

Will Technology Topple Religion?

DON MILLER: I'm not sure that there is a contradiction between technology and religion.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: Once you have created technology you cannot control it, it's the car, it's the airplane that brought me here. I cannot travel on a camel to go to the haj as my grandfathers used to do.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: I think it's a primarily an American phenomenon because of the free market, churches are like corporations competing for customers, and they have to offer better products and services.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: Don't say that technology is just, you can turn it off, you can't turn it off.

SHOW OPEN

MICHAEL SCHERMER: It has nothing to do with God or religion, it's just a sense of humility in the face of the size of the cosmos.

ROBERT KUHN: In an age of increasing knowledge in science and technology, it seems almost paradoxical that traditional religious views are also on the ascendancy, is this true?

DON MILLER: Well actually there are even more people going to church, temple or synagogue now than in the early years of this republic. We tend to romanticize the past and think, oh, back then people were so much more religious. But as a matter of fact we are probably, as measured by church attendance, three times more religious now, with about 40 percent of the population in a typical week attending a church, temple or synagogue than if we go back 200 years.

ROBERT KUHN: I find that fascinating, that in an age of science we have this increase in traditional or fundamentalist views.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Let's not let this point go, this is very interesting, conservative pundits argue that America is going to hell in a hand basket and we are more, less moral than we've ever been, and so on, and we have to get America back to the Christian nation it used to be. They have it bass-ackwards, we've never been so religious, and if that's the case, is there some correlation between us being so religious and America going to hell in a hand basket?

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MUZAFFAR IQBAL: I think we need to distinguish between science and technology. Science itself perhaps does not have that kind of impact on everyday life and church attendance or mosque attendance. It's technology, which is the application of science that defines the way human beings live anywhere, and because modern technology is threatening the traditional way of life, therefore, as a reaction, people feel the need to express their religiosity by going to churches or mosques. I think each new device that comes into existence intrudes into our lives in a way that we are not used to, take cell phones, for example. What has the cell phones done to us? The least we can say, without going into details, is that they have become an additional element of intrusion. I am thinking of this annual pilgrimage to Mecca that has been happening since 1400 years or more, this pilgrimage is when you leave behind the world for three days at least, and you are totally devoted to a set of rituals, you are totally there physically, mentally, intellectually, spiritually, and you are not supposed to be involved and tangled with the life of the world, and suddenly this other machine comes and starts ring.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Well you turn it off.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: The point is that I don't have this machine, you have this machine, suddenly this machine rings, it breaks into my privacy, breaks into my connection with God, breaks into my rituals, but this thing is there, and I did not invent it, and it was not there 50 years ago.

DON MILLER: Well and I think the point you're making, if I can just add to it, is that the cell phone, while it may make us more efficient, it doesn't necessarily make our lives more meaningful, and there is a deep inner need that all of us have to pursue that which is meaningful, and goes beyond just, in a sense the sort of superficiality of technology.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: And also I was using the cell phone as a metaphor, there are hundreds of other things of similar nature that technology has produced over the last hundred years. They have totally restructured the social and personal life, social and personal space of individuals, whereas the relationship with God, the need for religion, as you very well said, there is something inside, in the very nature of our beings that yearns to have something higher, that yearns to have something bigger than ourselves.

ROBERT KUHN: Is that reaction against the technology?

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: I think it's an accumulation, there is an accumulation perhaps at a subconscious level, these little, these little things are so many technological devices, there are so many right from the moment you wake up with an alarm clock, the radio, the news, with everything that is coming into our lives, there are so many numerous things that we react, perhaps not even consciously to all this accumulation of modern technology.

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MICHAEL SCHERMER: Wait, wait, Don, you're a social scientist. This is a hypothesis, a testable hypothesis, does the increase in technology cause an increase in religiosity? This is a just-so story, no one has ever tested this, how would you test this?

DON MILLER: Well what I am intrigued, in terms of what you are saying, is that there are a lot of individuals who are using technology in their worship. So, for example some of the Pentecostal groups I've been studying, you can't find a better sound system than in a Pentecostal church, in fact one of the liabilities of being a researcher in these studies is sitting too close to those booming speakers. So they are not fleeing from technology, they're actually appropriating technology and utilizing it for their own purposes. In fact, another thing I'm very fascinated with what's happening with the so-called millennial generation of kids. Their parents, the sort of boomer generation, at least in terms of Christianity, rejected religion and started sort of worshipping, worshipping in mega churches that were very bland, warehouse oriented and so forth, their sons and daughters are now using technology to sort of bring the visual dimension back into their experience, and so I'm not sure that there is a contradiction between technology and religion.

