

Technology and Alienation

By Mariyan Stoyadinov*

I.

From a biblical perspective that what we call technology and what we call alienation have accompanied man since the very beginning of human history. Man's ability to think, to give logos/names and create, even in the sense of being a co-creator of the Creator¹ is embedded in him.

At first glance, it would be speculative to introduce technology among the tasks of man to achieve godlikeness. But in fact, technology is a two-part word and we should not emphasize only the first part and leave out the second, namely – logia, the logos. This second part is present in Adam irrevocably. Making sense of the world and mastering the world, even dominion over the world, are one and the same aspect of logosness. In this sense, man was created as a reasonable steward of God's creation. Everything we say about technology subsequently must presuppose this human functionality by definition.

There are two directions in which the co-creation of man is realized: the first concerns himself, and the second concerns the world. Regarding himself, man has godlikeness as his task. He is an open being created for perfection and eternal life, without possessing all of these as an ontological given. The “natural” (*κατὰ φύσιν*) state of man is one of communion with God, while the “unnatural” (*παρὰ φύσιν*) is existence apart from Him². Man's gift lies in perspective and responsibility, both

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1. *Gen.* 2, 19.

2. Cf. Maximi Confessoris, *Capita de caritate* 3, 27, PG 90, 1025A.

of which require an active attitude towards oneself. Can we call this attitude “co-creative”? Certainly, because it is only through actively developing the potential of God’s image that we can achieve God’s likeness. Furthermore, the God’s image is not an autonomous given; it is contextual and cannot be considered outside of the Creator. When man tries to separate the creative relation to himself from the Creator, it leads to failure. The ancestral sin is a departure from the creative attitude towards oneself, and it lays the roots of the problem that will later be defined as alienation.

In relation to the world, man is God’s co-creator also in context. Revelation shows us man as a non-autonomous subject in the knowledge of the world. In the words:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion (*καὶ ἀρχέτωσαν*) over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth”³,

any form of dominion over creation is essentially an assignment. It comes from God, and in this assignment all the potentialities of man are realized. There are no human potentials that are “only” his, isolated from the task and the goal. Lordship “over all the earth” is an aspect of man’s communion with God. His “image”, according to Chrysostom, consists in the assignment:

God created man as a ruler over everything that exists on earth and there is nothing on earth higher than him, but everything is under his authority⁴.

The mastery or attainment of the world is not separate from the attainment of godlikeness. There is no reason to look for such a separation or divergence, since all elements of attainment of the world are a function of the logos faculty in man. God does not give names to animals, but “brings” them to man “to see what he would call them.

3. *Gen. 1, 26*. Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible references are according the ESV (English Standard Version).

4. *Homiliae in Genesim*, 8, 3, PG 53, 72.

And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name⁵. Man, in this sense, is a meaningful center in which all the logos of creation are summed up – he makes sense of them, names them, controls them. Moreover, in man only the creation “speaks” to the Creator, rises to Him, glorifies Him and thus fulfills the meaning of his existence⁶. In this connection St. Gregory of Nyssa says:

For I think that the Divine Scriptures teach a certain great and exalted dogma in what has been said, and it is this: the human nature is the middle between two certain ones, one of which is separated from the other and standing at the extremes, between the Divine and the incorporeal nature and between the wordless and animal life, therefore that in human composition it is possible to see a part of one and the other of the said natures, from the Divine –verbality and intelligence, which does not allow differences in the male and female field, and from the non-verbal – bodily structure and education, divided into male and female gender. This and the other of these natures are necessarily present in every involved human life. But how can we learn from the orderly origin of the human being that the intelligent in him predominates, and the innate to man is fellowship and kinship with the speechless⁷.

The ancestral sin is a deviation of both man’s creative attitude towards himself and his creative attitude towards the created world. Reaching for the “fruit of the tree”⁸ as a source of knowledge and existence is an antinomy to the words: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”⁹. This choice relates both to man himself and his autonomy in relation to the Creator, and to the “fruit” and their autonomy in relation to the Creator. As a result, the person dies and the fruits of this world become desert stones¹⁰.

