

Is technology our future?

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

The word religion comes from Latin “religare”, which means to connect, or to bring together. Religion is often associated with meaning, giving meaning to the present and the (near) future from a transcending framework. In difficult times, the need for perspective and therefore for meaning and connection often increases compared to times of prosperity.

Current global crises - energy, war in Ukraine, global political tensions, climate and sustainability issues - characterize a difficult time. The contrast is stark with the years of recovery and reconstruction that followed World War II, when optimism and prosperity almost led us to believe that trees grew in the sky. Traditional religious ties dwindled, churches were abandoned, while our planetary footprints continued to grow. The current generation is reaping the bitter fruits of this. In adversity, a strong need for "religion" arises again. However, the question is what brings us connection, comfort and hope today: churches, yoga schools, sports clubs or the social media?

Already at the beginning of this century Nokia came up with the slogan “Nokia, connecting people”. Apparently, worldwide Tech giants fill up the gap that was left by the separation of church and homeland at the end of the 20th century. Boundaries blurred, we were colonized worldwide by Bigtech and basic English. Like true missionaries, the M&C departments of BigTech companies began to envision futures in which we can all be connected anytime, anywhere. Apple: "the all-in-one for everyone". Microsoft: "Our mission is to empower every person and organization on the planet to achieve more." Heaven became directly accessible, and very concretely, unlike what religion offered in the Middle Ages with at most the promise of a heavenly state in the hereafter. However, “believers” in modern technology also often refer to the future. Shaping the future, from Samsung “the next big thing”, to Vodafone (“Who can embrace technology, can make dreams come true & Who can embrace innovation, can excel as a pioneer”).

Colonising the world

Technology has colonized our world and implicitly we all believe it will determine our future. If you ask people what the world will look like in 50 years, it's about robots or a humanity that may hardly have to do anything other than consume a basic income and of course enjoy "the next big thing". A heaven for some, a hell for others, a la Pixar film Wall-E from 2008, in which the earth has become uninhabitable due to pollution and the over-demand for materials and resources and the people in a spaceship continuously consume only in a fully automatic and robotic environment generated living environment. However, if you ask people how they would like to live "later", they come up with a very different view of the future, which is about meaningful activities together, friendships, family ties, deepening knowledge, etc. It is not about technology, or endless consumption of (smart) entertainment and being followed everywhere by smart systems.

It's time to face this discrepancy. Technology became our faith, but it is certainly not a joyful faith. With every new "solution", comes the need for new "solutions" to mitigate the previously undetected unwanted side effects. It's like an arms race, a technology race. Because unlike traditional religions, global tech religion creates matter. Even a virtual world (the metaverse) is material. The man-made mass (textile, plastic, asphalt, concrete, glass, etc.) already weighs 1.2 times the mass of all organic material on earth (all trees, animals, etc.). Every new pollution requires heavier treatment, every dike breach requires heavier dikes. It won't end until we stop leaving to “think different” (Apple) to technology. We must make the mind shift ourselves.

The Inner Development Goals provide a framework for this. Through 5 psychological factors - being, thinking, relation to the world, collaboration and adapting - the mindset can be transformed to tackle the sustainability problems. Do we dare to explore the hypothesis that technology shouldn't necessarily play the main role in our human future?