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Review

Craig Detweiler

iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives

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An email message alert chimes, and you instinctively react. As you click to reply, your phone's beep alerts you that a text message has arrived. Picking up your phone, a Twitter mention flashes. Who is in charge here? In *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives*, Craig Detweiler connects his Christian theological concerns with his affection for technology. On the one hand, he considers many new technologies "Godlike" and calls Steve Jobs "the original iGod" (2). A Californian who has only ever owned Apple computers, Detweiler sings the glories of modern technologies, marveling in their design and enjoying the affordances they provide. On the other hand, Detweiler strives always to complicate his praise, examining the diverse effects of technologies on

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our lives in ways both spiritual and practical. After all, he notes, “delight can devolve into devotion” (3).

Detweiler employs “iGods” as an expansive term referring to the person behind developing a technology (e.g. Mark Zuckerberg), a technology itself (e.g. Facebook), or the person caught up by technology’s promise (e.g. one billion of us). This broad definition sets up Detweiler’s theological claim that iGods, like any gods, can become idols, standing in for God and tempting us to accept false promises, self-centered lives, and misplaced attachments. Ultimately, Detweiler sees technology as a gift—even a possible source of divine revelation—but one that must never take precedence over God the primary giver.

While the book draws on several technology theorists, and Detweiler is clearly informed by the academic field of media and religion, the text is for a general audience of “parents, teachers, and pastors” seeking to live well within our technology-obsessed and technology-enriched culture (17). I anticipate that this book will be adopted for use both in religion and media university classrooms and church basement discussion groups.

After setting the stage by defining technology, with Martin Heidegger, as “more art than science, or at least, an applied science dependent on art,” Detweiler uses Genesis 2 to frame beneficial uses of technology as those which concern creating and cultivating, nurturing the earth and its people (25). Chapter 2 explores the rise of Apple and the company’s use of aesthetics and design (noting, of course, the symbolic potential of Apple’s logo, a bite from the tree of knowledge). Chapter 3, “A Brief History of the Internet” is indeed, quite brief, but gives the reader a context in which to set the following chapters.

Detweiler considers Amazon next, and its alluring notion of “personalized abundance.” Painting a full picture, he notes the historical, practical, technological, and theological aspects of the world’s largest online retailer. While Amazon has created a retail environment emphasizing ease, speed, comfort, and customer-centered decision-making, it is one with theological implications, says Detweiler, drawing from Walter Brueggemann’s Old Testament work on abundance:

The endless options on Amazon raise my interest in a theology of abundance. What is the proper attitude toward stuff? Can we develop a theology of shopping that affirms the goodness of goods, accepts our body’s need to be refueled, and yet resists our compulsion to indulge? Can we consume without being consumed? (100)

This passage also demonstrates Detweiler’s penchant for question-asking. In addition to discussion questions at the end of each chapter, Detweiler asks thought-provoking questions throughout that give the text an open-ended feel.

In Chapter 5, Detweiler considers Google’s “algorithmic authority,” marveling in the company’s power while questioning if information, or big data, has taken the place of God as a source of authority. Is Google now acting as a providential overlord tracking our every move?

Moving to the social aspects of the Internet, Detweiler writes, “A Brief History of Social Networking” before taking on Facebook. He believes that as social beings created for community, it makes sense for us to pursue social connections online. Here Detweiler ventures into slightly new territory, wondering if Facebook’s profile design has heightened anxiety levels even as it increases social ties and strengthens social capital. He also covers several netiquette questions including what Jenn Doll calls the Facebook “underbrag,” the implications of Facebook’s eschewal of a “dislike button,” and the

extent to which users can “be present” for one another on the social network. The book’s penultimate chapter considers YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram.

“Technology has become an alternative religion. It has distinct values, celebrated saints, and rites of passage,” Detweiler writes in the concluding chapter on the *telos* of technology (202). He argues that the tenants of newer, faster, smaller, and more, undergird much of technology’s design, before comparing Raymond Kurzweil’s notion of the Singularity to the Christian notion of the holy city, the *eschaton* found in Revelation.

At times, readers may become frustrated with Detweiler’s careful approach—describing a technology fairly (though briefly), appreciating its virtues, and also suggesting its connections to faith and the points at which he sees the technology as *possibly* leading towards idolatry of some sort. Unlike a direct link to a data-heavy infographic, Detweiler usually revels in ambivalence and paradox, staying away from pointed claims. He is more likely to quote technology theorists than theologians, although there is a strong Reformed theology perspective at work behind his arguments (John Calvin, after all, called human nature “a factory of idols”). In a world that is becoming more pluralistic, the book certainly privileges a Christian theological approach, though it does draw from the Hebrew Scriptures often.

The danger of this and any similar technology-focused project is the possibility of the text feeling dated after only a few years. In the meantime, *iGods* presents a thoughtful introduction to the beauty and danger of technology, technology that many of us, including Detweiler, have come to love and depend on. The question is: have we gone too far?