ROBERT KUHN: So how do you explain, if it's not technology, if it's not the change of science, how do you explain the increase in religious belief, are we all nuts?

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Churches are like corporations competing for customers, and they have to offer better products and services.

ROBERT KUHN: How do you explain the Islamic world?

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: I'm glad you brought that point because your theory only holds for the United States of America.

ROBERT KUHN: So how do you explain it?

MICHAEL SCHERMER: I think it's just a social momentum, historical traditions, whether it's animism, polytheism, monotheism, whatever, humans are pattern seeking storytelling animals constructing narratives about their world, trying to make sense of it, whether they're true or not is irrelevant

ROBERT KUHN: Michael, how do you see the technological trends affecting people's belief systems over time?

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Oh, I think it's great, I think we can plant, eventually be able to plant one of these right in your ear and you can have your keypad right on your palm and make your cell phone calls, I think this is just the start, I think more and better technology is the future.

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ROBERT KUHN: What will that do to our belief systems?

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Oh, again, I think it'll just enhance them, I don't think it will hurt them. I would like to see more scientism with science as a worldview, as a complete worldview, you don't need religion, I think it could be replaced largely.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: One more thing that you brought out which intrigued me was this metaphor of the cell phone implanted here, what I thought about that was, that could be just one of those things, there could be many more gadgets implanted within the human body, while you are driving you are doing ten different things. As a natural result of 8 or 10 hours of work-a-day routine with all these gadgets, would be a total disintegration of the inner concentration of being, your personality is disintegrating into smaller and smaller pieces.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: We've gone down that road a long time ago, you drove your car here, you flew from Canada here, you're already using all this technology, you can't just say draw the line and say, okay, we're going to stop now.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: No, I am not saying that, I am saying the impact, the impact of all these new inventions and technological devices will be a further disintegration of the inner center of being, which requires a reconcentration, so to speak, at the end of the day or during the day that's exactly what the rituals do.

ROBERT KUHN: That's a serious thing, that the continuous technological intrusions are going to have a significantly more degrading effect.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: Take a very complete example, if I am talking to you with my full concentration and ten volts of electricity are coming out of me and going towards you and you are holding your attention towards me, suddenly a phone call comes, or I'm doing ten different things at the same time I have the same ten volts of electricity but now they are divided into one thousand smaller parts, my being is shattered, you are not listening to me any more.

LAUGHTER

MICHAEL SCHERMER: [CELL PHONE] I turned this off, see, it's off. You can control technology, you can, you can pick and choose. We already do this.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: No, you cannot, you see once you have created technology you cannot control it, it's the car, it's the airplane that brought me here, I cannot control that anymore, I cannot travel on a camel to go to the haj, as my grandfathers used to do that.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: It would take a while.

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MUZAFFAR IQBAL: No, you cannot choose anymore because I would love to go there, they took six months to go to Mecca, go six months every step they took brought them closer to God, they were thinking about their pilgrimage. You cannot go back, you cannot [OVERLAPPING]

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Of course, I mean 50,000 years ago, we were living in caves, so what, we can't get that experience anymore.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: The news of somebody dying Jerusalem would not have traveled to the United States of America without the technology we have now.

ROBERT KUHN: That's very significant.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: The impact of that news would not have reached thousands and thousands of families and houses the way it reaches now. The fact of that impact on the lives of people would not be there, so don't say that technology is, just you can turn it off, you can't turn it off.

DON MILLER: One of my fears about technology is that it may lead us to think that we can be self-sufficient, that we can control our universe, and that we need not be dependent or humble. One of the most fundamental things about people who are religious is they do not see themselves as their own master, there's a sense in which they are dependent upon something other than themselves. And while there are many abuses to religion, there is a sense in which one of the qualities of religion, which I really appreciate is this quality of humility, that I'm not my own, that I belong to a higher power, whatever that higher power may be, and I do fear that technology may tempt us to think that we can be self-sufficient.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: But we have things like the Titanic disaster or the space shuttle disaster and then we're slapped back down and that's good, that's how we learn and get better. Why not have a sense of humbleness in just the face of the cosmos itself, that in and of itself it is so huge, so grand, so vacuous that we feel small, we don't feel empowered.

DON MILLER: I would affirm that.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: But I think the point Don is making also is very important, technology breeds this false sense of empowerment, as if we can do everything, although I think, Don, there is another point within that, is death itself. No amount of technology is going to eliminate death from human existence, and death itself is such a humbling experience, we all experience that in terms of we see people dying, and ultimately I think that is the frontier where technology would feel totally humble, no amount of technology is going to keep the human body working forever and ever.

