Spring 2000 Monday Night Lecture Series
Science and Religion

Questioning Technology and Continuing Revelation

May 8, 2000 Max and Lissa Carter

Scripture reading: Exodus 8:1-7 "The plague of frogs"

There really isn't much reason to begin a talk in a series on science and technology with a reading from the Bible, except that 1) I am a programmed Friend, and you would expect it; 2) I wanted to provide a segue from Mac Givens' talk of last week; 3) I tend to have an irreverent attitude that science, and in particular "scientism," sometimes serves contemporary society as Pharaoh's magicians.

Science has "wowed" us. Even the miracles of God have been replicated – as in the story of the Exodus. Philosopher of the world's wisdom traditions, Huston Smith, writes:

"Through technology, science effects miracles: skyscrapers that stand; men standing on the moon. Moreover, in its early stages these miracles were in the direction of the heart's desire: multiplication of goods and the reduction of drudgery and disease. There was the sheer noetic majesty of the house pure science erected, and above all there was method. By enabling men to agree on the truth because it could be demonstrated, this method produced a knowledge that was cumulative and could advance. No wonder we converted. The conversion was not forced. It did not occur because scientists were imperialists but because their achievements were so impressive, their marching orders so exhilarating, that thinkers jostled to join their ranks." (*Forgotten Truth*, p. 7)

In the end, though, if you recall the story of Moses' and Aaron's confrontation with Pharaoh, the magicians were not able to replicate all the plagues, and God's power delivered the people of Israel out of bondage. I don't want to go very far with this comparison, though, for I don't want to imply that science is to be equated with biblical "Mizrahim" and scientists with negative images of sorcery's vain attempt at conjuring up locusts, boils, and dead first-borns!

But I will make one further connection: science is very good in and of itself, but it is, in the end, limited, just as the court wonder workers were in the biblical passage. Again, citing Huston Smith: "Strictly speaking, a scientific world view is impossible....The reason is that science does not treat of the world; it treats of a part of it only." (*Ibid*) And most scientists readily admit this.

Scientism, however, often the philosophy of those less schooled in the limitations of science, would have us believe that what cannot be quantified and measured is at best inferior to the quantifiable, and at worst non-real. Some would go fishing in the ocean of reality with a large net, hauling aboard their catch and stating decisively, "Look at the fish I caught! This is one fine net; if my net can't catch it; it ain't fish!" All the while, countless sea life, small enough to pass through the net, escapes.

Much of reality - values, purpose, meaning, quality – escapes measurement by science's instruments. Yet some would question the legitimacy of that which is not verifiable by one particular set of measuring devices.

I recently got into a heated conversation (by e-mail, no less!) with a colleague at Guilford, a scientist, who called me on the carpet for clerking a committee at the college that sought to develop

through campus-wide forums a set of principles by which we might hold each other and the college accountable.

"This is a college, not a church," he wrote to me. "Disband your committee immediately."

I want to assume the best of motives on this professor's part, but I suspect that a smidgen of his protest relates to his suspicion of "squishy" values and academic departments as opposed to scientific method and a pedagogy directed accordingly. Two students this year said it more baldly – if not badly: In an "underground" newsletter, they railed at the college for abandoning a curriculum based on "cold, hard facts." They proceeded to lift up as their ideal the notion of "duty, honor, and country," along with the "Old South."

They were not amused when I pointed out to them that the latter values were highly abstract and given to a wide range of interpretations, none of which could be verified scientifically.

On the other hand, most of my academic teaching this year has been spent with students fascinated with the alternative to a "scientistic" world view which Amish culture provides. These were students in my fall "Plain People" class and my spring "Community and Commitment" course. It is this example which I want to present as a bridge to what Lissa will share in her part of this presentation.

The Amish, as our Pendle Hill colleague Sandra Cronk, lamentably recently deceased, knew and presented so well, have not been "wowed" by science and technology. I will argue a bit later that they are not "non-modern," but they do place higher value on certain intangibles than is allowed by science. An Amish friend of mine, Greg Mollner, a convert to the faith, was a medical student at the U. of VA before joining a North Carolina Amish community and accepting a literal belief in the Bible – including the creation story and a traditional dating of the earth's origins. Although he and his family have eschewed even some of the conveniences Lancaster Amish have allowed, I do want to point out that when their daughter was kicked in the head by a horse, they had no question about taking her by medevac to the Duke hospital, where, with the help of the medical staff there, a "miracle" occurred, and she is nearly fully recovered.