What would later be called technology would manifest itself in man’s quest for survival in a land cursed because of him¹¹. He builds cities and

5. *Gen. 2, 19.*

6. Cf. *Ps. 103; Rom. 8, 19.*

7. *De hominis opificio* 16, PG 44, 181 B.

8. *Gen. 3, 3.*

9. *Math. 4, 4.*

10. Cf. *Matth. 4, 3.*

11. *Gen. 3, 17.*

towers¹², forges copper and iron tools¹³, cultivates the land¹⁴, builds a ship/ark¹⁵ to fulfill God's will and tower, contrary to God's will¹⁶.

All the artifacts and data that archaeologists find show human traces in history as technological traces – objects, foundations of buildings, drawings. Technology itself is nonsense. It cannot be attributed to natural phenomena or to other forms of life in our world. Therefore, if archeology can be referred to anthropology, the same can be said for technology. Its secret is contained in the secret of man, its realization projects man.

II.

If technological skills or actions are based on the logical, rational ethos of man, they are functions manifesting human functionality, or, translated into theological language, they are energies manifesting human nature through personal initiative. In the words “cursed is the ground because of you”¹⁷, there are two possible logical accents – the cosmic cataclysm (the curse of the ground) and the reason (“because of you”). From a formal point of view, this is a breakdown in the human-creature relationship. This decay is a consequence of the decay in the human-Creator relationship: “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it’”¹⁸. The traces of all these decays form human history. But they do not remain external, similar to natural phenomena, to an atomized, distanced from God and the creation man. The first physiological death –the killing of Abel– indicates the breakdown at an even deeper level –in interpersonal relationships and even deeper– in the intra-personal status of man. God's warnings to Cain “hang in the

12. *Gen. 4, 17.*

13. *Gen. 4, 22.*

14. *Gen. 5, 29.*

15. *Gen. 6, 14.*

16. *Gen. 11, 4.*

17. *Gen. 3, 17.*

18. *Gen. 3, 17.*

air”¹⁹, and the consequences of his personal initiative turn out to be incompatible with the life of his native brother²⁰.

Any unbiased reader of the third and subsequent chapters of *Genesis* will see a series of threads that break not only between native brothers or people of the same family, but on a global scale either; will see a disintegration, a decay that comes as a result of the counter movement to assert the individual. The quest to overcome the curse and live a fulfilling life turns out to be illusorily attainable by removing the other as a rival, incl. for the grace of God. In a paradoxical way, the individual is asserted and transformed into partial, isolated, alienated.

If we use an anthropological marker, we will have to admit that a new anthropological reality is unfolding in front of us. This, of course, is the same Adam, but the ties that brought him into being have thinned out – he hides from his Creator; even the bone of his bones and the flesh of his flesh²¹ is already a cause for shame, concealment of nakedness, emphasizing one’s own dignity over the unworthiness of another²².

Man is detached from God, from the surrounding world and from himself. It would amount to mere biochemistry or physiology to think that ancestral sin affects the nature of man in itself. The unnatural state of existence is not ontological but functional. Prophetic calls are often diagnostic: “Bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!”, Isaiah says²³, and we read the same in Ezekiel: “Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not, for they are a rebellious house”²⁴. The blindness of the seer and the deafness of the hearer are functional deviations, not in themselves, but in relation to the communion for which they exist. The blind man is not blind to himself (he has eyes), but to what God shows him. Neither is the deaf in relation to himself (he has ears), but in relation to God’s words. We find the same diagnosis in the Gospel:

19. Cf. *Gen. 4, 7.*

20. Cf. *Gen. 4, 10, 11.*

21. Cf. *Gen. 2, 23.*

22. Cf. *Gen. 3, 7, 12.*

23. *Isa. 43, 8.*

24. *Ezek. 12, 2.*

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive”. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them²⁵.

There are many ways to name the state of man after sin. Whichever name we choose, we will in all cases describe some degree of alienation – from light (to pass into darkness), from good (to pass into evil), from Life (to pass into death), from Heaven (to pass into hell), from the neighbor (to pass into another)²⁶. The anthropology of alienation is a quasi-anthropology. It is not a function of civilizational, cultural or social givens. It is possible, in fact – only possible in the unnatural state of man.

