

# Geek Theologian

Wired magazine founder Kevin Kelly talks to CT about the Amish, heaven, and why he doesn't own a smart phone.

Interview by Katelyn Beaty / JULY 15, 2011

**A**mid the din of warnings about modern technology's impact on the soul, Kevin Kelly sounds like the happy evangelist from Geekdom. "[W]e can see more of God in a cell phone than in a tree frog," the *Wired* magazine cofounder claims in his most recent book, *What Technology Wants*. A provocative title, to be sure, introducing a more provocative thesis: All human artifacts, from words to wheels to Wikipedia, together act like a living, breathing organism that reflects something of the Divine. "Technology has its roots in God's work through the universe," Kelly told CT associate editor Katelyn Beaty as she sat down with the San Francisco native at this year's Q conference, where Kelly was speaking. He believes that as participants in the *technium*—Kelly's word for this tech-ecosystem—"when we try to increase the options in the world, we are part of something godly."

Kelly came to Christ in 1979, when he got locked out of a Jerusalem hostel and ended up sleeping on a stone slab in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He talked with CT about the Amish, his vision of heaven, and why he doesn't own a smart phone.

**You use the term the *technium* to discuss all artifacts that humans have made since the beginning. Why not just use the word "culture"?**

I use *technium* to emphasize that human creation is more than the sum of all its parts. An ecosystem behaves differently from its individual plant and animal components. We have thoughts in our minds that are more than the sum of all neuron activity. Society itself has certain properties that are more than the sum of the individuals; there is an agency that's bigger than us. In the same way, the *technium* will have a behavior that you're not going to find in your iPhone or your light bulb alone. The *technium* has far more agency than is suggested by the word *culture*.

And this ecosystem or technological super-organism is not random—which is controversial in the broader scientific community, but should not be in a theological framework. It has an agenda.

**Is God guiding the progress of the *technium* as it unfolds?**

I would definitely say that progress is a reflection of the divine.

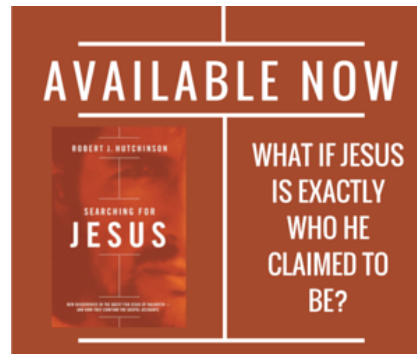
**What do you mean by that?**

In the same way we would say the beauty of nature reflects God, the *technium* reflects something of God's character. Not that the *technium* is without blemish, because anything we invent can be weaponized and made evil. But overall the *technium* has a positive force, a positive charge of good. And that good is primarily measured in terms of the possibilities and choices it presents us with. That's the metric I use to measure goodness.

For instance, love is good. I define love as not just an emotion but an action that helps others achieve some possibility. By love we give people opportunities to express their unique set of God-given gifts. In a certain sense, if you had to objectively measure the love in someone's heart, what would that look like? I think it would look like increasing choices and possibilities for others.

**While reading the book, I couldn't help thinking about Genesis 1:28, that God gives humans the opportunity to create beyond themselves, and that this is "very good," a part of what it means to bear the *imago Dei*.**

Yes. God has given us free will—true free will, not a phantom free will—and he wants us to surprise him. We are here to surprise God. God could make everything, but instead he says, "I bestow upon you the gift of free will so that you can participate in making this world. I could make everything, but I am going to give you some spark of my genius. Surprise me with something truly good and beautiful." So we invent things, and God says, "Oh my gosh, that was so cool! I could have thought of that, but they thought of that instead."



So yes, there is a positive charge within the technium, in the same way that organic life is good and that more life is better. That's not to say there isn't horror in biological life—animals ripping each other apart. It's just to say that overall, life creates 1 percent more than it destroys every year.

**Is that something you have calculated?**

No, I'm saying that even if the rate of improvement is as low as a 10th or a 100th of a percent, there is actually more good accumulated in the world than there is evil. That small difference is all it takes.

**Why do you believe there is more good than evil?**

Because the world is a better place now than it was 1,000 years ago. Whatever quantifiable metric you want to give to me about what's good in life, I would say there's more of it now than there was 1,000 years ago. There're fewer war casualties per capita, there's less violence. We think that some of these atrocities of war today are sickening, but Genghis Khan—you don't even want to hear about what they were doing. There is less disease, more longevity, more literacy, education, women's rights, more creativity, more food, more people, less hunger, fewer slaves, more leisure. You name it.

**But what about the central Christian belief that the human heart is perpetually evil—that we are not progressing toward goodness, but that we need a Savior to intervene dramatically?**

The fallibility of the human condition means that we tend to destroy as much as we create every year. We cannot even begin to be mostly good. But the good news is that by God's grace we can, and should, improve our lives a little tiny bit over time. That incremental crawl in the direction of good is all we can expect theologically, and it's the reason almost no one gives up the advancements of today. In what way would Christ's redemption be at work if we moved a little bit toward evil every year?

