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Technology, Precursors, Resistance

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This summer [2010], your book *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* appeared. Large parts of this book are very critical, not so much about technical products (say, email), but rather about the assumptions underlying the technological project. One of these assumptions, obviously, is the desire to command, to be in control, to manipulate. But, then, this desire also occurs in places we do not immediately associate with technology. For example, you write: "To define Christian ethics as concerned with a system of moral rules represents a return to a 'technological' mechanism that attempts to distill aspects of God's action in order to make them manipulable."[1] So, what is technology? Everything stemming from that human, all too human desire to play God?

It helps to remember how the story of technology begins in the Bible. The Fall narratives climax in the story of Babel, in which the biblical authors emphasize that a technical innovation made this feat possible, the invention of bricks of a special hardness. It was this innovation that sparked the idea to build a tower to God, suggesting that humanity had reached a level of technical sophistication that made God a superfluous hypothesis. If we read back from the Babel account we see that various innovations like the stirrup, music, and empire were invented by the children of the fallen Adam and Eve. Think now back to the very beginning: the first thing that happens

1. Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*, 223.

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after the Fall is the production of a material artifact, the fig-leaf loincloth. Jaques Ellul in *The Origin of the City* has brilliantly shown how modern technology is the repetition of this gesture. Unable to admit the guilt of our fallen condition, modern society can be read as one highly ramified attempt to assuage the feeling that we are missing something by trying to provide for ourselves without reference to God and hiding the disastrous results of our previous efforts.

I have discussed the problem that we sinful humans are prone to try to justify ourselves and so to displace the role of God in our lives. We want to take responsibility, be adults, not have to rely on anyone else. Think about the recent talk of "creating artificial life" in the news. Honest scientists know that we can't create life, but journalists still look for excuses to say that scientists have done it, and the public is duly fascinated and intrigued and sometimes morally outraged. But why are such exaggerations so tempting? Modern humanity *wants* to think of itself as being able to have such control of life. We feel better thinking that we could. This is the fig-leaf reflex. Am I proposing some naïve romanticism and suggesting we don't have to take responsibility for ourselves?

Wholly relinquishing control can be naïve, of course. But remember that God replaced the fig leaf with a technically superior coat of animal skins. Do we dare suggest God has stopped caring for human needs in this way? We can begin to glimpse where we might start to look for alternatives by noticing that it is possible to manage ourselves to death, to so control everything that freedom, spontaneity, and trust become suspect. Our world is a managed world, full of the responsibility that makes trust unnecessary, and it is, ironically, this management itself that is becoming most dangerous for human life, as is made clear in the most obvious way by the nuclear threat we find ourselves under and climate change. My main interest is to hold open the possibility that the rule of the Spirit and the lordly activity of Christ might offer more and better life than utterly efficient human management can offer.

To what extent is *Christian Ethics* a sequel to *Singing*? How do you see the relation between the two? If my suggestion in the previous question makes sense, then would it be too simplistic to say that the technological project is basically antithetical to Christian moral deliberation? Is technology (as a mode of thinking) Augustine's earthly city, or the tower of Babel, as opposed to Noah's ark building?[2]

2. Ibid., 227.

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Despite appearances, things are actually the other way around: *Christian Ethics* was written first, but *Singing* was published first for purely logistical reasons. *Christian Ethics* began life as my doctoral thesis, but after writing *Singing* in Germany and taking up my post in Aberdeen, I continued to think as deeply as I could about our developed societies while I revised *Christian Ethics* and finally sent it off to the publishers during a sabbatical at Duke. I've been thinking about the problems addressed in *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* while watching how new technologies enter and change our lives for about twenty years now, and in that sense, *Singing* is an inset poem within the larger project of *Christian Ethics,* answering the question about where we should go with the frustrations of modern life.