III.

Paradoxically the modern conversation about alienation started in the context of technology. Speaking about *Entfremdete Arbeit*, i.e. “alienation in work” or “alienated work”, Karl Marx not only sets the beginning of this conversation²⁷, but also outlines the trajectory in which it will be led in the following decades. The alienation of the worker from his labor is a phenomenon of class stratification, which in the following centuries will outline deep rifts. Not only classes but also nations will find themselves mobilized in their alienation from the accused perpetrators of their historical fate. At the social level, to find a way out, subjects will choose revolution in all its forms (national, class, cultural) as a panacea; on a psychological level, alienation experienced as existential loneliness

25. *Matth.* 13, 13-15.

26. If we consider the “neighbor” as an active *participant* in the human being, then the “other” is simply *present*.

27. He formulates his theory of alienated work in *Ökonomisch-philosophischen Manuskripten*, intended as a critique of Hegel’s philosophy of law in 1844 (published almost a century later). Cf. *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, Abteilung 1, Bd. 3, Berlin 1932, pp. 29-172.

will rediscover the biblical truth of the tragedy of “integration through alienation” in each individual situation.

If Marx imposes his concept as a prerequisite for social revolution, then thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard²⁸ and later existentialists put emphasis on individual solitude as alienation from all the past, from every form of social dictate, from every authority, even from every person. Kafka’s words: “Being alone has a power over me that never fails”²⁹ sounds like basic self assessment.

In principle, any modernity is unthinkable without the past as an opposition. The rejection of the past is essentially a rejection of the given authorities that set meaning and direction. Meaning is also no longer a given.

The modern man is

opposed to the people of earlier eras, of patriarchal societies, the village, the Renaissance city, who, despite all the antagonisms, were more firmly woven together and with the world – or if we must use another common expression: “modern man” opposed to “organic man”³⁰.

The contemporary projection of alienation –both social and psychological– is on an enlarged scale³¹. Whereas in a biblical perspective

28. Kierkegaard initiates this interpretation in his essay *The Ancient Tragic Motive Reflected in the Modern: An Essay in the Fragmentary Read before a Meeting of the Symparaneukromenoi*, in which he comments on Hegel’s distinction between ancient and modern tragedy. However, the parallel enables Kierkegaard to define modernity precisely through the lens of its alienated tragic. The essay was published in the volume 1st of Enten – Eller (Either/Or) a year before Marx wrote his *Manuskripten*.

29. Fr. Kafka, *Diaries, 1910-1923*, Peregrine Books, 1964 (26 Dec. 1916).

30. Цв. Стоянов, *Отчуждението (Stoyanov, Tzvetan. Alienation)*, Български писател, София 1988, p. 68.

31. In its definition of alienation, the Encyclopedia Britannica outlines the following meanings: (1) powerlessness, the feeling that one’s destiny is not under one’s own control but is determined by external agents, fate, luck, or institutional arrangements, (2) meaninglessness, referring either to the lack of comprehensibility or consistent meaning in any domain of action (such as world affairs or interpersonal relations) or to a generalized sense of purposelessness in life, (3) normlessness, the lack of commitment to shared social conventions of behavior (hence widespread deviance, distrust, unrestrained individual competition, and the like), (4) cultural estrangement, the sense of removal from established values in society (as, for example, in intellectual or student rebellions

alienation is concrete. Even when Israel as a nation turns away from God, the center is always the specific human person –Adam, Cain, David– with a specific biography and drama. In the modern age, however, man is present as an impersonal outline, a symbol – of class, race, or culture. On this scale, personality dissolves into cause. This is ultimate self-realization, ultimate fulfillment. In the poems of a poet from the time of the anti-fascist resistance, this realization looks like this:

I fell. Someone else will replace me and...
that's it.
What does one person matter here?!³²

This is an indirect answer to the question why in the Calendar of the Church only concrete persons or events are found, while in the Calendar of modern man only abstractions are present: Independence, Freedom, Thanksgiving, “quality”³³. Meeting another person in the presence of God always puts you in the position of “I-Thou”, while in the meeting with abstraction “Thou” is just a symbol, “I” too.