But when it comes down to a tussle between the Bible's truth and a competing claim by science, the Bible's court holds sway for Greg and for the Amish.

What intrigues my students about the Amish is not their naivete (or even "second naiveté," as in the case of Greg), but their ability to hold fast to cherished community values by "putting technology on probation" and "negotiating with modernity." Many of my students have seen the corrosive effects of technology on community and personal life – from small farming communities decimated by new agri-businesses to whole cultures eviscerated by the onslaught of the West's material success. They appreciate what Wendell Berry also appreciates about Amish society: before adapting a "modern" gadget, they ask, "what will this do to my community?"

Electricity is a good example. When federal regulations concerning the cooling of milk on dairy farms changed in the 1960s, the Amish were faced with a dilemma. The new regulations required that milk be cooled to 55 degrees within two hours of milking, a temperature not achieved easily without benefit of electric cooling. For reasons of wishing to be separate from the world, the Amish did not allow electricity, but Amish bishops in some of the districts decided that it would be better to make compromises on the use of electricity than to risk jeopardizing dairy farming as a way of life.

It was agreed that farmers could generate electric power in their barns to run bulk cooking tanks and automatic milkers, but the power could not come from the public grid, and it could not be used for other purposes.

The phone is another example. Although a telephone connection to a public telecommunication service violates the cherished Amish value of "separation from the world," increased dispersion of Amish communities across the country, increased dependence on the economics of cottage industries, and certain families' medical needs has led to a "negotiation."

Bishops over the past few decades have allowed the phone for purposes of business, connecting with friends and family, and for emergency uses. But it must be inconvenient enough not to tempt people to idle chit chat, gossip, or tale-bearing. For one of our Amish family friends, that means the phone was shared by two other families and was on a tree back in the woods!

The folks at *Wired* magazine noticed recently that Amish bishops were having to deal with the issue of cell phones. Phones had been allowed provisionally, and here was this new technology that wasn't visibly connected to the outside world. Would they be allowed? In a January, 1999 article, the magazine noted the various questions bishops were asking about cell phones' possible positive and negative impacts before taking a definitive stand. I shared the article with an Amish minister friend of mine during my PH short course on the Plain People of PA last May; he chuckled upon reading it and said forthrightly, "Cell phones will be banned." And they were.

Cumulative evidence pointed to abuses that would erode core community values. Despite their convenience, they had to go.

In this way, the Amish, in spite of appearances, are very modern. To be modern is to be free to make choices, to weigh options, and to use reasoned arguments to discern decisions. The author of the *Wired* piece, Howard Rheingold, observed the same and challenged his technologically savvy readers to consider lessons the Amish have to teach us – and which my students have also discovered. Rheingold writes,

"I never expected the Amish to provide precise philosophical yardsticks that could guide the use of technological power. What drew me in was their long conversation with their tools. We technology-enmeshed "English" don't have much of this sort of discussion. And yet we'll need many such conversations, because a modern heterogeneous society is going to have different values, different trade-offs, and different discourses. It's time we start talking about the most important influence on our lives today.

I came away from my journey with a question to contribute to these conversations: If we decided that community came first, how would we use our tools differently?" ("Look Who's Talking," *Wired*, January, 1999)

Last fall, when my first-year class at Guilford was presented with readings about a traditional Tibetan society, essays by Wendell Berry, and a visit to an Amish community, many began asking those questions and altered their lives significantly. Some unplugged TVs and limited e-mailing; several began working in the campus permaculture garden; one started making her own clothes, baking pies from campus apple trees, and carefully monitoring her "footprint" on the earth; one became the college "recycling queen." Yet another student formed a women's a cappella singing group (very low tech.

entertainment!) and began hauling food scraps from the cafeteria and keeping them in a bucket in her room for composting. Not only could she "carry a tune in a bucket...."

They haven't rejected society, technology, or science. They are asking a different set of questions, affirming the validity of a different set of values. But rather than listen to this grey-beard blather on about what some young whipper-snappers are saying, how about hearing from "Exhibit A!"