



## Sacred Science by Chris Swanson

*This article was adapted by the author from a talk titled "God's Gone: A Guided Tour of Transcendence in Western Culture" that he gave at Gutenberg's 2017 Summer Institute, "Meaning and Flourishing in a Secular Age." The author cites one of the Institute readings, *The New Demons* by philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912-1994).*

On the surface, the idea that science is sacred makes no sense. We associate the sacred with God and religion. We have sacred scriptures and sacred shrouds that are squarely in the realm of the divine. But we tend to view science as having replaced the divine in many ways. So then, how can science be sacred?

I would argue that science plays the same role in our society as the sacred has played in the past. Although science is not sacred in the sense that it is related to the divine, it fits the bill in all other senses, especially as science is part of a much larger phenomenon that Jacques Ellul refers to as "technique."

Technique, in Ellul's sense, is "the totality of methods, rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity." It is the impulse to find the "best way" in every activity. One of the hallmarks of technique is the desire to achieve an impersonal goal over the desire to serve the real needs of the people involved. Taken as a whole, technique defines not just a particular method, but an attitude toward the use of method. Ellul is not critiquing technology per se, but rather the spirit of "techniqueism."

Technique, as Ellul means it, is rampant in our society. We can see it everywhere. Politically active organizations carefully research and test their use of symbols and speech to maximally increase votes rather than serving

the real needs of their constituents. Advertisers study psychology and cultural norms to craft the most effective message to sell a product. Employers hire consultants in human resources to help them craft policies and workplace methods to maximally enhance productivity instead of considering employees as human beings. Big data firms mine Google searches for information they can sell to companies. In all these examples, efficiency in the "means" is elevated over the ends of serving people. The problem inherent in technique is not that carefully designed "means" are used, but that these means are prioritized over the individuals involved. If the politicians, employers, and advertisers *use* constituents, employees, and buyers to achieve their own goals, then that is technique.

It would be foolish not to create good methods in whatever endeavor we pursue. For instance, when crafting an article, I want to use the best method of writing so that my article is clear and understandable. But that is not necessarily technique. It becomes technique if I use rhetorical methods that try to manipulate readers into an action I desire by bypassing their reason and playing on desires or fears. To prioritize method over man is madness.

Now that I have clarified the nature of technique I would like to look at the various senses in which something can be thought



of as sacred. In *New Demons* (Seabury Press; January 1975), Ellul defines the sacred as that which helps to provide order and meaning in the incoherent and incomprehensible world. Man sees the sacred as the means by which he can solve what he believes to be his most important problem. Thus, man submits himself to the sacred as a solution and finds in it power, mystery, and existential danger. The sacred can determine his destiny and is wholly beyond influence or question. The sacred must exist for man to find any meaning.

Two examples of the sacred can be found in past eras: when polytheism dominated the world and in the early Christian era up through the Middle Ages.

Polytheists, such as the ancient Babylonians, Egyptians, and Greeks, held *nature* as sacred. Man's most important problem was how to survive. Survival was uncertain because it depended on natural occurrences outside his control. Man could not control the annual flooding or the rainfall for agriculture. He could not control the wild beasts or crop-eating insects. Childbirth was dangerous, and storms at sea sank ships. The ancient polytheists saw the chaotic actions of nature as resulting from the chaotic decisions of the gods, who either were nature or were in nature. Nature had other characteristics of the sacred as well: it was mysterious, powerful, and could both give and take life. Polytheists of the time feared and revered the gods of nature and sacrificed to them in an attempt to be spared from the gods' destructive whims. Nature was sacred. *(continued)*



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## Sacred Science, cont.

In the early Christian era up through the middle ages, *sacraments* were sacred. In the West, man's problem was how to gain eternal salvation. Christianity had turned the focus from survival in this world to survival in the next. Part of that transition included desacralizing nature. Christians rejected nature gods and brought all of nature under the dominion of God, who is wholly distinct from nature. Nature was no longer sacred. Instead, the sacraments were sacred because the solution to man's problem—needing to be saved—was to partake of the sacraments. Holy baptism, communion, confession, and last rites were all central aspects of gaining eternal salvation. The punishment reserved for heretics was excommunication, which suspended the right to take the sacraments. An early Christian understood the order and structure of heaven and earth and the role the sacraments played in that structure. The sacraments held power, mystery, and existential fear. They held the power of salvation and at the same time the fear of eternal damnation. And a great deal of mystery was bound up in the sacraments, for instance, in transubstantiation during communion. The sacraments were not debated but assumed as part of early church practice. Thus, the sacraments fulfilled the role of the sacred.