In his research, dedicated to the alienation in the literature and social psychology, the Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Stoyanov describes the alienation as a process when the threads connecting man with other people and phenomena in this world begin to break one by one. Separate nodes – individuals – weaken, the forces that hold society together – cease to act. Social entropy ensues. Individual particles in society cool down in the same way that it happens in the physical world. The human being, especially the modern one, is living in a world of threads that break constantly³⁴.

against conventional institutions), (5) social isolation, the sense of loneliness or exclusion in social relations (as, for example, among minority group members), and (6) self-estrangement, perhaps the most difficult to define and in a sense the master theme, the understanding that in one way or another the individual is out of touch with himself. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/alienation-society> [22.09.2023].

32. Ник. Вапцаров, *Борбата е безмилостно жестока...* (Nikola Vapzarov, *The fight is mercilessly cruel*, translated in English by Peter Gaidarov (<https://lyricstranslate.com/bg/borbata-e-bezmilostno-zhestoka%E2%80%A6-fight-mercilessly-cru.html>) [22.09.2023].

33. Cf. list of the UN International Days and Weeks here: <https://www.un.org/en/observances/list-days-weeks> [21.09.2023].

34. Цв. Стоянов, *Ibid.*

In this context, in Kierkegaard we can also read a whole series of essays dedicated to individual Christian distancing from the world and even from the external forms of organizing Christian identity. In his interpretation of New Testament Christianity, the emphasis is on loneliness in the background of a culture that claims to be Christian. Alienation from this conventional culture is another element of the modern age. Christ's call to man to take up his cross, to leave this world and follow Him must be realized in a culture of almost "realized eschatology". However, when this "Christian" culture has neglected its transformative function and serves only as decor, then Kierkegaard's words sound like an awakening:

A Christian in the New Testament sense is literally a stranger and a pilgrim, he feels himself a stranger, and everyone involuntarily feels that this man is a stranger to him³⁵.

To be distanced from the world in this sense corresponds to the Apostle Peter's definition of Christians as "sojourners and exiles"³⁶ and to the exhortation of the Apostle Paul that "here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come"³⁷.

However, if the apostles speak in the plural (we, you), Kierkegaard's Christian is alone. The worker of alienated labor before Marx is also alone. The success of Marxism lies in the collectivization of the alienated in the name of a cause. Any subsequent "...ism", any ideology at all, will achieve the same. We can call these causes social or even anthropological utopias. But it is a fact that the modern age gives a new dimension to the subject of alienation. It's the same age-old theme, originating from the time of Adam and Cain, but presented as a new circle within a series of concentric circles, all essentially linked to the center.

35. S. Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1946, p. 229.

36. 1 Pet. 2, 11.

37. Heb. 13, 14.

IV.

It was previously mentioned that alienation becomes a central topic in the modern discourse concerning labor and the worker, essentially a “technological” subject.

Today, almost 180 years after this conversation started the technology is usually accused for being s.c. game changer in the life of the humanity. It is usually applauded by the progressivists, and hated by the traditionalists. The most colorful examples of Amish community and luddites are examples of the extreme activity in this direction from one side, and the post-trans-humanistic attempts in the last almost hundred years – from the other side (all versions of the Superman and Batman³⁸ are included here).

Despite the potential for technological advancement being inherent in human logos-ness, we may have mixed feelings about the value of technological progress when our logos-ness nature is in an unnatural state. The latest challenge we face in this regard is AI. However, I would like to address something more familiar. It was just one point of technological revolutions in not so extreme version but who affect our life and our Christian education and formation as well.

Today we accept the book as a “copy” without question. But not always was like that. The book printing technology was really game “changer”. Being a social phenomenon – in the discipline of one reader many listeners – visible in Synagogue and the Ecclesia – the book became a silent companion of our, let say, intellectual life. And this became possible when book became a “copy”, but not –let say– a “piece of art”. Undoubtedly, the practice of individual reading³⁹ existed before, but it was not widely available or popular.

