

Tech and religion are very much alike



They both have gods, rich institutions and secretive cultures

Tech Agnostic. By Greg Epstein. *MIT Press*; 368 pages; \$29.95 and £27

“ENTIRE SUBWAY CAR mesmerised by small gizmo clutched in hand. Some sort of worship?” The tweet by Joyce Carol Oates in 2019, alongside a photo of riders holding mobile phones, as if in prayer, neatly captures the way that society holds technology sacred. Most people check their phones on waking and just before sleeping (and glance at the screen throughout the day), replacing an earlier generations’ ritual of prayers.

“Technology has become religion,” writes Greg Epstein, a “humanist” (atheist) chaplain who works at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in a provocative new book. Believe him?

There are plenty of parallels. Both tech and religion have gods, which in Silicon Valley might be mythical leaders such as Steve Jobs or Elon Musk, and reverential followers. Tech firms and religions are also considered all-powerful (by some) and claim institutions that have amassed almighty riches. Any journalist who has spent time in Silicon Valley can attest that tech companies are secretive and boast unique cultures and rules, like monastic orders. They also demand vows of allegiance—in the form of non-disclosure agreements and non-compete clauses.

Techies can sound as if they are spouting religious principles, too. Google’s original motto—“Don’t be evil”—has biblical overtones. Mr Musk has described his interplanetary ambitions as aiming to “extend the light of consciousness to the stars”. Marc Andreessen, an investor in Silicon Valley, has compiled a list of the “patron saints of techno-optimism” who are “liberating... the human soul” in a manifesto that contains the words “we believe” almost 115 times.

The first half of “Tech Agnostic” does an excellent job of teasing out how tech companies have persuaded people to faithfully believe in their mission and people. It includes portraits of figures who have held great influence. One is Sam Bankman-Fried, the head of a once high-flying crypto firm, later found guilty of fraud. Another is Nick Bostrom, formerly a professor at Oxford University, who posits that there is a good chance everyone on Earth lives in a computer simulation.

Mr Epstein is at his best when he brings religious scholarship to his research on tech to offer original analysis. His observations are intriguing and perceptive, for example, when it comes to the “effective altruism” movement, a philosophy (read: eschatological doctrine) espoused by Mr Bankman-Fried that urges focus on long-term existential harms rather than short-term problems to save humanity.

But such insights are rare in the second half of the book, where the author recites a litany of familiar worries about technology, blaming it for too much screen time, “toxic masculinity”, the precarious lives of workers in the gig economy and heavy surveillance through facial recognition and online advertising. Whatever the technology, Mr Epstein has found a person to interview who will criticise it in an overstated way, only for the author to soften it a smidgen (to give the devil his due), but let the point stand.

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