It is certainly clear to me that some of the technical problems in modern moral theory that I discussed in the previous interview are tied up with the habits of mind that characterize the inhabitants of a technological age. If you want to eradicate disease or "fix" the environment, you need a methodical plan. And if you want to do the right thing as an individual you need some moral rules, or at least rules for moral deliberation (as John Rawls has so well and influentially encapsulated this updated version of Kant's moral program[3]). I've already indicated some of the ways in which these approaches to technology and ethics parallel dominant academic sensibilities about how we can best ensure that our biblical interpretation is accurate and productive. The problem, however, arises when these well-oiled methods of thinking run up against a technology that the world has never before seen. This presents not only a practical problem, but a problem for the whole of modern ethical theory.

Christian Ethics begins with this problem, setting it out in as much detail as I can manage, and *Singing* tries to reconceive ethical theory in the wake of this problem. In short, Noah did not build the ark because he thought the moral rules of the day demanded it, nor because the technical state of the art demanded he build the "next generation" animal-carrying ship in order to make sure that his family survived in a stormy international economic environment. We are forced to ask: then what rationality did demand it? I think the answer I've tried to give in both books is that Noah heard that if he wanted to continue living with God then this is what he had to do—so he did it instead of saying "I want to make my own way" as did Adam, Eve, and the Babelites. Christians call this faith in the Trinitarian God. Although Scripture does tell us that a few concrete instructions were

3. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.

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included in this divine direction, there is no hint, as there is in the story of Babel, that this is "new" technology. Right from the outset of the biblical story, then, the value of "new" technology is questioned in a way that is fertile for our contemporary attempts to grapple with it today.

One of the key words in *Christian Ethics* is "perception": what matters most is how we perceive the world, and to ask how Scripture can alter our perceptions. This very much reminds me of Stanley Hauerwas, who makes this point again and again. More generally, it struck me that in the recommendations you offer in the concluding chapter of your book, you seem to have moved very close to the exercises in "perception-alteration" that Hauerwas offers in so many of his essays. But if I am not mistaken, most of the Hauerwas references in your book are rather critical. So, how do you relate to his project? Obviously there are differences between the two of you, especially in style and approach. But at the end of the day, it seems that both you and Hauerwas insist very strongly on the need to speak in biblical language about our everyday moral behavior rather than relying on the "secular" discourses generally available to us. Also, both you and Hauerwas agree that Christian language is learned in the practice of worship.[4] What I like both about Hauerwas and about your second book is that they want to speak in biblical language about the most "ordinary" things, such as the industrially farmed meat I previously mentioned. So, again, how do you relate to Hauerwas?

It is impossible to overstate Hauerwas' importance both in North American academic theology and in my own biography. He directly and essentially single-handedly challenged the general disdain with which traditional doctrinal theology was viewed in a university context dominated by modern liberal theology. He did it with humor and insight and often in direct frontal assault. He reshaped the discipline as a result, and his accessible writing style at the same time provided the catalyst for young pious believers to imagine that theological thinking in the academy might matter in a way they had not been able to for several generations in America. As a result, he drew a large swath of young blood into a theological landscape that he rightly says had been dominated for several decades by establishmentarian aims and sensibilities.

4. Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*, 249.

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Medical ethics, for instance, had fallen a long way from its early roots in Christian theology, and had come to be dominated by Kantian ethics of principles. It is still the case that the majority of its contemporary practitioners, if they refer to themselves as theological thinkers, are operating with an explicitly "religious" or perhaps a "Judeo-Christian" ethic. I cut my teeth in this discipline and found its understanding of Christianity to be a pretty pale and distant caricature of my experience of the church. That's why I was stunned and immediately converted when I first read Stanley's *Suffering Presence*. It turns out that my subsequent career has not moved on very much from this book's basic sensibilities, even if I now believe that a different set of conceptual tools better reaches the point he was straining in a very creative way to reach long before disability theology had grown up around the questions he was asking. But remember that he was way ahead of his time, asking questions that nobody else was asking, and doing so in a very hostile environment. Having done so for so long he has collected a lot of interesting people around him, and I'm part of that frothy mix in my own way, though only indirectly because my intellectual formation took place in very different contexts.