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MICHAEL SCHERMER: It might, give it another 10,000 years of current pace of Moore's Law going out there, the computer chips and so on, so we live 200 years, 500 years, 1000 years, 10,000 years, download those silicon, download those neurons into silicon chips, silicon lasts a lot longer than protein meat, you know, it's just meat in your brain, it's just meat. So change it, replace it, this is possible.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: No, Michael as you know yourself is a human person. This person cannot live forever, is not designed to live forever, that's when I'm talking about.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Well, wait a minute, you people believe in God, you think that we are going to live forever, just in some other state, you're contradicting yourself.

ROBERT KUHN: Muzzffar, Let's go back to the...

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Oh, wait, don't let him off the hook here, this is, we got him.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: The point I was making was in reference to what Don said, I was adding onto that, technology does breed a sense of empowerment.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: It's a good thing, you say it like it's a bad thing.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: I'm not saying that is a bad thing, but I'm saying that ultimately that sense of empowerment fails at the critical point of death, death of a human person, which no amount of technology can stop. That's the point I was trying to make.

ROBERT KUHN: So let's go to the next step what does fundamentalism mean in America and international society?

DON MILLER: Well fundamentalism has some so many different definitions. But the sort of classical sociological view is that it is some kind of reaction against modernity. Modernity is perceived as something that is not moral, or amoral, fundamentalism is an attempt to get back to a time when there are absolutes.

ROBERT KUHN: Religious absolutes.

DON MILLER: Religious absolutes, moral absolutes, where there is less ambiguity, and typically there's something rather mythological almost about fundamentalism because you're trying to recapture a time when that was more pure than the present.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Back to the fundamentals of that belief.

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DON MILLER: Right, now whether, I use the word “mythological” intentionally because I think that a lot of these visions in the past, in fact are extremely inaccurate. Now, on the other side of that, I don't want to think of fundamentalism as necessarily negative, because I've studied a lot of fundamentalist groups and particularly a lot of Pentecostal and evangelical groups. They are often times very warm, nurturing environments, wholesome environments in which to raise children, and I personally don't see them, as a lot of critics do, that people's minds have been removed. And I say that because I actually grew up in a fundamentalist home, and right now I'm a very liberal Episcopalian, and I look back at those early years with a great deal of fondness, and think that probably my children sort of missed something by growing up in this very pluralistic open-minded household.

ROBERT KUHN: Is there a tradition of fundamentalism in Islam?

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: The whole concept of fundamentalism is totally foreign to Islam, because the definition you just gave has so many elements that simply do not exist in the case of Islam, because Islam, Islam is the middle way, it calls itself the middle way. And even in terms of worship, in terms of spending, in terms of rituals, there are specific instructions to be moderate, and even in the sense of fasting, which is a virtue, do not be extreme in your fasting, because you will get tired by being extreme in your fasting, in your worship, in your prayers, in your spending, and the Prophet of Islam says that, do something little, but do it over a long period of time if you can, rather than do something big but for a short period of time.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: There are extremists.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: There are people, call themselves Moslems, and they are extremists, right? We have to distinguish between Islam and the Muslims who say we are practicing Islam in this extreme way, and extremism in Islam is a foreign element. Quarige, we don't call them fundamentalists, we call them quarige, quarige is a term which came into the Islamic court centuries ago. Quarige means anybody who has left the root of quarige, an Arabic word, which means somebody who has gone out. So as soon as you become extreme, you have automatically gone out from the middle part.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Yeah, but the question on the table is not the middle path people, it's the people that fly planes into buildings, where do they come from? And, is religion particularly good at driving people to do things like that?

ROBERT KUHN: Any religion.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Any religion. And even non-religion, Marxist ideologies can get people to commit horrendous acts which they see as courageous acts of violence.

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MUZAFFAR IQBAL: You have already decided that a particular act is a direct result of religious teachings, we haven't established that yet.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Not the teachings, it's the commitment to a philosophy, an ideology or religious belief, and I just think religion is particularly good at this because it's good at getting people to believe fanatically, extremely. Most of the acts of these kinds of violent acts are committed in the name of God, not all of them, but most of them.

DON MILLER: That's such a gross generalization, I have to break in here because I think we get into very simplistic thinking if we say, oh, well religion is particularly good at violence. Well, there are so many non-religious ideologies which have been particularly good at purges and violence.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: Nationalism is one of them, look at the Second World War, was it motivated by religious extremism or was it nationalistic?

MICHAEL SCHERMER: More nationalistic, sure.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: So, is nationalism as bad, then, is any belief as bad then, is skepticism as bad?

MICHAEL SCHERMER: It's the point you brought up initially, the problem is extremism, not, fundamentalism in some extreme generalization, that's the problem.