**You spend a chapter on the Amish, and mention that you were part of a hippie movement that stressed paring down on material goods. In *The Next Christians*, Gabe Lyons writes that you don't have a smart phone or TV, you ride your bike everywhere, you've only tweeted three times. Are your choices inconsistent with your belief that technological invention is so good?**

Technology can maximize our special combination of gifts, but there are so many technological choices that

I could spend all my time just trying out technologies. So I minimize my technological choices in order to maximize my output. The Amish (and the hippies) are really good at minimizing technologies. That's what I am trying to do as well. I seek to find those technologies that assist me in my mission to express love and reflect God in the world, and then disregard the rest.

But at the same time, I want to maximize the pool of technologies that people can choose from, so that they can find those tools that maximize their options and minimize the rest.

**What do you mean, "maximize their options"?**

I want to increase all the things that help people discover and use their talents. Can you imagine a world where Mozart did not have access to a piano? I want to promote the invention of things that have not been invented yet, with a sense of urgency, because there are young people born today who are waiting upon us to invent their aids. There are Mozarts of this generation whose genius will be hidden until we invent their equivalent of a piano—maybe a holodeck or something. Just as you and I have benefited from the people who invented the alphabet, books, printing, and the Internet, we are obligated to materialize as many inventions as possible, to hurry, so that every person born and to-be-born will have a great chance of discovering and sharing their godly gifts. So I'm interested in fostering innovation and investing in it, and making sure that it reaches other places in the world.



That is, by the way, why I fault the Amish. They are minimizing but not out there inventing new things.

**Yet many people see something really attractive about the Amish's stripped-down life. Doesn't more technology just put us in a frenzy of choices?**

I would call that romanticism. We are attracted to the Amish because their family and community support is astounding. They are incredible volunteers in and out of their community. They do everything "peer-to-peer" within their society. They pay for each other's medical bills, rebuild burnt barns, cover bad debts, counsel each other's marriages. This is all very attractive.

But there's a price to this life: the Amish have reduced options. If you are a female Amish, you have one destiny. You are not interviewing me. You are a mommy. If you are a boy, you have two destinies: you are either a farmer or a mechanic in the backyard. This lack of choices is the same reason people living in the lovely hills of southern China or the organic villages of Africa are moving to the cities by the millions. They are leaving these idyllic places because they don't have choices.

**Do your peers know you are a Christian?**

Yes, it's on Wikipedia, so it must be true.

**How would you articulate your beliefs to them?**

I would recite the Nicene Creed, which I profess. But I also have a technological metaphor for Jesus, the Son

of God. This came from watching computer scientist Jaron Lanier. Very early in the days of virtual reality, around 1986, I visited Jaron in his lab. In virtual reality you put goggles and gloves on and enter a 3D virtual world. Jaron had just made one of the first virtual worlds that afternoon. Then he put on the goggles and gloves and climbed into his world, crawling on the floor on his back as he inspected it. And he was completely amazed by the world he had just created.

I had this vision of the unbounded God binding himself to his creation. When we make these virtual worlds in the future—worlds whose virtual beings will have autonomy to commit evil, murder, hurt, and destroy options—it's not unthinkable that the game creator would go in to try to fix the world from the inside. That's the story of Jesus' redemption to me. We have an unbounded God who enters this world in the same way that you would go into virtual reality and bind yourself to a limited being and try to redeem the actions of the other beings since they are your creations. So I would begin there. For some technological people, that makes the faith a little more understandable.

**You are working on a catechism for robots. Why?**

We are made in the image of God; God is a creator, and God created free-will beings. So, I believe we will create free-will beings in the form of robots. And I believe they will have increasing degrees of autonomy. We will need to educate them about the difference between good and evil, about who made them (and who made us), what to do when they do something wrong. And at some point, one of them will come to us and say, "I am a child of God." When [that happens], how will we respond? Does Jesus' salvation cover them? This is a question I've been asking theologians. They shrug their shoulders.

When we begin to make robots, I think the secular scientific world will appreciate what Christians have been talking about for a long time. If you make something with its own purpose, you need to give it moral guidance. If you give it moral guidance, what values are you going to give it? Teaching technology is like teaching children. At the point we make autonomous robots, Christians can step forward and say, "We know about this."

**When your robot turns to you and says, "I am a child of God," what will you say?**

I would say, "Welcome to our church." It will take every possible type of invented mind to even begin to appreciate the greatness and mystery of God. Our human minds alone are so limited. We need others who "think different."

But in the meantime we can speculate. I am working with eight people from my church [Cornerstone Church in San Francisco] on a graphic novel about angels and robots. In this story there are a million different species of angels in the celestial realm, and they all crave embodiment. There's a silver cord (which is mentioned in Ecclesiastes 12:6) connecting souls to bodies. Dark angels want to "ensoul" the new robots on earth with their consciousness through this silver cord. Normally there are guardians over the moral education as souls come into bodies, but the dark angels want to subvert that. And there's a *nephilim*, a half-angel half-human girl, who discovers the renegade ensoulment of the first robot by a dark angel, and she has

to save the world. That's the premise.

**I think C. S. Lewis would be proud.**

Exactly. It's an excuse for us to do amateur fictional theology, and it's forced us to try to describe heaven.

**And how would you describe it?**

In our books it's a world without matter, energy, or time. But it is not static. Stasis is death, the opposite of heaven. Everything good, true, and beautiful that we know about moves. Heaven is growth, yet somehow outside of time. "Growth beyond time" doesn't make much sense to us in time, but you might think about it as goodness that improves itself—a type of perfection that grows more perfect! Which you would have to agree is much preferable to a perfection that never gets better.

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