are intimately connected with current debate surrounding technology, including the development of artificial intelligence and its integration with weapons technology.

We see this parallel clearly in another article from February 1977—Jim Wallis's "Nuclear War by 1999?"[31] Wallis argues that Christians cannot support the continued development of nuclear weapons simply because Russia continues to develop nuclear weapons. He highlights how religion is used even in the Pentagon in a carefully controlled way to support the status quo. But, he argues, "Resistance to the military aggression of nation-states is always a Christian responsibility. However, the fact that world rulers are now marching us all into nuclear oblivion makes Christian resistance to that insanity an imperative."[32] Such a reminder is relevant for us as we consider technological development in our context. Not only is there the argument related to China's development of artificial intelligence and how that might impact the United States, but there is the potential for a return of a nuclear arms race as the United States suspended a nuclear arms treaty with Russia in February of 2019.[33]

It would be inaccurate to say that the *Post-American* and *Sojourners* is routinely negative about technology. For instance, Jim Wallis wrote a column entitled "Food for War" in March 1975 that criticizes the policy on food aid but acknowledges the importance of providing this help (which relies on technology).[34] Additionally, Wes Granberg-Michaelson wrote an extended piece in November of 1976 on postwar Vietnam, in which he argues for the importance of technology, industry, and agriculture for the society.[35] Considering progressive evangelicals more broadly, Ron Sider's famous *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* included inadequate technology as a problem for the poor.[36]

Related Themes

Now that we have explored some specific articles related to technology, we can consider broader related themes that have come through in recent research on the progressive evangelicals. In particular, Brantley Gasaway's thematic treatment of the progressive evangelicals brings technology into the discussion in a few discrete places: feminism, abortion, nuclear weapons, and poverty.

Gasaway notes that the issue of technology was part of the issue as the Religious Right attacked feminism around the 1980 presidential election. Joyce Hollyday, formerly an associate editor at *Sojourners*, clearly saw the relationship of these issues: "It is too easy to blame the disintegration of the family and moral values on the changing role of women while ignoring mobility, technology, materialism, alienation from authority structures, and other factors that have set the tone of the times."[37]

Though not clearly drawn out by Gasaway, another connection exists between technology and

the issues surrounding women's rights. Abortion became a critical fault line, as he notes, and progressive evangelicals opposed abortion. However, they did so without vilifying feminism as a movement, which the Religious Right attempted to do.[38] But what about the very issue of abortion itself? While people have practiced abortion for thousands of years, it is really the technological novelty in the twentieth century that has made abortion more widely available and safe. While we would not want unsafe abortion either, we can easily miss the technicism implicit here: the very fact that the medical technology exists makes abortion a different discussion. Because it is safe and available, and because we have come to see medical technology as a tool to solve whatever problems we have related to our embodiedness, the debate shifts. Interestingly, progressive evangelicals oppose abortion largely for the same reason the Religious Right did: killing an innocent child is wrong. However, abortion as evidence of a growing technicism merits highlighting as well.

The abortion issue relates to what progressive evangelicals called a "completely pro-life" ethic, or a "consistent pro-life" ethic. Not only does abortion destroy lives, but the development of nuclear weapons threaten to annihilate millions of people, people made in the image of God.[39] Under the consistent pro-life ethic, progressive evangelicals actively opposed the continued development of nuclear weapons, and also promoted complete disarmament. In fact, some activists from other traditions, such as Dorothy Day, described nuclear weapons as tools for protecting wealth and power, for perpetuating a global order of injustice.[40] In a way, progressive evangelicals were using the same technological calculus as the Religious Right: evaluate how the tool is used, render moral judgment accordingly. The two groups simply disagreed on the merit of the use of the tool, or perhaps the merit of threatening to use the tool while stockpiling many of them.

As we noted in the previous section, the treatment of technology is not all negative. In these cases, progressive evangelicals promoted forms of technology, seeing them as intimately related to pursuing justice for oppressed communities. Gasaway's inclusion of technology provides further evidence for the fact that, by and large, progressive evangelicals primarily engaged technology adjectivally. Rarely did technology *per se* come under fire; instead, industrial technology, abortifacient technology, and nuclear technology all came into view as subsidiaries of larger issues.

