Nature, Technology and the Sacred: *Dialogue with Bronislaw Szerszynski*

MUTATIONS OF NATURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE WESTERN SACRED

by Anne Kull

Abstract. Bronislaw Szerszynski's book *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (2005) challenges us to think of nature, technology, and the sacred in a genuinely novel way. The sacred is the context and the protagonist, not a passive, unchanging, vague phenomenon. Both nature and technology will be better interpreted in the context of the transformations of the sacred.

Keywords: change; creativity; nature; sacred; techno-demonology; technology.

Bronislaw Szerszynski has written a wonderfully rich study of the ideas of nature, technology, and the sacred. The book has a great protagonist: the sacred, in many of its historically diverse ways and disguises. One could almost read it as a biography of the sacred, moving and motivating, overwhelming and overcome by ever new manifestations of the sacred.

What is that sacred? The author does not want so much to define the sacred as to understand:

> Rather than particular orderings of the sacred being a response to a particular experience or understanding of God, I would rather see any particular understanding of God (including the idea that there is no God) as a feature of a particular ordering of the sacred, as only intelligible when that order is grasped as a gestalt. Any given ordering of the sacred, then, is more than just a particular account of which things, people, places or other beings might have ultimate value;

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more even than a particular understanding of the divine, whether transcendent or immanent; more even than a cosmology, if by cosmology we understand an account of all that is in the world. (Szerszynski 2005, ix–x)

The sacred is the dynamic context in which we have our being and becoming. Doubtlessly Szerszynski is correct that we experience nature and technology in the way that is shaped by the previous stages of our cultural history. The author disclaims theological or metaphysical moves and describes his methodology as social scientific (and also historical, anthropological) but, contrary to many social scientists, maintains firmly that "the sacred" (not society or economy or something else) in its different historical orderings plays the primary interpretive and explanatory role. His illustrations of the mutations of the sacred, drawn from various areas, from consumption and lifestyle to alternative medical practices and rhetoric practices of the environmentalists, strengthen his argument: "the disenchantment of nature" is only a part of the story, and not a very good one to begin with. Sacral ordering of nature is the ongoing process, and it takes place both on a general and a specific level. Religious meanings do not disappear; they just alter, and new forms of treating nature as sacred are generated.

Szerszynski formulates the following thesis: "contemporary ideas and practices concerning nature and technology remain closely bound up with religious ways of thinking and acting . . . these ideas and practices are radically conditioned by the very specific religious history undergone by Western society, by what I want to call the 'long arc' of institutional monotheism" (2005, 7). The secular society as well as contemporary sciences came into being not by making a decisive break with religious thought but through the transformations of the sacred. And, according to Szerszynski, the kind of ordering of the sacred needed for the present time is still at best struggling to establish itself in contemporary society. This sacred has to emerge in the interactions that take place between actors in the reflexive society. It cannot be provided for by institutional forms, and it has to combine pluralistic democratic impulses with the idea of harmonious agreement promised by the tradition of monotheistic religions.

As cognitive sciences and developmental psychologists have demonstrated, already as infants we are cognitively proactive rather than reactive, more attentive to the immediate world than had been previously suspected. We humans act not directly on "the world" but on beliefs we hold about that world. The most natural and the earliest way in which we organize our experience and our knowledge is telling stories—about ourselves and about others. Our immediate experience of what happened a day before is framed in the storied way. We represent our lives as stories, and yet some of our stories are better, more complete, more appropriate than others. Our reality instructors are parents and friends, schools and sciences, and our religious and scientific narratives.

A lot of the material going into these constructions is scattered through professional journals and disciplinary conferences. With the help of *Nature, Technology and the Sacred*—a more summary and thus more accessible and synthesizing work—we do get a clearer picture of what is going on. What kinds of symbol systems, what kind of accounts of the past and the present, what technologies and sciences go into this great narrative, our possible self- or even world-construction, is certainly not an easy task to decide. Managing or navigating the different ideas of the sacred cause is the heart of the matter. Trying to relate everything more carefully, in a productive manner, obviously means that there are a good many more ways of getting it wrong than there are of getting it right. Szerszynski's account demands attentive listening.

