

Technology and Theology

Edited by

William H. U. Anderson

Concordia University of Edmonton
Alberta, Canada

Series in Philosophy of Religion



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*To my beloved son Liam:
In this world, you are my whole world.*

*It has become appallingly apparent that our technology
has exceeded our humanity*

~ Albert Einstein

The Future is Friendly

~ Telus

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Foreword

In the Fall of 2017 I attended a conference on Artificial Intelligence in Montreal, PQ, Canada. The Conference eventually served as a catalyst for the creation of a Centre for Applied Artificial Intelligence at our own Concordia University of Edmonton 14 months later.

While much of the content at the event focused on the latest research in Machine Learning and featured leading figures in AI, one line in particular caught my attention. When referring to a new approach to Deep Learning, and specifically how this approach could be applied to military hardware, a comment was made about the ethics of what was being created. It was the first time I had encountered, in a serious way, a discussion on the ethics of what humanity was building in AI. Two things stood out about the ethics comment.

One, that the ethics of technology had been raised at all. Up until this time, my view of AI was as an attempt to make better robots or automation systems as a businessman. But now here were serious scientists and thinkers contemplating handing over control of human tasks such as driving a vehicle to a computer and wondering about any ethical implications. The long-standing “Trolley Problem” was no longer a future consideration but a pressing issue.

The second point that was highlighted was how cursory the first point was. There couldn't have been more than ten minutes spent on the topic. That is not to say that deep thought hadn't been done on this topic before. But it seems that over the last several years we're coming to the realization, as a species, that AI is no longer a Sci-Fi prop or literature tool, but a real and developing societal and philosophical issue. In his book *Our Final Invention*, James Barrat suggests that AI will displace even our own propensity for creation and invention. If so, then what? What are we as a species without challenge and adversity to overcome?

This book, *Technology and Theology*, is an important step in our quest to understand who we are as human beings and perhaps where we can go. It raises cautions and provides hope. The book treats human beings through deep theological consideration—both the good and the bad—with an eternal perspective. When we only see the familiar, it is difficult to discern what is special. We've been the lone technological intelligence on this planet. If AI is to reach its full potential, perhaps it's creators need to better understand who they are. This book is a step towards that goal.

Mike Wade

Director of the Centre for Applied Artificial Intelligence
Concordia University of Edmonton

Introduction*

William H. U. Anderson

Concordia University of Edmonton

“Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of”. My first foray into technology was watching *Star Trek* in the 1960s. I was only five years old when it originally aired in 1966. But when ITV Edmonton did re-runs in 1975, I was totally hooked and obsessed. Now my wife Joan and I spend 5 or 6 hours a week in the deepest, outermost parts of the galaxy.

Before we go any further, I want to make a disclaimer. I am neither a scientist nor technologist, though I am a Journeyman Millwright Red Seal who uses advanced engineering technology as a tradesman (but I haven’t been “on the tools” for years now). I am a trained biblical scholar and theologian who researches and teaches extensively in the area of Pop Culture Studies (about 50%). I am currently developing a course entitled *Technology, Philosophy and Religion*. The course description reads in part: “Basic introduction to Technology with an examination of philosophical and religious ideas, themes and imagery in, and with an emphasis on the ethical dilemmas conveyed and posed by, the portrayal of technology through pop culture and specifically in the genre of Science Fiction literature, film and television”. So this is the way that I am addressing the topic of “Technology and Theology” here in the Introduction. Just about every chapter in this book is heavily engaged in philosophy, ethics, and metaphysics in one way or another. Theology is well-known to be inextricably linked with all of these as well.

Now back to *Star Trek*. Gene Roddenberry originally pitched the series to the networks as a “wagon train to the stars”—picking up on the other cultural obsession with Westerns in the 50s and 60s. As any student who has taken one of my pop-culture courses knows, every artifact is a reflection of the artist’s

* A version of this text in the form of an editorial in the *Canadian Journal for Scholarship and the Christian Faith* was used to support the May 2019 conference on “Technology and Theology”. See <http://cjscf.org/editorial/technology-and-theology-2019/>. It is used here with kind permission.

philosophy, beliefs, and values, as well as the cultural milieu in which it is situated (provenance).

Roddenberry was a complex man with a complex relationship to theology and religion. He grew up in a Southern Baptist home in Texas and was very involved with church activities. He later rejected the faith when he was around 14 years old.

Roddenberry has often been portrayed as an atheist. Later in life he asserted that he believed in some concept of God (a form of Deism) but categorically rejected any notion of organized religion. But I think his complex relationship with technology and theology can be seen in the various manifestations of the *Star Trek* franchise.

In the original series, Roddenberry's atheism, or perhaps more accurately secular humanism, was more sublime; even though in public discourse he could be quite harsh against organized religion. I speculate that this subtle anti-religion approach in the TV series may have been because any overt criticism—during a time when religion was still well-regarded and widely practiced—might have affected ratings. Yet the concepts of God or spirituality have been a mainstay of the *Star Trek* franchise throughout.

In the 1980s, Roddenberry gave strict instructions that *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was to be thoroughly secular—and that there was no place for religion, superstition, and mysticism. But *Star Trek* betrays subtle cognitive dissonance between science and religion: It can't seem to get away from religion and even at times portrays it in positive ways. *Star Trek Deep Space Nine* in the 90s is a case in point—where an abundance of overt religion, spirituality, and mysticism can be found—although often with the intent to portray it as primitive, emotional, and unreasonable.

Religious themes, ideas, and imagery are found throughout all *Star Trek* series. See an excellent little summary by Schneider on his webpage *Ex Astris Scientia*.¹ This relates to one of my own obsessions: Non-religious artists (particularly in the science fiction genre) who are obsessed with religion and religious themes, ideas, and imagery reflected in their art. Roddenberry is no exception in the *Star Trek* franchise. Ridley Scott is another one.

The current *Star Trek* series *Discovery* perhaps is a re-assertion of Roddenberry's original philosophy—complete with a superficial and stereotypical portrayal of ignorant and backward Christians—in the episode “New Eden”. Here the

¹ Bernd Schneider, *Ex Astris Scientia*, <http://www.ex-astris-scientia.org/inconsistencies/religion.htm>.

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