Suffering Presence is a book about disability, medicine, technology, and the church. It was an unspoken homage to that book and another of his essays that John Swinton and I subtitled a book we edited *Why Science Needs the Church*. Swinton and I share an interest in the theology of disability, and it was Hauerwas who independently, and in very different ways, inspired us both. So my being in Aberdeen, in a roundabout way, had to do with the network of connections that Stanley has created with his life and work. Incidentally, Swinton and I are also heavily involved in various disability-theology projects with Hans Reinders of the Free University of Amsterdam, another academic given room to breathe in the informal Hauerwas network. When I was on sabbatical at Duke last year I taught a class with Amy Laura Hall that also orbited around related themes. Stanley's work on liturgy and ethics also inspired a young German named Bernd Wannenwetsch to come to Duke for the better part of a year over a decade ago, and so again I discovered one of my main conversation partners in the network of relationships around Stanley.

One of the things that is so fascinating about Stanley is that he is not actually trying to draw all these people into his orbit; they just end up there as fugitives from the dominant intellectual regimes, and Stanley loves to talk to new people. In fact, when I was a graduate student, it was Stanley,

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among others, who sent me to Britain. He has a lot of sympathy for the pre-modern Christian tradition, but doesn't work directly with it much. Following his own advice to take the tradition seriously meant coming to Europe where the historical knowledge of the Christian tradition is much deeper and so more accessible to the student. On this point I decided to follow Stanley's advice rather than his example.

On the topic of perception, I certainly learned its centrality in Christian ethics from Stanley, but I think I learned how to speak about the ordinary with biblical language first from the simple Bible-believing Christians I grew up around. I was only later taught how to understand the ways Scripture can capture and reshape perception by reading Karl Barth as mediated by my wonderful secondary doctoral supervisor Colin Gunton.[5] Stanley also gave me common ground with my other main teachers through his emphasis that choosing the right words is all-important in Christian theology and ethics. Though I first learned this Wittgensteinian linkage of words, perception, and action from Hauerwas, it was Michael Banner, my primary doctoral supervisor in London, who really helped me to understand the full implications of this claim, showing me how sociological observation can open up all sorts of theological questions by revealing the genuinely stupendous gaps that often exist between what we say we are doing and what we are actually doing. This tutelage on the linkage of words, perception, ethics, and everyday language continued and deepened when I went on to study with Hans Ulrich in my postdoctoral work in Germany. Ulrich, an old fashioned German philologist, exponentially deepened my appreciation of the theological importance of these linkages, and taken in the round, remains the modern theologian I most want to be like when I grow up.

In short, my various criticisms of Stanley are only possible because I have been so deeply influenced by, and remain so reliant on work he's done. In fact, I just came back from a year-long sabbatical spent at Duke, because I wanted to get to know him in person and see him in his institutional context before he retired. Having met him many times before, including hearing his Gifford lecture on Barth at St. Andrews, I was still amazed and humbled at the time he spent talking to me during my sabbatical year. But I also wanted to know him personally because in the years to come the most important trends in the field that I will have to deal with will in many respects be reverberations of ideas and emphases that Stanley put in motion.

5. Brock is here referring to lectures later published as Gunton, *The Barth Lectures*.

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He has a lot of students and has made plenty of enemies, and given that I am in fact in neither of these camps, it seemed important to have as deep a knowledge as I could of the man himself in his own context. Also, being from Texas and a bald white man, I do worry that at some point I'll be saddled with the expectation that I should be the next Hauerwas, and so I have avoided some of his more famous modes of self-presentation. To take one example, I never say "I'm a Texan" as an identity marker in the way he does. I have indicated why I think the identities we claim for ourselves matter, and why too much interest in the activity of self-naming is itself problematic. Stanley and I had long discussions while he was writing his memoir (which I read as a late draft) about the way he portrayed himself as a bricklayer and a Texan, and only ended by saying, "I discovered I'm a Christian." I'm a Texan, but I've never been under any illusion that it is an ontological category, which is a very Texan thing to assume. If anything, I'm certain that saying "I'm a Christian" demands that I consider what it might mean to say "I'm a recovering Texan." I hope I'm transparent enough to myself to be able to admit that all of this is probably the long-winded way of saying that though we are, in my view, doing some fairly different things theologically, I remain tempted by, and in *Christian Ethics* may have succumbed to, an uncharitable Freudian impulse of sons to emphasize how they are different from their fathers.