The book became a commodity, merchandise, a stock, and sometimes a weapon, but apart from that it became an “individual” rather than a “communal or social phenomenon”. This was not being accepted

38. Both of them were “born” in the 1930s.

39. We all know of Augustine’s amazement at Ambrose, the first man he had seen reading without moving his lips.

unequivocally. There was dominant opinion in the 17th century, that reading of many books or collecting of books is a disease.

Does the printing press of Guttenberg affect alienation? In a way – yes, if we compare the individual reading with the listening (someone's reading) communities. As Susan Sontag says, in one of her famous essays on photography:

A now notorious first fall into alienation, habituating people to abstract the world into printed words, is supposed to have engendered that surplus of Faustian energy and psychic damage needed to build modern, inorganic societies⁴⁰.

And do the new technologies affect alienation? In a way – no, if we compare it with the individual reading of books or newspapers and yes, if we compare it with the individual use of technology with the listening (someone's reading) communities.

And let us develop the question: Is anyone now afraid of Gutenberg's printing press? Now –not, but centuries ago– for sure. Is anyone now afraid of new technologies? – for sure, maybe not afraid but concerned.

We need and we require borders or regulations concerning the new technologies. The borders are kind of solution. Here we face there are at least 3 possible answers – the individual (with his & her opinion/choice to use or to reject the technological improvement in life); the state regulation (in some well-known countries and regimes); and the corporate regulations (for which the quarterly financial balances is existential value above all). And here is place to put the question about the Church and theology.

V.

As we see the border is a complex issue: who has to take responsibility – the individuals, the state or the corporations? And let us add the Church in the line above. Shall we as Church, theologians and faithful be afraid of technology or to restrict the access to the new technological

40. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 1977, p. 2.

“fruits”? Can we be better in this than Amish or luddites? I’m afraid – not. Shall we as Church introduce borders or limits? If say – yes, there is a risk to repeat the heliocentric syndrome of the Catholic Church from the late medieval times, i.e. to reject something that after have to accept as “obvious”⁴¹. If we as a Church say no (to the regulations or borders) – there is a risk to leave this burden (or why not freedom) on the shoulder of every person.

Of course, there are different levels, but we have to admit that all of the forms of modern technologies became part of our Church life in a natural way. Some borders have been crossed and we have to discuss the results *post factum*. We accepted for example the printed paper copies, instead of handmade icons and mural paintings. My personal opinion is decidedly against this practice and business, but who cares? Our ecclesiastical trading centers and corners are full of artificial plastic kitsch.

The theme of contemporary church decoration and icon painting is a big one and needs a separate analysis, but I just point it out in order to illustrate one silent negative tendency for decades. We accept the replacement of the artifact with a copy in the ecclesiastical art without any discussion, without any resistance. There are still artisans working within the crevices of the system, but their craft has become increasingly niche in recent years, and their creations are now considered expensive artwork for connoisseurs.

What to say about bioethics where all of the nowadays issues are not regulated or only partially have reached a certain agreement from the ecclesiastical point of view. On the level of online communication, we have to admit the same even less. A lot of the new technologies that provoke our concern now will be accepted at least by the next generation as the norm. And this will happen without any discussion, without any resistance.

But there is still a practice in our Church, that give a chance for being in course of the God’s vision for the Church as a communion of

41. The ban on Galileo’s *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* (*Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems*) and Copernican books was partially lifted by Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758). Galileo was informally rehabilitated by Pope John Paul II (1979-1992).

disciples⁴². We still read the Gospel publicly, apart from the fact that now every one of us –especially the scholars– has the Bible and all volumes of PG and PL in his pocket. Why are we doing this? There is a simple answer: because of the communion.

At the end and instead of conclusion I would like to advocate a limitedly optimistic theory of man and humanity in general. No technological product –past, present or future– could replace man in the full sense of the word. Because there is no technological product that could be as inhuman as humans can be. We have a lot of examples. And no technological product –past, present or future– can be as human as God-man is. And for this, it seems to me, there is no need to give examples.

And finally, can technology deepen our alienation? No more than what the first Adam did. Or can technology alleviate our alienation? No more than the last Adam did.

42. *1 Cor. 11.*