Chapter 5

The Techno-Religious Age

“Computer science is no more about computers than astronomy is about telescopes.”

E. W. Dijkstra

“Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”

Albert Einstein

5.1 Introduction

First, we consider the “spiritual search” that many have found to be foundational to humanity. Religion is foundational to humanity across the world. To some extent, sociology is a “ secular panacea” for what classical philosophy called “The religious quest.” The religious, and nonreligious quest is a search for meaning most commonly understood in religious contexts as a search for “god.” In the last decade of the 20th century, a number of authors have recognized that technology is being used for a “spiritual quest.” Increasingly, this is being expressed through the Internet and World Wide Web. The “search beyond Google” represents this
human quest for meaning. Even though organised religion may be declining, the religious quest is not necessarily abating. Technology, along with some “alternative” religious expressions, is supporting the present day search.

Next we see how “transcendence” has been identified as a common theme of religion and technology. Technology, in its widest sense, is about transcendence, whether this is in medicine or agriculture. The extreme of technological transcendence is found in the transhumanist, who sees humanity to be in a transitional phase to be “completed” by technology. Most religions have a similar concept of “overcoming.” The Christian concept of “resurrection” is the prime example of overcoming the ultimate human limitation, death, and religion seeking transcendence. If transcendence does unite the two disciplines, then it is also true that both religion and technology may be seen as “human constructions” — ultimate outworkings of the human striving to overcome. Putting religion and technology together creates a synthesis that we cannot ignore!

Next we look at five of the major world religions — Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism — in order to see in what ways they hope to both find meaning and transcend. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Orthodox) share the vision of death being transcendence, enabling the person to be “with God.” There is a sense that this is a “perfect state” entailing happiness and overcoming of human suffering, pain, and so forth, with Islam especially emphasising the “pleasures” of the world to come, including sensual pleasures. Buddhism and Hinduism find transcendence possible within this world. They also have the conception of “reincarnation,” with Buddhism not necessarily having any sense of divine in which meaning is found. Zen Buddhism would locate this “meaning” within the individual.

Finally, we pause to find out where and how and whether these five major world religions have apprehended technology in their pursuit to find meaning and transcend. We make an emphasis on Internet and communication technology, since these are the main ways that technology has impacted religion. We seek where particular elements of the religion intersect with Internet technologies. For example, where pilgrimage is important, there are facilities for taking a “virtual tour”; where “image veneration” is important, there is scope for downloading them; where teaching and “knowledge for enlightenment” is vital, there is
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