In the acknowledgments of *Christian Ethics*, you devote a few sentences to your son, Adam. You may not want to elaborate on this, but if you are so inclined I would like to ask: has your understanding of technology been changed by the experience of seeing your child depend on such cutting-edge technology as heart surgery?

My first child, Adam, was born in Germany after the early version of *Christian Ethics* was finished and right in the middle of writing *Singing*. He nearly didn't make it through his first week. The passion and despair at the frailty of human resources to stave off death that comes through in my treatment of Psalm 130 in *Singing* is a result of it having been written during that period. Some may find the references there to Job a bit incongruous, but I could not make sense of our situation without thinking through the faith of this man who lost all his children and yet did not repudiate God.

Five or six years later I was thinking about finding an image for the cover of *Christian Ethics* that cohered in a meaningful way with the book's

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content. My overriding interest was in finding an image that painted neither too dismissive nor too anodyne a picture of our technological present. It occurred to me that a picture I took on Adam's fourth day of life was perfect. He is in an incubator, blindfolded, naked, with tubes in most of his orifices. Some people find such a picture distressing, and I must admit that for many years I couldn't really look at it. But Adam, being sedated, is certainly not distressed in the picture. He is in a second womb, through which he was literally born again. What an intimate love we can give to such fragile new lives today, hanging onto them against the threat hovering over their precarious existences! It is precisely the ambiguity of modern technological life that this picture brings before us in a book that is sure to be disturbing to many. It won't have done its job if it is not. In my mind that picture is half of a diptych with the famous album cover from Nirvana, in which a healthy baby is pictured in a similar blue light but is underwater in a pool.[6] The baby's eyes are open, and dangling in front of the baby is a fish hook with a dollar bill on it. In both pictures it is quite clear that humans are largely helpless beings: sometimes on their back and comatose and being kept alive by technologies, other times head up, but immersed in technology and in that environment always chasing money with all the strings it entails.

We didn't know it at the time, but Adam has Down syndrome, and now has autistic characteristics. The latter may be a result of brain damage he suffered during his close call that first week, and it is not out of the question that it might have been prevented by a more scrupulous application of medical knowledge and technology. He is now six years old and non-verbal, not yet toilet trained, and so on. Some of his challenges are no doubt effects of his brush with death and the invasive techniques modern medicine used to keep him alive. Would our lives be easier today if such technologies did not exist and Adam had gone the way of all such children for millennia? Undoubtedly. But they would also be much poorer. My wife Stephanie is a neo-natal nurse, so none of these processes were new to either one of us, and in that sense Adam's wonderful arrival didn't change my view of technology, quite the opposite—what I had written about technology helped me understand what I was going through at the time.[7] I continue to write about our life together, because as a friend who has a severely disabled brother

6. Nirvana, *Nevermind* (1991).

7. For an account of this period see Brian Brock and Stephanie Brock, "The Disabled in the New World of Genetic Testing."

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once said to me, Adam "has disabled me." Adam exposes our technological habits for what they in fact are. As Hauerwas is fond of saying, people with disabilities are "canaries in the coal mine" who let us know when there is not enough oxygen in the air to allow us to survive. Adam is a citizen of a world in which most people test their pregnancies before they agree to care for the child that has been conceived precisely so they can avoid having to parent people like Adam. What he allows me to see in ways I never could have otherwise is how badly our modern world is set up to welcome the non-efficient and unproductive, how incredibly far it is from a world that can really receive "the least of these."

Why are eating habits and sexual practices[8] such important themes in your book? Are these also the themes that, in your assessment, should be addressed in sermons, in catechetical instruction, and so forth?