The course of our understanding of the sacred does not consist in a determined march toward an omega point where everything finally falls together. It consists in the repeated deployment of distinct inquiries in such a way that they force deep-going reconsiderations upon one another. Just a hint of the complexity involved, and Szerszynski's grasp of it:

> [This] complex, branching path taken by the Western sacred—from the social nature that is still inhabited by surviving primal and archaic cultures, through the allegorical nature of symbols and magical interconnections characteristic of the Middle Ages, through the nominalist nature of God's direct activity posited by voluntarist theologians and taken up and later made atheistic by natural science—is not one in which the sacred is withdrawn like a protective mantle from the world, leaving a pre-existing nature bare and exposed to exploitation. It is rather one in which nature and the sacred emerge as separate principles for the first time, and then are fused back together in a quite new ordering of the sacred. Modernity is thus constituted by a "religion of nature" that changes both religion and nature. (2005, 49)

Numerous theories of secularization have argued that societies develop inevitably toward secularization and thus religion will lose hold on societies, becoming replaced by science. However, empirical studies show that the rumors of the sacred's death have been premature, and, indeed, one can see with startling clarity the sacred in various lively forms, both in public and personal relations with nature. Szerszynski explains:

> The illusion that the sacred has disappeared is arguably a feature of all historical transitions from one form of the sacred to the next in a given society. Each transition can seem like an eclipse of the sacred in the terms in which it was organized in the closing epoch; from a larger historical perspective, however, it can be seen as the emergence of a new sacral ordering. (2005, 26)

The contemporary Western world (less so in America than in Europe) does understand itself not simply as secular but as nonreligious—without reference to religious truths. The hypothesis that challenges this presumably established fact must therefore persuade both with logic and careful expression as well as with examples.

Szerszynski demonstrates brilliantly that this understanding of the secular is itself a product of transformations in the sacred—of the long arc of monotheistic religion. The contemporary sacred does have an important new feature: its internal plurality. In contemporary society the discourses and practices of the sacred have been set free from their long incarceration in institutionalized monotheism and have become generally available as a cultural resource. Yet history, the path-dependency of the postmodern sacred, matters, and no simple return to the primal and archaic sacred (however much contemporary neopagans might wish it were so) is possible. The same monotheistic path-dependency conditions also the present ideas of nature and technology: our nature is not a social nature, an interacting community of plants, rocks, animals, and humans, as can be said of the archaic nature. Our idea of nature has changed along with our ideas of the sacred. "Nature as understood by science thus has its own hidden theology" (p. 47). But one obviously cannot read this theology off the elements of nature—and the sacred, it keeps changing. The evolution has not stopped; nature is not finished, and religious communities should keep in mind that the sacred does not remain the same, either.

Of course, it is easier to manage any future (future sacred, future nature, future school system) by legislation, regulation, and planning. Many feel that the future is too important and too dangerous to be left to spontaneous evolution, and thus well-meaning planners turn reactionary and allow no time for decentralized trial and error or tolerance for diversity. Totalitarian solutions and centralized plans do not have space for learning, for inherently open-ended processes. Totalitarian methods were tried in the former Soviet Union, with disastrous effects on both nature and technological development. I remember still the time when the order came from Moscow that everywhere all over the former Soviet Union corn should be grown, regardless of the climate zone—and disobedience to this order could very well spell loss of employment or even death for the people involved.

Szerszynski offers a critique of the understanding that technology is a key player in the drama of "nature's disenchantment." According to him the technological transformation of nature belongs to the story of the ongoing sacralization of nature. Szerszynski writes that technology becomes a "calling," a vocation with its own theological underpinnings.

Neither the sacred, nature, or technology ever remains the same, because we live in a world of constant creation and discovery. Do we dream of predictability, or do we see the future as inviting, albeit complex and messy? Some persons prefer stability and control, so they would rather curb the unruly and too-creative forces. This solution can be called totalitarian or perhaps technocratic: the world should be run according to a plan, everything should be under control. Others rejoice in diversity, in unbounded processes of exploration, in countless recombinations. It is not the familiar division of left and right, or technophile and technophobe.

The future-wary prefer rules and prescriptions and orders, and they will devalue and demoralize creative minds. To resist change they will use any available religious traditions and scientific narratives about nature. And Christians have all too often permitted this theft of trust to take place. Technosciences evoke possibilities and dangers for our cultures and ourselves. "Dreaming of possible constructions of the impossible leads to real transformations, new types of life, changes in the very way we think of space, time, erotics, art, artificiality, perfection, and life, ourselves. Technoscience is constantly deconstructing the idea of the impossible. The only set impossibility is making nostalgia real" (Gray 2002, 194). Learning the appropriate etiquette, and eventually becoming technonatives in our world, requires lifelong learning by trying new things and creating new combinations.

In a recent paper (2006) Szerszynski argues that an important strand of ecotheology should be an articulated techno-demonology. He proposes that at least some technologies should be considered as agencies, as forces that operate on the natural and human world that are neither natural nor under human control. He does not want to say that technologies are evil per se but that technologies become demonic when they stand beyond human steering. First he names (following the model of Walter Wink: naming, unmasking, and engaging the powers) two important groups of techno-demons. The first occurs when technology seems to impose certainty in our dealings with nature (*stoicheion*); the second manifests itself when technology fails to give this certainty (*dynamis)*—technological extension of human powers extends itself beyond the original intentions of the apparent designer of a technology. Here he gives an example of the Yami people who blame every misfortune on the nuclear waste deposited on their island. Indeed, as Mary Shelley already noticed, when we place a technological product out of sight, out of sphere of our care and responsibility, we may get disastrous and unpredictable results. Our technologies need long-term commitments, not evading or forgetting, and one can call this commitment (redeeming) love indeed. Another aspect of techno-demonology is that it may invite us too quickly to project all evil on technology, perhaps even to demonize the scientists, engineers, medical doctors working with complex technologies, and so forth.

