

Book Review

Tech Agnostic: How Technology became the World's Most Powerful Religion, and Why It Desperately Needs a Reformation

Epstein, G. (2024). *Tech Agnostic: How Technology became the World's Most Powerful Religion, and Why It Desperately Needs a Reformation*. MIT Press. ISBN: 9780262049207 (Hardback), \$29.95, 385 pages.

Preface

Tech Agnostic by Greg Epstein offers a look into a world that most people never get to see up close. Drawn from his connections with the educated elite, venture capitalists, and Ivy League colleagues around the world, Epstein peels back the curtain on a religious phenomenon that most of us participate in without ever realizing it. The individuals driving this phenomenon are unimaginably rich, deeply influential, and operating within a system that functions like a religion in every meaningful sense of the word.

The book is divided into three distinct sections: beliefs, practices, and community, the last of which encompasses everyone from Tech resisters to would-be reformers. Each section is comprised of themed chapters that take deep dives into the various aspects of this religion, from its doctrine to its apostates and heretics. Embedded throughout are a wide range of voices, from figures like Ellen Pao of Project Include, a former technology investor, to individuals like Epstein's former student Javon, whose personal perspectives end up being some of the most revealing in the entire book.

In this review, each section of the book is briefly examined before connecting Epstein's framework to a theme directly relevant to Technology Education: how technology adoption in schools mirrors the same religious patterns Epstein describes, and how those adoption decisions can directly impact the ability of Technology Education teachers nationwide to do their jobs.

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Beliefs

In *Tech Agnostic*, Epstein makes a clear distinction between theology and doctrine. Theology, as he frames it, is the bigger picture: the method for wrestling with the deep questions about what it means to be human. Doctrine is where those questions get specific answers. Beliefs in this context are the specific ideas a tradition teaches its followers to accept: who saves us, what we owe the future, what threatens to end us. Epstein lays out ten of these tenets operating within the technology religion, and he is careful to point out that religious doctrines do not have to agree with each other and that they often do not, which may be exactly why traditions put so much energy into writing them down. What makes these beliefs tangible, though, are not the definitions themselves but the people living inside them.

While this section of the book is predominantly about Greg Epstein building, layer by layer, a vision of Technology as a theological (religious) monument in our modern era, the places where it truly shines aren't during the periods of this theological scaffolding. Chapter one deals with Technology as a theology, with evidence provided to justify using a theological analysis lens, while chapter two covers Technology's theological doctrines. Though the research into these topics is foundational, the truly pivotal work is contained within the accounts from venture capitalists and colleagues that truly highlight the world Epstein has envisioned.

Javon, one of Epstein's Harvard alumni turned physician and venture capitalist, ends up being the most prominent figure in chapter one helping to highlight profits as one of the driving tenets behind Technology's rise as a religion. Javon's perspective on Technology is the result of his own upbringing, which caused him to step from one side of the economic equation into a world of successful venture capitalism and biomedical technology. Not having been born into this world, he regularly feels observed and judged. There is an inherent inequality that Javon highlights when discussing one of his classmates who was born into the system, and therefore does not share his same experiences.

Morgan Ames, a UC Berkeley professor, is the second figure to make an appearance, with her focus on something Javon had noted: inequality in technology. Her discussion about the research she conducted on the One Laptop Per Child initiative (laptop.org) ends up being some of the most significant work in delineating the underpinnings of this religious phenomenon; something Javon had also noticed. The driving force is not a desire to help the underprivileged, no matter what benevolent and lofty goals are promised. As Ames herself concludes, Technology itself is not a religion, the religion is technology-capitalism.

Lincoln Cannon, another influential interviewee from chapter two, is incredibly unique because as a Mormon transhumanist he feels that the resurrection and the concept of a technological singularity wherein AI surpasses human intelligence are the same thing. And such beliefs about technology are

not unique. As Epstein describes, these conversations are rampant in the spheres where discussions about technology progression are prominent. However, he notes that those having these discussions do not use the word religion because doing so is considered taboo and dirty.