The main reason I hone in on practices of eating and sexual practices in *Christian Ethics* is a technical one. If the question of Christian ethics is "How do we receive God's sustenance?" then feeding and fertility are obvious answers to that question. This first question together with a second, "How does God rule human society?," brings the church and politics into view. I am increasingly attracted to the tradition of tying these emphases together with the doctrine of the three estates (or in the original German, *die Drei-Stände-Lehre*), which consists of the *oeconomia* (the household economy), *politia* (the political realm), and *ecclesia* (the church). I read this triad as indicating the three core aspects of human life that God has promised to care for: the realm of the sustenance and reproduction of life, the realm of political governance, and the realm of communication with God and with the saints. If Christian ethics is not a quest to find the right rules by which to live, then it makes sense to me that it is about discovering how to perceive and respond in praise and gratitude for the provisioning and ruling in which God is already involved. This is the ultimate basis of my criticisms of contemporary Christian ethical theory, that it renders God far too distant from these very practical concerns. So yes, if we are worried that the church is dying and has become irrelevant in the West, then we ought to be talking in church about faith as something that we do with our bodies. Because we don't want to be contentious in church, we doom the gospel to practical irrelevance.

8. Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*, ch. 8.

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As we Western Christians reflect on our technological age, what do you think we can learn from Christians in the southern hemisphere? For example, I would not have been surprised if, at some point in your book, you had quoted the Accra Confession, which deals explicitly with "our sin in misusing creation and failing to play our role as stewards and companions of nature."

Here is where my question "Who are my contemporaries?" really starts to hit the ground. In *Christian Ethics* I make several references to the wisdom of non-Western or non-modern agricultural practices. Western agricultural "progress" has not yet reached everyone on the planet, meaning that some people's ways of procuring food is not contemporaneous with our Western industrialized forms. So of course we still have things to learn from those who haven't yet started to do things in the manner of our industrialized agriculture. But it is not clear to me if the Christians in those places see this agriculture as valuable. They may well see it as "primitive" and tied up with the old fertility religions that they have left behind. There is no doubt that part of the missionary appeal of Christianity was that the power of modern technologies came with enlightened religion, and this was true from the beginnings of Western imperialism. So it may be that the role of some in the "dying" church in the West is to brake some of the progress of the Christianity we have bequeathed to the Two-Thirds World. We need to be able to care about them as brothers and sisters in Christ, and precisely on these grounds to warn them against covetously aspiring simply to be like us. This self-critical relation, and the braking effect it might have on the tendency of people in the Two-Thirds World to jettison their native cultures when they embrace Christ, is perfectly compatible with their teaching us what it means to rely on the law of the Spirit.

The problem of Western mission is again of a piece with epoch-thinking: it assumed the West was the "home" or "mature" church offering a packaged gospel to create "young" (read "dependent") churches. So not only does our Western Christianity divinize our Western cultural habits of looking down on our parents in the faith, it causes us to look down on global Christianity. We will always have things both to learn from and to teach other Christians that we may meet because the whole church is given the one gospel. But we can only make such an assertion because the canon of Scripture is essentially fixed, and as such exists as a divinely provided place to hear the gospel in order to become contemporaries in more than a superficial sense. Because the canon is fixed we have a place to gather and

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think together, a place that dictates the form of our dialogue such that, in order to gather there, we have to agree that we want to somehow be like the saints that Scripture depicts. The formation of a Scriptural canon can be referred to as a "technique" (in the most appropriate sense) in that it is designed to keep people talking together and understanding one another through successive generations. But it will only serve this traditional function if we expect it to do so rather than freezing that process of transformation by taking the stance that says, "Wow! Those people back then believed the craziest things!"

Going back to your question, I generally resist the language of stewardship and companionship with nature because of the way that language is (mis-)used today in affluent Western Christianity. I would only consent to using that language if we began trying to understand what it actually means by discussing the implications of the twist in the story of the prodigal son that the "good" brother, who is clearly the good steward in the story, comes off as more than a bit self-centered (Luke 15:11–31). We would then need to look into why Jesus commends the "shrewd" steward who self-centeredly cheated and twisted arms of debtors to keep his job (Luke 16:1–12). Starting with these biblical examples of stewardship would help us to more seriously engage with the way stewardship language is used today in the Western churches in a manner that is best characterized as an unreflective divinization of economic efficiency by the bourgeoisie and wealthy, and therefore tends to exacerbate the older understanding of "having dominion" in its more interventionist formulations.