ROBERT KUHN: What is it about modern society with its technology, with its, Muzaffar used the word "intrusions" or disruptions, what, what does it do to the psychology of the individual, the sociology of the group that causes many people to have need for these types of religious experiences?

DON MILLER: Harvey Cox at Harvard University, in the divinity school, says it is in response to an ecstasy deficit in Western, rational enlightenment culture. So if you want to ask, where is this coming from, I actually think there is a kind of switch in world views that is starting to occur, which is bringing the body back into the whole experience of religion, and that there is a kind of crack in Western rationalism,

ROBERT KUHN: This is an important point.

DON MILLER: So that's why I actually think Pentecostals, while a lot of people say, oh, that's some kind of primitivism, it's very fascinating to me that at a generational level, younger people tend to be more open to the supernatural than their parents and grandparents.

ROBERT KUHN: And they are more educated, how do you explain that?

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DON MILLER: Because there's a tiredness with pure, rational, enlightenment western thought.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: I would agree with you, it's the kind of education that is being spread all over the world, because even in the Muslim world, China as well, the kind of education which is being given is basically western, modern, secular education, same as here. Although there is a parallel system within the Islamic world where you have this religious education, the Madrassa system, for example, these two systems have created two parallel generations in the Muslim world, people who go to the Madrassa system and not have any knowledge of the modern western secular science, which also comes with its own world view, is one generation, and people who do not go with the Madrassa system, who have no routines in the Islamic tradition, is another generation. So this dichotomy has a result in cultural schizophrenia,

ROBERT KUHN: What was the impact on the Medrassas?

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: The impact on the Medrassas was to retreat further into the religious core, because they felt there is a need to protect that in the face of this attack which they saw as an attack.

ROBERT KUHN: But that's the whole point here, that's what technology does, it forces a religious group to go more into their own tradition and become more isolated from the other part. We're talking about some significant trends both in the United States and in the world, what are the implications of these trends, can we follow them forward? Jewish community there is an increasingly large group of Jews who are returning to the tradition with a more ritualistic, but with a very serious interest, and the center is going in opposite directions.

DON MILLER: Precisely, while there may be this sort of movement toward more fundamentalist absolutism, at the same time there are many people who feel free to make choices about their life philosophies that didn't previously have that same choice, they simply inherited what was passed down to them. And the thing is it's being done guiltlessly, that's the difference from the past. Before, if you left your father or mother's inherited religion, you felt guilt about it. Now, at least in the U.S. there is a sort of almost moral obligation, you should make up your own recipe.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: Don, do you think therefore this impulse, the religious impulse, or the impulse for customs and rituals is part of human nature, if we started humanity over again on Mars, would, would religion evolve again?

DON MILLER: Absolutely, I think there is some deep human need to have meaning and to pursue ultimate significance.

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MUZAFFAR IQBAL: I agree with you.

DON MILLER: And every religious tradition is going to have some embodiment of their religion, including the skeptics.

MICHAEL SCHERMER: See, this is why we hold our meetings on Sundays at Cal Tech, which is sort of the church of science, I mean if ever there was a Mecca of science, it's Cal Tech, right. And religion is a social institution to reinforce the rules of cooperation and, and punish excessive greed, and, you know hold this social primate species together, it's a way of living in large numbers without killing each other.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL: Yes, but I think also the biggest danger comes from the new religion that you just named scientism. [LAUGHTER] That religion basically denies the fundamental human aspect, and that aspect is something that is not measurable by our scientific instruments. anything that is not quantifiable is beyond the limits of that new religion called scientism, therefore it will forever leave humanity in need for something higher than the science, and what it produces. Therefore, even people who believe in this new religion would always be craving to go beyond that.

ROBERT KUHN: Because of scientism, people will crave what they feel they've lost even more, so it will create even greater tension in societies, is that what you're doing, Michael?

MICHAEL SCHERMER: No, we're just building a home for people that their spiritual needs are not been met by religion and they want them to be met by the modern scientific world view. I just wrote a column for my Scientific American column called *The Scientific Shaman*, and it's about Stephen Hawking, because he just turn 60. And the question is, why is he so popular? ” And part of it is because of his disease, and that's incredible that he survived, the courage of being able to survive this neuronal disease. But part of it is he is dealing with the biggest ultimate deepest questions that he is daring to ask and trying to answer, “why does the universe bother to exist at all, why should be something instead of nothing? What was there before the Big Bang, what was there before time began?” These are really theological type questions, or at least they were traditionally theological type questions. So there is a hunger, obviously millions, tens of millions of people have bought his books and why is that, and I think there is this hunger to know, and there's a big group, that big group you talked about who don't have a traditional religious way of answering that, they are looking for answers, there's one answer.