Szerszynski mentions that the techno-demons of risk can also serve as angelic *messengers;* to the very extent that they fail to communicate our intentions to the world, they can remind us of the limits of technical reason (2006, 72). Technologies belong to God and humans.

> It is technologies' not belonging to themselves, their lacking of any inherent telos, that fits them for being wielded for quotidian human purposes; but it is their belonging to God that fits them for the redemptive role that they can play in history. And perhaps it is the very denial that technologies ultimately belong to God, their very construal in purely secular terms, that allow them to start to

> belong to themselves, to become autonomous, in the pathological ways [explored in this article]. The modern aspiration to make technologies radically ours, to utilize them solely with reference to human, secular purposes, can be seen as an attempt by humanity to have its own angels, its own perfect servants, its own infinite extension of its powers. But the irony is that the denial that technologies belong to God seems ultimately to give them not to us, but to themselves—to render them demonic, and to place humanity under their thrall. (p. 72)

Technologies require skill, ingenuity, responsibility, and an understanding of their relations to other forms of life. Technological creation does contain creative stuff of human life, but it can return to us as a nightmare, as something not fully in our control.

Techno-demons can be redeemed. Machines and artifacts are not just things; all things have stories alive in them, as it were. Technological things are gatherers. Around a single contraceptive pill bishops, pharmacists, biochemical companies, social workers, legislators, media people, mothers, and others gather into a most motley crowd. In, under, and with a technical object profound social relationships get mediated, now as well as in the past. When we condemn technology into isolation and autonomy, we deny our coevolution with our technologies, and we deny to technology its birthright to be engaged—with care and wisdom. Paul Tillich emphasized almost half a century ago that nature does not provide the substructure or stage for human history; rather God's history with humankind is a segment of God's history with nature. When nature is removed from theology, God gradually disappears to us because we ourselves are nature (Tillich 1967, 126). Szerszynski's conclusion, "The goal of achieving a right relation to nature and to technology is thus only possible if we engage at the level of the sacral meanings—both benign and malign—that inform our current relationships with them" (2005, 172), calls us to reconsider our past trajectory, fully aware that a new reordering of the sacred is already emerging. The key words are "a right relation." And a haunting question: How to escape the seduction of the Hegelian master-slave narrative in our relations to nature, technology, and the sacred?

In Western myth Eden is the unchanging paradise we have lost. However, the biblical story of Genesis can be read as the original Frankenstein myth (not to be confused with Mary Shelley's book *Frankenstein*, which tells a very different story): No sooner has God created animals, man and woman, than the creator loses control of creation. Human being occupies a particular place already in the garden, between (static) order and wild nature. Gardens themselves are (human) creations that organize and rearrange nature. Yet natural processes continue in the garden. Not everything is under the gardener's control. Perhaps no creation is completely under its creator's control. The artificial/technological/creational is mixed with the natural. The world changes as soon as it is formed, and so does humanity. They change each other.

The ideal of the untouched, ideal nature still shimmers in many imaginations. However, stability and permanence are not characteristics that best distinguish even a biblical Eden. The Genesis stories do not say that harmony and order in the garden are permanent or that nature is changeless and that human presence does not make a difference. Quite the opposite. The open-ended future of discovery, hard work, and resilience seem more appropriate words to describe the Genesis lesson.

How we think about nature—and technology—informs how we think about the growth and evolution of human societies. If what is given by nature is good by definition, to change it is evil. If nature supplies patterns, boundaries, and essences for us to respect, recombinations are immoral or dangerous. If changelessness is the highest form of biological nature, perhaps it is also the highest form of the sacred. However, if nature is a dynamic process, there is no single form of "the natural"—and there is no single form of "the sacred." An evolving, open-ended nature may impose practical constraints, but it cannot dictate eternal standards. If human beings, human work and purposes and imagination, are part of nature in some significant way, technologies are part of that nature, too. The distinction between the artificial and the natural must lie not in their source—human or not—but in their characteristics, in the way they relate to the world around them. Technological artifacts are what they are because of human (or at least some humans') dreams and imagination. Technologies, however, cannot offer complete control and security. The artificial and natural are bound together in the coevolving technonature. The artificial (maybe) serves its creators' purposes. But if the creator is not able to take care and love the artificial, the "serving" will come to an end sooner or later. Maybe, though, God loves us not because of what we are or do but because of our dreams and imaginations?

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