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**Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture and Computer Technology (Book Review)**

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despite what their founding fathers carefully constructed, and of being deceived about what they are supporting or voting for when they agree to protest and vote. This book meticulously illuminates the historical course of that happening. But I say that as a Jeffersonian. I suspect today’s Hamiltonians are quite pleased with where things are: that the Tenth Amendment has long been declared essentially non-existent, that the constitutional doctrine of delegated powers has been ignored, and that the US Supreme Court recently refused to rule the Congressional passage of the Affordable Care Act (ObamaCare) as unconstitutional. If change does come, it will no doubt be because old political categories are broken so that new arguments, and unlikely alliances, are made—as Taylor discusses in this book.

No review would be complete without some negative criticism, I suppose. Were I to offer that, the length of the book (over 600 pages) would be at the top of the list. The length is also a strength of the book, but that strength would be more acknowledged by dedicated college or post-graduate students, or very serious political hobbyists (I consider myself the latter). The fact is, if Taylor wants to have a lot of influence with lots of voters, he should realize that many or most will start reading another book when they see the length of, and small print in, this one. Given that the book appears to be at least in part a compilation of prior articles and papers done by Taylor, perhaps he will do us all a favor by releasing future books that are designed, visually and content-wise, for the reader who just wants to be an intelligent voter and modest political participant. I’ll keep this one though.


One need not be a computer scientist in order to be concerned with the issues surrounding computer technology. Some might see computer technology as a challenge; others may fear that they are being controlled by it in ways that are uncomfortable. Derek Schuurman, an electrical engineer who became a teacher, steps back from his work as a computer scientist to examine a wide range of issues from his Reformational Christian perspective. For example, he shows that technology is not neutral, that digital technology influences how we think, and how to develop responsible technology. This little book can serve very well as a resource in many courses beyond those in computer science. It provides a wonderful introduction to how Reformational thinking influences all of our work. It demonstrates how a scholar should wrestle with issues, and he includes discussion questions, which should make this a very fine book for a variety of classes—even for church groups. The bibliography itself is worth the price of the book because it points to many Reformational scholars who have laid foundations on which the rest of us can build.

Drawing on a wide range of Reformational thinkers throughout the book Schuurman explains in the second chapter how the themes of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration set the context for thinking about technology. He draws on Dooyeweerd’s scheme of modal aspects to help understand how diverse entities function in creation. He argues that the lower aspects function more like creation laws and the higher ones appear to be norms rather than laws: “The ‘earlier’ aspects (starting with the numeric) provide a foundation for the ‘later’ ones (up to the faith aspect)” (42). And “whereas laws are in effect without human intervention, norms involve human freedom and responsibility” (44). He then shows how the various modalities function when working with computers. This section is particularly helpful in understanding these modalities because he illustrates with computer examples how they function. “A simple example is a digital image; although it is formed using low-level binary pixels (numeric aspect), the image that is formed enables higher aspects in a human subject. A digital image can prompt feelings of affection (psychic aspect), serve as a cultural object (historical aspect) and be used to portray symbols or text (lingual aspect). Digital images can portray friendships (social aspect) and also beauty (aesthetic aspect)” (43).

In the third chapter which deals with the effects of the fall, Schuurman uses Albert Wolters’ concepts of structure and direction to explain how the possibilities of computer technology are intertwined with the effects of sin: “The web is useful for communicating and disseminating truthful information; on the other hand, online gambling and pornographic websites are destructive. Email and social networking can shrink the distances between people; but compulsive computer use leads to loss of authentic human con-
connect” (55). While he appreciates technology, he does
not worship it as some seem to do. Technicism, the
faith and trust in the power of technology, is marked
by three key beliefs: that the progress of technology
cannot be stopped, that technological progress will
improve the conditions of humankind, and if prob-
lems develop, technology will solve them. He calls
this a religion, albeit a false one because it replaces
God. He is concerned that technology may appear
to take on a life of its own if we do not develop a
comprehensive view of what we construct: “we may
shape our machines, but they will also shape us” (61).

Although some may view all technology as a re-

sult of the fall (e.g., Jacques Ellul), Schuurman claims
that “[t]echnology and rational methods are part of
the structure of creation; however, they can be abso-
lutized or misdirected” (65). We must consider both
structure and direction as we work with any technol-
yogy: “ignoring normative principles goes against the
fabric of creation and entails negative consequences
(65). Schuurman further argues that when technol-
yogy is driven narrowly by monetary or economic
considerations, “a technical worldview directs things
toward efficiency at the expense of many other con-
siderations” (66).

His fourth chapter, on redemption and respon-
sible computer technology, helps us see that “salvation
is comprehensive in scope; it is about more than per-
sonal salvation. . . . [Christ] comes to make his bless-
ings flow, as far as the curse is found” (72). Schuurman
struggles with the question of just what a Christian
does in computer technology compared to a non-
christian. Using the insights of several Reformational
thinkers, he explains that the starting place is sha-
lom—the way things are supposed to be. From this
point, he rejects technicism and attempts to develop
normative principles for technology. Computer sci-
entists cannot operate in a vacuum; they need to seek
guidance from other experts. For example, designing
computers to help automobile traffic flow requires
including a traffic expert cooperating with computer
scientists and engineers. Therefore, the overarching
normative principle, he says, is one of love. By go-
ing back to the modal aspects he discussed earlier,
he demonstrates how these aspects are integrated in
computer technology—including historical, cultural,
social, aesthetic, and juridical norms. In discussing
each of these norms, he uses examples that demon-
strate the power of these norms and what happens
when they are violated. Computer technology should
promote the creational norms.

In examining the future of computer technology,
Schuurman avoids both a utopian view that technol-
yogy will solve all our problems and a view of despair
that technology will threaten to make humans an en-
dangered species. Instead, he sees technology as part
of God’s good creation: “We must discern the good
structures of creation without being lured by some of
its misdirections” (117). He points to Christ’s return
when he, not technology, will heal the nations. He
shows how we might think about what technology
can do in the new creation when harmful technology
will be transformed to conform with God’s original
intention for creation.

Finally, he notes that both worldview and a per-
sonal relationship with Jesus Christ are essential in
shaping computer technology. In doing so, he says,
“we need to be new creation signposts, people whose
hearts and lives seek to be faithful to God” (124).

325-4. Reviewed by Howard Schaap, Assistant Professor of English, Dordt College.

Anyone familiar with James Calvin Schaap’s fiction
should find the premise behind his latest collection of
short stories, Up the Hill, quite a departure. Actually,
there’s only one major change in Up the Hill that
Schaap makes from his usual style, but for an author
who believes in realistic fiction as much as he does,
that shift is all the more major: Up the Hill is told
from a point of view beyond the grave. That’s right.
In Up the Hill, the stories are told by a small-town
newspaper editor, himself a dead, ghostly resident of
the cemetery “up the hill,” who tells stories about his
cemetery neighbors and especially the newly dead, as
they take up residence in an afterlife that has heaven-
ly flavor but an earthly setting. Viewed through the
lens of literary realism—Schaap’s forte—this move
to a sort of magic realism seems downright shock-
ing. Through another lens, though, Up the Hill fits
perfectly in with the work that Schaap has been do-
ging for a long time: telling the stories of small-town
characters in the tradition of Sherwood Anderson’s
Winesburg, Ohio. In Up the Hill, Schaap’s Winesburg
is Highland, Iowa, only projected into the afterlife
where Schaap has found new inspiration to explore
the lives of small-town Dutch America.

Perhaps the thing I enjoyed most about Up the
Hill is how playful it is—or how playful it can be,