Given these examples of how the sacred functions in a culture, let us now look at the role technique plays today. In a sense, technique has robbed nature and the sacraments of their sacredness; it has desacralized them. Science has conquered, in a sense, the unpredictability of nature. Science has “explained away” the supernatural and thus life after death, rendering the sacraments as mere ritual. Most importantly, man's “problem” has largely shifted—from physical survival and eternal salvation to the problem of comfort and security. We are mostly buffered from death and no longer overly worried by it. Clearly, we all die, but survival does not drive our actions and thoughts like it did for the polytheists. Thus, we are not motivated by the fear of death. Similarly, for the most part, our culture is not motivated by the desire for salvation and eternal life. The fear of damnation is not in the forefront of our minds like it was for the early Christians.

Today, we are overwhelmed by a desire to live comfortable and secure lives. This is what gets us going in the morning and focuses our attention. Students are educated to get a good career because a career provides comfort and security. Adults work toward a satisfying income. Those people who do not contribute to the cause of comfort, such as stay-at-home parents, may feel unproductive and useless. Vacation and entertainment demand a great deal of our attention as a part of comfort. People buy lottery tickets in droves because of the promise of comfort and security. The two main goals of government have become increasing wealth and enhancing security from danger, both foreign and domestic. Universal health care, for example, is born out of the need for security because we fear the discomfort of bad health and large medical bills. These things point to our culture's current interests.

Man's solution to this problem is technique. Today, technique is sacred. All sectors of society have decided that there is a best and most efficient way to increase comfort and security. We battle endlessly over what that most efficient way is, but we do not question whether we should pursue the best way with all of our resources. In the pursuit of the best way, we lose track of what a human is and what a human needs.

Technique holds all the power, mystery, and existential danger in our lives. Technique has power over our economic and personal well-being, both privately and publicly. Technique is used by economists in the Federal Reserve and by the government to improve national comfort and security. Technique is used by businesses and non-profit organizations that provide us with jobs, and thus technique has power over our livelihoods. Technique controls how we communicate on our phones and computers. It provides us with food, shelter, and entertainment. Technique has the power that we once attributed to gods and sacraments.

Technique is also feared and revered. We revere the politician (if he is on our side!) who can find the most efficient and powerful way to accomplish our political goals. Followers of Ayn Rand see the most powerful practitioners of technique, the CEOs, as the saviors of society. We also rely on all sorts of complex computer, financial, energy, and transporta-

tion infrastructure. In a sense, we take them for granted, but we fear any interruption of that infrastructure. We are afraid of failures like Y2K or the 2008 housing crisis or the 1973 oil embargo. Because our comfort and security depend on the smooth operation of technique, we fear it.

Lastly, technique is a source of mystery. Technique is not an occult, magical mystery, but it is a mystery nevertheless. Who knows how a cell phone really works and how excessive pollution in China may affect our retirement funds? In fact, no one person can penetrate fully any of the complex mysteries of our world because expertise and knowledge are so distributed.

So, although technique (and science as part of technique) does not reference any gods or supernatural beings, it does perform the function of the sacred. A culture must have a structure and some sort of promise that there is a solution to its great problems. There must be sacred practices, principles, and objects to provide some order and hope. The alternative is despair, which is intolerable.

As in other times and places, there is always a resistance and rejection of the sacred. Today, a variety of movements reject technology, corporatism, government, and media. For instance, some wish to save the environment from the ravages of technique-driven corporate and government power. Others wish to find alternatives to technique-driven industrial educational models. Still others wish to avoid the technique-driven food industry.