In your theology of work, you follow Barth in claiming that for work to remain creaturely, "it must remain communally attuned, reflective, and playful."[9] Although I very much like this chapter—Barth's exposition on the Sabbath is one of my favorite passages in the *Church Dogmatics*—I could not help but wonder if this offers any guidance to Christians whose work and working conditions are by and large defined by their company or sector. I mean, you and I, working at a university, are perhaps to some extent in a position to arrange our work so that it can be something like reflective, communally attuned, and playful—but how many others are? Those who own their own businesses may try, of course, as did those late nineteenth-century Catholic craftsmen who have become known

9. The quotation comes from ibid., 303; the question of work forms the theme of chapter 7 in that book.

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as "corporatists" for trying to imitate the medieval guilds as a Christian alternative to nineteenth-century capitalism. However, as a rule, such experiments have little chance of survival in a competitive, capitalist economy. So, if we want to avoid "romantic images"[10] like those of the Catholic corporatists, how can we realize something like reflectiveness and playfulness? Perhaps we cannot do more than to engage in Foucauldian micro-resistance?[11]

One way I have responded to this type of question is to point out how much the modern division of labor so characteristic of capitalist societies has removed all initiative from the vast majority of workers. Even secular management theorists are recognizing that the drastic division of sheer manual labor from creative work has significant drawbacks and are trying to reverse the trend in various ways. One answer, then, is that, yes, we have theological reasons to question the Taylorization of labor, that is, our tendency to assume that everything will be cheaper and faster if we reorganize it as an "idiot proof" assembly line. My aim at this point is to say nothing more than that Christians have good reasons to take these alternative proposals seriously because they question problematic labor practices that are dominant in modern industrial societies, and which are being forced in their most draconian forms on nations that wish to join the Western market economy.

We only have to look at the vast asymmetries between the lives of those who produce Apple iPads and those who consume them to get a measure of the issues at stake. Christian theology suggests a reconfiguration of our ideas about "efficiency" in a manner that lets human beings have more of a say in how their own work is configured. Once this line of thinking is opened up, one discovers that sensitive interpreters of modern design and manufacture as it actually occurs have pointed out ways that we can make much more space for human initiative and creativity in modern work, but most of these solutions, though they make the lives of the workers better, are considered financially inefficient and so are not seriously considered. I

10. Ibid., 306. The question here refers to the discussion in ibid., 382.

11. The French philosopher Michel Foucault extended the definition of politics far beyond the idea that political engagement is reducible to casting votes in elections. Having described the ways that modern governments rule by teaching citizens to internalize rules to govern their behavior, Foucault suggests that political engagement must begin at the level of an individual's self-understanding, by trying to learn to speak and think differently and to explore suppressed potentials of our bodies.

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want to broaden theologically the ways we think about the relation of work, money, and the good life in order that so-called "financial inefficiencies" may, viewed from another angle, emerge looking a lot more like modes of loving our neighbor. Part of that task is to point out that the dream of industrialized work can never entirely stamp out zones in which workers are allowed to take some initiative. Without these marginal zones and spaces, however small, micro-resistance itself would be impossible.

This is to open up larger questions about the role of government in fostering the common good. You and I work in institutions that are subsidized by the state, protected from the capitalist forces that might radically reshape what we do. We feel this in a special way in Britain, for at the moment the trajectory that Margret Thatcher opened up to think of the universities as private enterprises is finally beginning to produce academics who, once they get into "management," feel it entirely appropriate to receive business-style performance bonuses, since they are steering what they think of as large corporate entities. But this cultural transition, which is by no means complete or uncontested in Britain, totally reframes what counts as "productive" scholarship in their research and teaching. In the same way many churches (especially in North America) have lost the theological vocabulary even to notice that education is one of many sectors of our societies that are not well served if treated as a money-making enterprise. The narrowing of the vocabulary of modern Christian ethics has a lot to answer for in fostering a state of affairs in which even believers can no longer articulate the legal and ethical differences between governments, charities (which universities in Britain have been for centuries), and businesses.

