

FOR A RESPONSIBLE SOCIETY: CHURCHES IN DIALOGUE WITH SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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By: Per Anderson

The issues of science and technology need a place for public discussion on their influence in our culture. Our communities of faith — from the local parish to our campus ministries — can play such a role

(Editorial Note: This issue of Lutheran Partners will contribute to the ongoing dialogue between Christian faith commitments and the pre-eminent world of science and technology in our culture. Theologian Per Anderson, from Concordia College, Moorhead, and Ida Hakkarinen, a scientist working in the arena of meteorology, as well as an ELCA member, provide two perspectives on how the worlds of faith and science can learn from each other.)

The ELCA college where I teach is currently engaged in comprehensive curricular review. The faculty recently accepted a vision statement that understands rigorous liberal learning as constitutive of the "responsible" person.

Following Dietrich Bonhoeffer, H. Richard Niebuhr, William Schweiker,¹ and others, we are thinking of responsibility as the sum of the Christian life, and we are thinking that responsibility is a contemporary imperative that speaks to all people of good will.

Basic to this way of life are various abilities to participate constructively in a pluralistic society and world through social roles, public conversation, and association building. Because these abilities are largely matters of practice and habit, such a vision challenges the college to be a formative microcosm — a miniature, a model, a foretaste — of the life that we expect and seek for our graduates.

Whether this college carries out its vision remains to be determined, but the vision is worthy of all communal institutions of the church — our parishes, campus ministries, colleges, seminaries, and schools. If faith-based associations want to make a difference to the future of our scientific-technological society, they have a distinctive and important opportunity as sponsors of conversation and builders of community.

The faith-science-technology dialogue today is a vibrant and growing movement in academia and relevant professions. There are more conferences to attend and books to read than dedicated participants can manage. Faith-science-technology research and teaching in higher education are being underwritten generously by philanthropic causes. The movement is increasingly global.

But a crucial element remains unrealized, which only the churches can address: mass participation. In the language of Robert Putnam, the Harvard political scientist who gave us the "bowling alone" image of American civil society, the churches are needed today to engender a certain "social capital" for a responsible humanity in an age of science and technology.²

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If the churches do not act, this social capital is not likely to develop, much to our common peril. For the issue of popular participation is more than simply broadening access to dialogue and reflection about some exceedingly interesting matters at the intersections of theology and cosmology, archeology, neurology, biochemistry, or computer engineering. It is an issue of social power and of the adequacy of the current dialogue, which is limited to an elite knowledge class of investigators, opinion-shapers, and decision-makers.

Should we proceed with stem cell research using human embryos? Should American consumers know when they are eating genetically engineered foods? Should humans bring Martian rocks back to Earth? These are important questions where decisions and deeds have already been undertaken before most of us knew they were questions at all, let alone shaped by the course of events.

The philosopher Hans Jonas noted the problem here 20 years ago. For Jonas, modern science and technology radically extend human powers and call for a commensurate expansion of care and accountability. Humans individually and collectively now participate in the patterns and processes of life in ways that would be unthinkable to people only a century ago. This power can be used to enhance and destroy life.

New Moral Power

We need, thinks Jonas, to adjust for increases in human power to shape the world and to generate new moral and social power over these powers. We need to be more "responsible" given the fact that humans through science and technology are seeking power over nearly everything — except our own power.³

After 20 years of some trying, our society has not even begun to achieve adequate power over our own power. We have a scientific and technological society with an overconfident, uncritical bumper sticker: "more of the same is good." As the new century begins, science and technology in the United States are cultural forces without rival, constituting a new social order which the social critic Neil Postman terms "technopoly."⁴

Now fused with corporate capitalism and the liberal political project, science and technology are indispensable for economic prosperity and modern quests for

freedom. Without science and technology, mainstream American convictions about the good life would collapse.

Despite some ambivalence, science and technology enjoy tremendous loyalty and trust for all of the benefits they bring. We are not very energized to be Jonas' responsible society because we basically like the course of our culture.