These are worthy goals based on good insights. But we should keep in mind that while individuals may find some success here, it is not clear that we will have much success as a culture. On a large scale, when one technique goes awry, another, better technique is hailed as a solution. Changes in education over the last few decades have swapped one technique for another, but the goals have continued to drift toward job training for comfort and security. Those who use “organic” to capitalize on market trends are simply adapting techniques to the times. Efforts to save the environment are rife with political, judicial, scientific, and advertising techniques.

This analysis of our situation is nothing new. Ellul was writing about it fifty years

ago, and others were writing about it before him. The harder problem is to know what to do about it. There are innumerable viable responses to our situation. Some emphasize a return to small communities where we can love, care for, and support each other in our walk of faith. Others emphasize the use of natural foods, which are more in keeping with the way God made us. Many encourage supporting small business where owners can have a relationship with both employees and customers, treating them as valuable humans

rather than as means to profit. There are hundreds of different ways that we can refocus on treating people well and prioritizing them over our comfort and security. But it is not easy. We must encourage each other in that effort and remind ourselves of the truth.

For a Christian, technique should not be sacred. Our hope should be placed in God's kingdom, not the comfort and security of this world. We cannot serve two masters. Because skills, interests, and personalities vary, there are as many practical ways to pursue God on

this earth as there are people. But the ultimate and best rejection of sacred technique is to seek to know and understand the things of God and to live our lives in accordance with that understanding.

**Chris Swanson** is the president and a tutor at Gutenberg College where he teaches science and leads discussions in *Microexegesis*, *Western Civilization*, and *the Great Conversation*. He has a Ph.D. in physics.

## Thank You for a Great Summer Institute!

Gutenberg College would like to thank all those people who helped make a great Summer Institute this year: volunteers, alums, and eager participants. Thanks especially to GC alumna **Katherine Caballero**, who oversaw the whole institute, and sisters **Beth Sheehan Walton** and **Gretchen Odegaard**, who volunteered their time to make great food. The Summer Institute can't happen without volunteers, and we thank you all! Most importantly, thanks to all of the participants for sharing their thoughts and bringing the institute to life. Thanks for coming!



GC alumni Carina and Stefan Crabtree came for the SI and helped lead discussions.



Tim McIntosh answers questions after his lecture.



Gutenberg office manager Kathryn Dewberry greets participants with a gift bag.



President Chris Swanson talks to participants on the patio, a favorite discussion spot.



Sisters Gretchen Odegaard and Beth Sheehan Walton made wonderful food.



Kim and Mark Farmer from Idaho visit with Gutenberg tutor Ron Julian.



Provost Eliot Grasso and GC alumnus Toby Johnston lead a discussion in the gallery.



SI speakers answer questions in the final session of the 2017 Summer Institute.

## Gutenberg College Community Classes



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classes and other events at Gutenberg, go to [www.gutenberg.edu/home](http://www.gutenberg.edu/home) and click the blue "Subscribe" button. Subscribing to email updates is the best way of keeping up with what's happening at Gutenberg.

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## Philosophy Workshop: Common Sense & Thomas Reid

September 8, 9:30 AM to 3:00 PM at Gutenberg College



Thomas Reid's classic text *An Inquiry into the Human Mind: On the Principles of Common Sense* (1764) responds to Scottish philosopher

David Hume's skeptical claims about man's ability to grasp knowledge, and it serves as a landmark in the eighteenth-century discussion of epistemology. In this workshop, Dr. Charley Dewberry

and participants will discuss Thomas Reid's common-sense philosophy in order to develop a nuanced framework for evaluating what knowledge is, how one acquires knowledge, and how one demonstrates knowledge.

Participants will discuss complex epistemological philosophy, evaluate the role of empiricism in learning, and develop an understanding of the Great Conversation surrounding knowledge in the philosophical tradition.

**Dr. Charley Dewberry** is a founder, tutor, and the academic dean at Gutenberg College, as well as an award-winning restoration ecologist. He holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Science from the University of Oregon.

Cost of the workshop is \$57 per person or \$77 for a family. A catered lunch will be provided at no additional charge. Space is limited.

For more information or to register, please visit [www.workshops.gutenberg.edu](http://www.workshops.gutenberg.edu) or call our office at 541-683-5141.