Finally, speaking about this micro-resistance: I was struck by your remark that "Such resistance is rendered *more* faithful because it is more patient by its knowledge that sin has already been defeated by Christ."[12] Are you suggesting that we are forgetting the work Christ has already done if we, for example, radically break with certain forms of technology? Is a call to withdraw from certain sinful sectors of society (the world of high-risk finance, for example) the equivalent of a "frustrated call for total revolution" and incompatible with Christian patience and dependence on God?

No, it is not. The conceptual and practical problem is that modern Christians are again caught in a vicious polarization that presumes we either

12. Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age*, 384.

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have a Christianity that protects the status quo or a Christianity that stands as a "contrast society" that is *only* doing its job when it is opting out of the system. Both positions are partial truths. I want to hold both trajectories together, and I think this is truer to the many biblical stories we find in Scripture than either pole taken on its own. Since I already mentioned him, think of Samson the judge bringing down the palace of the Philistines. This is Israel rebelling by breaking the systems of the age if ever there were such a rebellion. But what about that first judge, Moses? His revolution was to institute the patient business of sitting in court, judging disputes. This is the guy who killed an Egyptian in a fit of anger, so sitting in court all day couldn't have suited his temperament very well. But his service in the kingdom demanded setting up the settled institutions of judgment. In hearing and obeying this divine word I dare even say his hot-headed character was rounded off and made suppler, but it is pretty clear from the story that he didn't sit in judgment over Israel in order to develop his character, and if it changed his character, the biblical writers do not think this is a theologically interesting enough fact to tell us.

Michael Banner once responded in a debate about the permissibility of just war in this way: "As Woody Allen once said, 'some day the lion may lay down with the lamb, but the lamb sure is going to be nervous.'" His point was that it is a foreshortening of the Christian history of faith to say "all Christians believe in pacifism" or "all Christians believe in just war." Christians have been, and I would argue should be, on both sides of that problem of human life, the problem of war and injustice. The Christian soldier and the pacifist can never forget that what they do is only intelligible given the tensions that the witness of the other sets up. Nor can they claim that Christianity is ever solely behind the status quo or some relentlessly radical questioning of our cultures. The gospel is always both questioning everything and pushing the governments that exist toward continuous incremental reform because Jesus is both an incarnate God who must live as creatures do in times and places, and also the resurrected God who is not ultimately bound by the laws of nature and culture that we think we know, but is their ruler. In both moments he is radically for human life both as it is and as it will be. I would therefore like to support both the micro-resistance that can admit, for instance, that modern finance is torn by problematic practices and assumptions and into which a little Christian thought and practice could make a major difference for vast numbers of people (such as by rejecting the bonus culture, or fostering micro-credit initiatives in the

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mega-banks). I would also like at the same time to see Christians involved in more thoroughgoing and experimental forms of resistance as we see, for instance, in the Occupy movement that swept the globe after the financial crash and Christian movements like New Monasticism in the United States, which is trying to recover for Protestants the core monastic virtues of stability and poverty that have always been present in Christian monasticism since Benedict of Nursia (fifth entury AD). Unfortunately, I think the academic discipline of Christian ethics has tended to impede rather than foster thinking of the Christian life in these terms in being, by and large, trapped in the belief that Christians must be either conservatives *or* radicals. In Jesus, I believe, we see that God is always a partisan for concrete human lives, and as this love is lived out it constantly has to resist both the conservatives and the radicals who collapse the important tensions bequeathed by Jesus with their ultimately ideological insistence on a single set of policies. We could call Jesus a conceptual radical and a political iconoclast—which is simply to say that because the world is fallen and hurting, at no time is God for the simple maintenance of the status quo—though we may not yet be clear what needs to be overturned and what preserved about the current arrangements of our societies.

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