But suppose that many Americans feel a deep ambivalence about science and technology. Suppose that the absence of Jonas' responsible society stems from the lack of a credible cultural alternative to "technopoly" and a trustworthy social mechanism to change it. Suppose that Americans feel isolated in their concerns about our common life ("What can 'I' do?") because we do lack the social capital (networks, norms, trust) that would give us the inspiration and means to come together around science, technology, and our future.

If social capital is the problem, then where should we look for help?

Loyal Opposition?

In this connection, the moral philosopher Daniel Callahan calls upon faith communities to be "a kind of loyal opposition" to science and technology, a cultural counter-force that only the churches can supply.⁵ The churches can play this role because they offer a different way of looking at human power, at nature, and the meaning of it all.

This alternative stance does not mean rejection of science and technology. More to the point, this stance establishes a creative dialogical tension, a conversation, that can allow us to understand the overpowering social force of science and technology and to be more critical and discriminating. Is this what we really need?

Further, the churches can be a cultural counter-force because they are the only places where Americans go regularly in mass to engage something more than the worlds of science and technology.

By one recent estimate, during any given week, American church and synagogue attendance exceeds total attendance at all American sporting events by a factor of fourteen to one. While attendance rates tell us little about what brings people to worship and how they leave, the fact remains that faith communities represent a mega-force capable of changing the course of wider public life.

In American life today, only faith-based communities remain free enough from the hegemony of science and technology and vital enough to be a force in tension. If we conclude that our scientific-technological society is not a responsible one and that it needs a dialogue partner to make it so, faith communities are key.

Callahan is not alone in calling religious communities to the task of cultivating space and time and motivation for forming critical consciousness and judgment about

science and technology. Cultural critics from various quarters have lately, sometimes reluctantly, come to see the promise and urgency of such a public church.

They want the transcendent loyalties of faith to relativize the destructive idolatries of contemporary life. They want the best of the faith community to bring people together in a context of honesty, humility, charity, and reconciliation.

Given a pervasive cynicism today about systemic social change, such a program may seem utterly incredible. We who know the "real" church may wonder whether these theorists take seriously how far the faith communities must come to be a potent public force.

However, the challenge here ought to capture the imagination of the churches, which have long suffered under the notion that the public square does not need them and that the religions properly inform only the private spheres. The call to public dialogue with science and technology is an opportunity for faithfulness and for love of the neighbor that could not be more urgent.

Public Ministry

A central calling of the churches is to be places of public conversation and community building. This is "public" ministry in several senses. These experiences and practices are formative. They seek to engender virtuous people who have various and several public callings.

Further, these conversations and communities are open to all people, even as they are expressions of Christian faith, love, and hope. They are open to all as a response to the world's need.

Finally, these conversations and communities will be formed around a major public concern, namely, the future of the scientific-technological society. Because these dialogues address matters of public concern, they should be inclusive, involving persons outside the churches whenever possible.

Today, few faith communities are inclined and able to do such public ministry. In most congregations, the attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and behavior to practice public conversation are in short supply. This sort of ministry is not only demanding but often perceived to be divisive or of little benefit to congregational life. Now and then, certain questions (like homosexuality or the historic episcopate) can spark vigorous debate, but rare is the congregation that practices public conversation continually.

Deliberative Place

In the ELCA, this situation could change. The imperative of the public church has lately begun to receive due attention in the churchwide organization. In 1991, in the ELCA's first social statement, "The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective," the

ELCA affirmed "community of moral deliberation" as a basic expression of Christian vocation and committed itself to be a church of public "upbuilding" and "revitalizing."

In 1996, an ad hoc Social Statements Review Committee named moral deliberation as an area of emphasis in this church's social witness and called upon the Division for Church in Society to work continually on "encouraging learning and moral discourse" through resource development (people, networks, and materials) and focussed study programs.

In 1997, the Churchwide Assembly adopted seven "Initiatives to Prepare for a New Century." One of them, "Witness to God's Action in the World," calls upon congregations to "model life in community as they address pressing social issues, ethical questions, and community renewal." This is good, and, even better, it obligates the church to dedicated programs and funding.