Doctrine

Briefly before drawing conclusions, let us return to some of the doctrinal topics that have played important roles in the various arguments we have traced. In particular, the doctrine of the image of God and the implicit ecclesiology of Gasaway's "public theology of community" require further analysis and critique.

First, what do we make of Gasaway's "public theology of community," the overarching theological idea that seems to draw together the various commitments of the progressive evangelicals? On the one hand, he is right. Repeatedly we see the logic of community impact notions of justice and moral evaluations. But, on the other hand, how successful or useful is this concept for unifying progressive evangelical thought and action? The concept ends up being

fairly thin; it is basically a notion of "equality" rooted in the image of God and then extended to substantive applications. The "image of God" does not play a large role as far as guiding what humans are to do; rather, it underwrites the concept of equality that is requisite for a notion of "justice." Furthermore, justice is rooted in an ecclesiology that makes the church not a witness of a future, already-but-not-yet kingdom, but an efficient actuator of justice in the world as a main task. There seems to be a good measure of realized eschatology thrown in for good measure. At least in Gasaway's research and argument, this is as substantive as the theological background gets. It is a commitment to this vision of the church's task that gives substance to the applications.

This community emphasis also relates to another significant load-bearing wall: the consistent pro-life agenda. This agenda relies on the public theology of community in two primary ways. First, it relies on the public theology of community because the radical equality of the community sets one of the terms for what "life" is, and how justice is determined related to it. Second, it relies on the public theology of community because a consistent pro-life agenda not only makes certain statements about what it looks like to be consistently pro-life, but it also understands the church's task as primarily one of advocacy for such an agenda.

One of the weaknesses of the progressive evangelicals emerges here, and it relates directly to the analysis Swartz provides of their failure in the 1970s. Swartz argues that they failed because they fractured along gender, racial, and ideological lines. But if Gasaway is right, and the prevailing logic is this public theology of community, what else should be expected? If there is nothing more substantive to define the larger community (as a robust doctrinal foundation would provide for along with a robust praxis), then the smaller communities will actually be more effective at doing what the progressive evangelical ecclesiology demands: advocacy. Thus, it is the very public theology of community that not only unites the thinking of progressive evangelicals but also contributes significantly to their fracturing and loss of broader witness.

While the solution to this would take us too far afield from our current concerns, it is helpful to remind ourselves that ethics cannot be separated from doctrine. Right practice and right belief are certainly related in a complex way—I am not implying that we get our beliefs "just right" and then move on to ethics. But oftentimes an overemphasis on certain theological themes, to the neglect of others, can evacuate the Christian core of any distinctive meaning and identity. Other identities will rush in to take its place. Then, you might still have a "public theology of community" that can guide you as you advance equality and justice, but it might not be a distinctively Christian theology.

Conclusion

You might recall that we launched into all of this based on a simple assertion followed by a question. The assertion: Christians must respond to technology. The question: What is so new and urgent about our age? Our exploration of the work of progressive evangelicals in the 1970s has yielded some interesting ways of answering that question.

First, the progressive evangelicals help us to see how easy it is to operate with an over-simplified view of technology. While we did have an exception or two, most progressive

evangelical engagement with technology was based on the idea that technology is neutral. We can only evaluate if we add adjectives. But we have also seen the danger of this approach. If we only evaluate technology with adjectives—biotechnology, military technology, industrial technology, and so on—we are less likely to see that technicism is an underlying cause of many ethical problems. Progressive evangelical analysis and advocacy could have found a more consistent voice across issues if it had followed the lead of folks like William Stringfellow, whose piece on "technocracy" in 1976 called for such engagement.

Second, the progressive evangelicals show us the importance of an orthodox doctrinal core for engaging ethical issues. Now, let me be clear: I am not arguing that the progressive evangelicals abandoned core orthodox beliefs. I am arguing that Gasaway is right; a "public theology of community" was the main theological foundation for their work. But their inattention to some of the larger doctrinal loci—Trinity, incarnation, soteriology, eschatology—actually weakened their ability to stand as a community rather than fracturing into interest groups as Swartz noted in his work.

Christians must respond to technology. We must respond to it more than just adjectivally; we must grapple with the technological spirit of our time. But we must do so without turning our attention away from the church's primary task: bearing witness to the inbreaking kingdom of Jesus Christ, Son of God, crucified, dead, buried, risen, coming again. That hope, that belief, forms the core of any community, and we cannot take that message for granted.

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