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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-
they take up residence in an afterlife that has heaven-cemetery neighbors and especially the newly dead, as the cemetery “up the hill,” who tells stories about his newspaper editor, himself a dead, ghostly resident of Highland, Iowa, only projected into the afterlife. That’s right. That shift is all the more major: that Schaap makes from his usual style, but for an author who believes in realistic fiction as much as he does, there’s only one major change in Up the Hill that fits perfectly in with the work that Schaap has been doing 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,