In response to the 21st century initiatives, the Division for Church in Society has recently released a helpful, step-by-step guide to congregational deliberation entitled "Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues."⁶

The guide, which builds upon sophisticated research and seasoned perspectives, is the first stage of a comprehensive strategy for public conversion in our church. With this document and the larger strategy, the ELCA has undertaken an uncommon (if not unprecedented) effort to work at social capital formation.

In American life today, only faith-based communities remain free enough from the hegemony of science and technology and vital enough to be a force in tension. We need to be more "responsible" given the fact that humans through science and technology are seeking power over nearly everything — except our own power.

Without question, the churches have the potential to generate moral, social, and intellectual force to shape a scientific-technological society toward a more critical account of human benefit and well being.

They could produce cultural change, manifested, for example, in selective public resistance to what scholars call the "autonomy" of science and technology. The difference between possibility and actuality is mass participation, within and beyond the churches.

The public church is an idea whose time could be coming in the ELCA — if most of our congregations, campus ministries, seminaries, colleges, and schools would think of themselves as sponsors of conversation and builders of community. Do we dare to take ourselves so seriously?

In the past, we could justify inaction by the absence of guidance or legitimacy or support. Those excuses are getting harder to manufacture.

In closing, it should be noted that the dissatisfaction with the scientific-technological society which animates this proposal need not be the starting point or the reason for becoming a church of public conversation. Alas, there are others.

But for those who wonder whether and how Christian faith can do something about the cultural hegemony of science and technology (and other informing values and practices), there appears to be an affirmative answer in the form of habitual public dialogue as a mark of identity and as a gift to the world.

Finally, although this proposal seeks to respond to a fearful "imperative," churches should want to sponsor conversation and to build community because dialogue and reciprocity can be truly astonishing encounters with God's grace. Good conversation is hard-won and rare, but when it happens, it is among life's most powerful experiences.

We humans are not meant to be alone. In good conversation, we experience a vitalizing transcendence of the alienation and solitude of life. Philip Hefner, a Lutheran leader of the contemporary faith-science movement writing in a new ELCA study book on genetic testing and screening, calls for "Christian friendship" as the morality needed to fund churches in dialogue about a new set of consequential questions.⁷

Real dialogue has to be inclusive of real differences of viewpoint and experience. It has to be safe and supportive, yet critical and evaluative. Friendship is the place for such dialogue. The calling of the churches to public conversation is an opportunity for faithfulness and for love of neighbor. It is also an invitation to the wonders of friendship.

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Editor **George Koch**, who also works as the ELCA's Campus Ministry Region 5 staff person, wrote a article on ways to hold a faith-science dialog in the Spring/Summer 1999 issue of *Convergence* (vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 4-5). After writing about why dialogs are important, he suggests six ways to begin one. Among his ideas are: celebrate the work of scientists in your local setting, begin a book study group on the issue, subscribe to faith and science publications, and watch and discuss the movie *Contact*.

Endnotes

1. See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge and trans. by Neville Horton Smith (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995; H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); and

William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

2. Robert Putman, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Current* 337 (June 1995): 3-10.

3. Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, trans. by Hans Jonas with David Herr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

4. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Current Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

5. Daniel Callahan, "Calling Scientific Ideology to Account," *Society* 33 (May/June 1996): 14-19.

6. *Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues* (Chicago: Division for Church in Society, ELCA, 1999). Order from the ELCA Distribution Center, Augsburg Fortress no. 69-8681, ISBN no. 6-0001-1197-5). Cost \$1. Single copy orders can also be made by phoning the Division for Church and Society at 800-638-3522 (ext. 2718). The publication can also be downloaded at the ELCA's web site at www.elca.org/dcs/talktogether.html.

7. Philip Hefner, "The Genetic 'Fix': Challenge to Christian Faith and Community," in Roger A. Willer, ed., *Genetic and Testing Screening: Critical Engagement at the Intersection of Faith and Science* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 1998), pp. 73-93.