

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 147: SEPTEMBER 20, 2018



CHRISTIAN HENKEL is a visiting scholar at the Boisi Center and is a researcher and executive director at the Institute for Ecumenical and Interreligious Research at Tübingen University in Germany. He spoke with Boisi Center interim assistant to the director Jack Nuelle, before his September 20, 2018 luncheon colloquium entitled, “Utopia on the Small Screen: How Political-Theological Thought Translates into Digital Community Organizing.” The following conversation engages questions around the danger of dystopian ideas disguised as utopian thinking, the ways technology is utopian, and the effects of digitization on ethical and political thinking and praxis. It has been edited for clarity and content.

NUELLE: Can you describe your project for me? Specifically, what does “utopia” mean for you?

HENKEL: Utopia itself, for a political theologian rooted in practices, is hard to define. Utopia, by definition, is not a place, *ουτόπος* in Greek. And so utopia, for most people, probably means this dreamland, this fantasy, this never-to-be-realized idea. For me, however, utopia and utopian thinking is more of a vision, an idea about a future society. Because if you look at early utopian writings—take Thomas More or even Aristophanes—they are describing an ideal state. For me, this has concrete political implications. If we have a vision, this place in the distant future, in a distant fantasyland, we strive to realize it. This is what utopia means for me, a powerful motive behind our actions as political citizens, as voters, as politicians, as theologians, as scientists.

NUELLE: So it is exclusively a positive concept?

HENKEL: I try to revitalize the idea of utopia as something positive, being fully aware that the utopian idea, at least at the beginning of the 20th century, had become a contested concept. As soon as people started trying to put these ideas into practice, they turned into some



thing completely different. It is not just Stalinism, for instance. If you look at the pilgrim fathers of this nation—was that a good place? Was that a utopia? It was a great idea, maybe, but it quickly turned into something else.

Here is something interesting from theology that might help us understand this dichotomy—two ways any utopian vision can go: the idea of “already” and “not yet.” So you see that vision before you, but if you try to realize it in a way that resembles a blueprint that you try to faithfully execute, this quickly turns into something not positive. If we talk about utopia, we should talk about having a utopian vision rather than a concrete blueprint.

There is, however, another question we need to answer: Is there just one person or a small group, the elites, who then build up an ideal state? If we say we are all utopian thinkers—and utopia is a deliberative concept—if we take that as our starting point, then I’d say we could make this into something we can all participate in, which leaves room for more than just the elites.

NUELLE: What is specifically utopian for you about our digital age now?

HENKEL: The advent of mobile devices, potent enough to run software at a fairly high level of complexity and able to communicate with other devices—these factors are important for me. The advent of this technology has enabled us to create. We no longer have to write a book about the best possible state and then hope some politician will adopt it and put it into practice after centuries. We can now just test it out, have a small community of internet users communicate in a way that would resemble communication in an ideal state. We no longer have to write pamphlets or give talks about healthy nutrition. We just can put an app on the market. If we find enough followers who are guided by their electronic devices, guided by these virtual realities, we have already put them into practice.

So we can circumvent this idea of having a giant superstructure such as the state as where utopian living is practiced. We can circumvent that and reach ordinary citizens in their everyday lives. For me that is the difference, really, between utopian thinking in the past and utopian thinking now.

Bruno Latour put this very well when he said that “the expansion of digitality has enormously increased the material dimension of networks: The more digital, the less virtual and the more material a given activity becomes.” This is no longer lofty thought out there, it is something I can touch. I can touch this phone, I can interact with it. I can interact with these ideas: they are in my pocket. That is why I find this so fascinating.

Interestingly enough, when most people would talk about utopian thinking in the late 19th and early 20th century, they forgot most of the positive implications: Let us either say that utopian thinking is dangerous, leads to dystopian fanatics trying to overthrow the state, or let us say utopian thought is completely irrelevant because we’re not interested. We live our daily lives. We have jobs, we have kids to feed, houses to maintain. We do not have time to engage in this. This is just for a few people, either with money and resources at their hands who can live out idealized lives.

NUELLE: You bring up dystopia, which is my next question. It seems to me that our digital age has created an excellent exchange system of ideas and a seamless way for folks to improve their lives. But in my mind, the improvements to their lives are relatively superficial. Or at least the most popular ones—connecting with friends, aesthetic lifestyle tips—that kind of thing. Is that just the beginning of the utopia movement as the technology increases exponentially? Will those changes to our lives become more significant?

HENKEL: I think that is an absolutely valid point. The fact that these ideas about universal communication, about living a better life, have become a com-

mercialized part of a market economy, could lead us toward saying they have been dumbed down into commodity. However, I would say the way we interact with these devices has already gradually, subtly but profoundly, changed the way we think. They have changed the way we understand friendship, or even more profoundly, changed the way we understand romance. The dating app Tinder, for instance, changes how people love, and what could be more profound than that?

“We could find designs which allow for a profound human interaction if we would move away from this idea that you just have a few influencers and you crave likes and shares.”

The idea that people adjust their lives to fit a digital lifestyle is something that changes the fabric of our society. Go to a restaurant and look what happens as a chef serves the first course. People will take a picture. The way they think about eating is completely transformed because their first thought is, “What would my followers on Instagram say about the presentation?” Not the nutritional value, not the taste, not the person I’m having dinner with, but just the appearance of what is before me. So I think that gradually has influenced the way we live.

But on a deeper level, you rightly mentioned these other concerns. Moore’s Law showed us that the complexity of integrated circuits, and with it computing power increases at a very high rate. I would say we are just witnessing the beginning of what some call another Industrial Revolution. There are two sides

to it. One side, I think, is the dystopian side. It replaces workers, it might even be—with machine learning and intelligent algorithms—the replacement of human beings in all their capacities; not just manual labor being replaced, but also creativity. My job could be replaced were robots trained to do theology!

