

Book 2

Egbert Schuurman: *Technology and Christianity: Essays on the Interface.*

(Aalten: Wordbridge Publishing/Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 2024). ISBN: 978-90-76660-74-5, pbk, pp 450

Steve Bishop

Associate Research Fellow

Union Theological College, Belfast

Egbert Schuurman (b. 1937) is a prominent Dutch philosopher, engineer, and politician. He is a former Professor of Reformational Philosophy at the Universities in Delft, Eindhoven and Wageningen. He was also a Member of the Senate (Eerste Kamer) of the Dutch Parliament for the Reformatorische Politieke Federatie, and, since 2000, the Christen Unie. As this book indicates, he has written extensively on the intersection of technology, faith, and ethics; his writings offer profound insights. Schuurman views technology as using “tools to give form to nature for human purposes” (144).

This anthology comprises numerous articles and four previously published books (Schuurman, 1997, 1987, 1995, 2005), along with some newly translated articles. Unfortunately, there is little information on where the contributions were first published. As will be obvious to anyone who reads this book, Schuurman, first and foremost, writes from an unashamedly Christian perspective. His Reformed world-and-life view permeates his approach. As he states, he comes from “the perspective of reformational philosophy” (380)—an approach developed from a Kuyperian approach as developed into a Christian philosophy by Herman Dooyeweerd and D.H.Th. Vollenhoven, among others.

Recurring themes discussed in this book are progress, a rejection of unbridled technological optimism, a rejection of technological pessimism and determinism, and technicism. He advocates for a nuanced, reflective approach to technological progress. Progress needs to be seen in terms of its contributions to human dignity, human flourishing, justice, and the well-being of creation, rather than on perceived economic benefits. He is cautious of technological determinism—technology is incapable of bringing

salvation from societal ills. His is a cautious optimistic view of technology, a view tempered by the need for ethical and environmental responsibility. He emphasises the need for responsible technology.

Most discussions on ethics and the ethics of technology in particular reject any normative response as being authoritarian. Subjectivism is the consensus. This is not the case for Schuurman. His is not a bland common denominator approach; he comes from a clear Christian perspective, while acknowledging (and critiquing) other views. He attempts to delve deeper and examine the religious and philosophical roots of the technological worldview.

He argues for a multi-disciplinary approach to an ethics of technology, as the uncritical appreciation of technology is so widespread and Western culture has become so dependent on technology. We need to discern what is a responsible human approach to technology. His approach to ethics is a response to all the normative aspects of reality.

He shows clearly how religious belief plays a significant role in the development and shaping of technology. One example of this is the Enlightenment movement, with its belief in human autonomy, which secularised Western culture and emphasised a materialistic worldview, this has had a significant impact on the development of technology.

The absence of the transcendent renders belief in human autonomy bereft of a solid footing. He argues, "The closed worldview of secularism ultimately offers no horizon beyond nihilism: a bleak outlook devoid of hope" (47). This perspective, he suggests, becomes tangled within itself, unable to find a way forward.

He recognises the paradox of a technological approach, technology enables us to appropriate reality more, but as a result, we become more alienated from reality. However, Schuurman is no Luddite, nor a technophile. He acknowledges the advantages technology brings as well as its problems and threats.

Schuurman argues that technology has become distanced from a Christian worldview, resulting in a de-Christianisation, but that does not mean it has freed itself from religious influences. Other religious beliefs underlie technology. It is these beliefs that Schuurman has exposed. For many technology has become a religion—albeit without any ceremonial features—technology is seen as a means to salvation, it can bring heaven to earth. Schuurman highlights this shift, noting, "The first and great commandment

of 'technological culture' is, "Be as effective as is technically possible," and the second like unto it is, "Be as efficient as is economically possible." The breadth and depth of a technological-materialistic culture hang on these two commandments" (392).

A Christian approach to technology is to develop an ethics of technological responsibility. What is required is an ethic linked to culture, ethos, motives, values, and norms, an ethic that needs a normative framework that can only come from a Christian world-and-life view.

Organised chronologically, spanning from 1974 to 2023, this collection shows the development in Schuurman's thought. No effort has been made to update the references and some are rather dated; however, the text and content are as pertinent as ever and is indicative of Schuurman's insightfulness and discernment. His critique is as relevant and as needful as ever.

There is a useful scriptural and general index. A bibliography of Schuurman's English works would have made an excellent addition.

As a robust and Christian understanding of philosophical discourse and technological trends, this volume merits the attention of pastors and congregants alike, serving as a vital resource for navigating the complexities of our technologically driven age.

Bibliography

SCHUURMAN, E. 1997. Reflections on the Technological Society. Toronto: Wedge.

SCHUURMAN, E. 1987. Christians in Babel. Jordan Station: Paideia Press.

SCHUURMAN, E. 1995. Perspectives on Technology and Culture. Sioux Center, IO: Dordt Press.

SCHUURMAN, E. 2005. The Technological World Picture and an Ethics of Responsibility. Sioux Center, IO: Dordt Press.