

Paul C. Heidebrecht, *Beyond the Cutting Edge?: Yoder, Technology, and the Practices of the Church*. Eugene, Oreg.: Pickwick Publications, 2014. Pp. 252. Softcover, \$28.00 USD.

Carl Mitcham, an American philosopher and ethicist of technology and engineering, observed some thirty years ago that technology is “recognized as a social and as a philosophical problem – but only to some limited extent as a properly theological one.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this remains as accurate an assessment of much of the academic conversation about technology today as it was when Mitcham wrote it. In *Beyond the Cutting Edge?* Paul Heidebrecht provides an analysis of technology that helpfully addresses this gap in the literature. Indeed, he argues not just that it is possible to think theologically about technology, but that “a theological perspective provides insights into technology that would not otherwise be possible” (1).

The particular theological perspective that he refers to here is built out of a reading of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, who, for Heidebrecht, provides a means for Christians to “consciously engage – rather than simply object or acquiesce to” technology (xvi). After setting out his definition of technology as simultaneously artifact, system, and way of thinking, as well as making his case both for the theological relevance of this subject and for the usefulness of Yoder’s theology and social theory (particularly his analysis of the Pauline ‘principalities and powers’ language) for thinking through the questions it poses, Heidebrecht turns to focus on the way “particular manifestations of technology embody and encourage a particular kind of moral vision” (73). The three examples he chooses are the automobile, genetically modified foods, and the Internet. In each case, Heidebrecht shows us how the “ideals” embodied by these technologies are called into question by practices that bear witness to a number of “marks of the church” that Yoder identifies (114). Car culture, for example, embodies and encourages speed as an ideal, whereas Yoder helps

us see how the Christian community is characterized by practices of patience and disciplined slowness (121).

In the final two chapters of the book, Heidebrecht moves from the constructive to the critical, suggesting that perhaps Yoder's own way of thinking about church history reveals the mind of an engineer. This is certainly a provocative thesis given Yoder's quite explicit rejection of an engineering model of the social process. Like engineers, Yoder suggests, social ethicists typically imagine that their job amounts to a kind of 'problem-solving' through the efficient manipulation and transformation of the best available means (physical and chemical, in the case of the former, institutional and political in the case of the latter). This is in total opposition to the way that Jesus thought: "Jesus did not ask what kind of world we want, or how we can get it, he asked how we can recognize the new world that has already been born in our midst" (157). Heidebrecht does not dispute Yoder's reading of contemporary social ethics, but suggests that Yoder might not have fully appreciated the dynamism and sensitivity of the engineering process. If we look at the way that most engineering is actually done, it looks very much like the patient 'tinkering' that characterizes Yoder's own way of thinking about ecclesiastic reform.

In pushing Yoder in this way, Heidebrecht suggests a different way of thinking about the role of theology in the life of the church, while also challenging some unfortunate stereotypes of the field of engineering to which critics of technology too often succumb.

Indeed, one of the great achievements of this book is its ability to speak clearly and constructively both to readers interested in a new application of Yoder's thought as well as to those trying to make sense of the various moral dimensions of our technoculture. Heidebrecht is an able guide through these difficult conversations.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Carl Mitcham, "Technology as a Theological Problem in the Christian Tradition," In *Theology and Technology*, Ed. Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 3.