I have for instance three thinkers I engage with in my project: Saul Alinsky, Ruth Cohn and Cornel West. I would have thought a machine learning algorithm could actually go through their books and become these three characters, and they could have a conversation and my book would be done.

Apart from the dystopian vision, this could mean we free resources for creativity, for human flourishing. We are not extinguished but assisted, enhanced by digital technology. I would not just worry about what will happen with the power of machines and their increasing capabilities. I would see this as a chance for living out these dreams for which we did not, or don not yet have the capacity for because we are too caught up in finding a parking space, worrying about the plumbing of our houses, and trying to figure out the most basic menial tasks.

This is why I think you are absolutely right in saying this is a development where we have to proceed with caution. But this could potentially lead to even more creative utopian thinking. This could make utopian experiments even easier.

NUELLE: I know part of your project deals with the effects of digitization on community organizing. From an ethical perspective, there is also this idea that technology depersonalizes—it clouds the other from us. It turns our gaze inward, which is traditionally not a theological virtue. What are your thoughts there?

HENKEL: My first foray into digitalization was liquid democracy, which is partially the idea that having online networks aids deliberative democracy. There is this German party, interestingly called the Pirate Party. They used an online sys-

tem for party members to discuss issues and vote on party positions. Even the members of parliament from that party would post concrete questions that came up in parliament to have members talk and maybe reach decisions about their position. This was incorporated into daily lifestyles as people would return home from their jobs and log on to the system; it was more than just a forum.

What they did was develop a software that would allow for deliberative decision-making to assist in making sure that all participants are equally respected, that there was time between the discussion and the vote, for instance—they called it the “cool-down” phase. You have a heated discussion, then you make up your mind. What does it require? Time, distancing yourself from the issue—that system allowed for that.

There’s a lot of potential for something similar in community organizing, using these tools to facilitate an ongoing debate about pressing political issues that can make sure, by design, that this does not become a network dominated by one person. This does not turn into a nice event where some elite members simply give their decisions a more democratic façade. This could profoundly help people to interact with political issues in a more democratic way.

You also mentioned the ethical perspective. I think that it is a design question. We could find designs which allow for a profound human interaction if we would move away from this idea that you just have a few influencers and you crave likes and shares—these logics which are not necessarily inherent in digital networks but which are built into them by programmers, by us as consumers. If we could move away from that, I think this would allow for more deep personal connections and interactions.

However, I think you are also right to point out that this is not a universal solution. It is not all about digital tools and digital networks and digital utopian thinking. It is not something that

replaces everything else. I still think that the community is built on trust. Now you can have trust networks online, but I still think that that personal interaction is valid and important.

My idea would be that we have this hybrid structure—as I said, we already take these devices with us and they become part of our everyday lives, part of our bodies. They do not take over in the sense that they replace our bodies. Before you and I met, we had an exchange via digital means, but that does not mean that we cannot have face-to-face conversations. I think these devices and the apps and services could actually foster face to face interaction. Think about the Occupy Wall Street movement. People actually got together on the streets. So here you have a digital tool that helps people come together in a very physical manner.

NUELLE: That is compelling. You made the point earlier about how a lot of the dehumanizing aspects of tech are actually built in, because that makes them easier to sell and makes them addictive. So, I wonder: What could you see the incentive being for companies to start creating

tech that is a little bit more ethical, that moves toward the good which technology has the possibility to be? Is there an incentive? Is it going to have to be driven by people? It is never going to come from the corporations?

HENKEL: I would answer that there is a certain logic inherent in the market economy as it is now. I can see that, within this economy, only so much is possible. But what I observed is people coming together and changing tech. The Fablab movement started off with people saying, “Well, why should we just leave the means of digital production to a few big companies? Why don’t we take matters into our own hands?” It has become a much more widespread movement than just a few experts or nerds or hackers coming together, and this has transformed areas around these Fablabs where all kinds of community activities are developing.

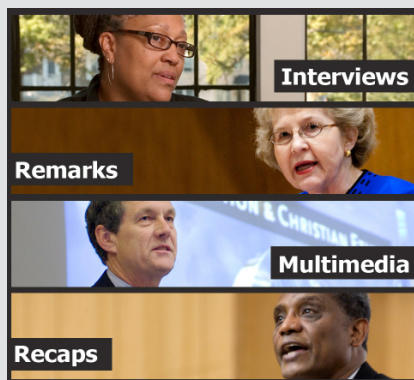
Even people who think they have no programming knowledge—they’re empowered by these movements, by these Fablabs, to actually think about, “What do I want? What is important for me? Can I take



matters into my own hands?” The whole idea of agency has become tremendously important in this respect. People want to take back control. I think people will demand a different use of technology, and some of them will start, or have already started, changing the face of technology. I am not saying everyone will end up having a Linux phone with home-grown apps—that would be my idea, that would be the utopia. So that is my utopian vision, basically. But you could see people slowly and gradually doing things differently with digital devices, even within the existing Apple or Google ecosystem. Subversively, people are using these to do unintended things.

Creativity and spontaneity cannot be curtailed by an app store policy or by a few big players. I think this will become, in the future, something that profoundly changes the fabric of society if people start taking these matters into their own hands. It does not matter if you are a radical community organizer, it does not matter if you think we should go out and do something or if you think, “Well, leave me alone, I’ll sit at home.” You cannot escape the questions that technology poses. I think if we design apps and services that help people engage with these questions, they will.

[END]



Visit bc.edu/boisi-resources for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs, and transcripts from our events.

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860

fax 617-552-1863

boisi.center@bc.edu



boisicenter



@boisi_center



boisi_center



boisicenter