In terms of doctrines, Hell has particular prominence from the perspective of Christianity in rural America. Surely, then, technology has its own Hell equivalency, which is a concept Epstein digs into. In Technology, Hell is an existential risk: the idea that some calamity is going to eliminate all humans. Within the theology that Epstein is building however, Hell might not be abstract. It could very well be something concrete that the Technology messiahs are building toward. As an example, his interview with James Barrat highlights this by vocalizing the belief that general artificial intelligence is to be our existential crisis; that the technology we are creating will be the end of the human race because we as a species are not smart enough to survive its advent.

Practices

Where doctrine is about what the tech religion believes, practice is about how it operates. Epstein treats this distinction the same way scholars of traditional religion do, that beliefs on their own do not sustain a religion. What sustains it are the structures, habits, and systems that put those beliefs into action. In traditional religion, practices are things like tithings, worship, confession, or pilgrimage; the repeated behaviors that reinforce what a community holds sacred. In the Technology religion, though practices may look different, they serve the same purpose. Such practices are the hierarchies that determine who is allowed a seat at the table, the addictive design patterns that keep users engaged, and the surveillance systems that maintain control. In the second section, Epstein digs into these practices directly, and what emerges is a picture of a religion that does not just ask for belief; it demands participation, often without the participant realizing it.

Considering the predominance of white men in technology, logic might suggest that technology as a religion would be built to serve these founders and prominent figures. Epstein is not afraid to dive into this concept. His interview with Ijeoma Oluo makes it very clear that he is happy to tackle the myth that tech was built by exiles and outcasts. Oluo is correct in her assessment that the successes of exiles and outcasts are framed as a matter of merit; they worked the hardest and deserve their success. And yet Epstein boldly captures the obscenity of their beliefs with a simple statement: "the man who was born on third base and thinks he hit a triple." The hierarchy of the technology religion is not built on open hostility toward women and people of color. It is built on a narrative where these individuals feel like this is their story, and they perceive women and people of color as obstacles not because they are all racist and misogynistic, but because the narrative casts them as obstacles to the perceived ascension of these white messiahs.

Therefore, if Technology is thought to have been built explicitly to see the ascension of white men, what processes are behind its almost universal success? James Williams and Epstein dissect technology addiction together. Despite being an award-winning Google engineer, Williams looks at technology as something detrimental to humanity. This is because technology companies have designed their products to feed impulses over intention, and because of this, many people using technology forget to question whether what they are doing is furthering their own goals or those of someone else. When you engage with social media or watch an influencer, which of your goals are being served besides feeding your dwindling attention span? Williams sharpens this by turning startup language back onto the industry itself. When politics rears its head in the discussion, the dangers are only highlighted by Williams's use of startup language turned back onto technology: do we have a minimum viable trust? Do we, the users and the companies, have a mutual floor-level confidence that is required for any functioning society?

Technology utopia should be unending in terms of Christian divinity, but that does not mean catastrophe cannot occur. It should turn minds to Revelation and a guiding principle for many Christians: that eventually an end must arrive before true utopia can be achieved. This begs the question, does technology have these catastrophes and apocalypses, to use Epstein's language? Yes. The events that Epstein and his colleagues fear most, the apocalypse everyone using technology should dread, are already occurring: mass surveillance. He highlights this with Chris Gilliard, a community college professor and advocate for the responsible and equitable use of technology in education. The concept most focused on in this chapter is Gilliard's *luxury surveillance*. Detroit's Project Green Light is used to demonstrate, that under a veil of safety measures, technology is already being built into a panopticon. But a panopticon used as a means of mass surveillance to exert control, without the walls that Jeremy Bentham, the original architect of the panopticon prison, envisioned. Instead, these companies act in place of the single guard, and the implication that they are always watching is the origin story that both Gilliard and Epstein identify with: the origin story of not a hero, but a supervillain.

What Epstein makes clear across this section is that the technology religion does not maintain its power through belief alone. The power is maintained through systems that most people never think to question, and with a hierarchy that ensures the same people stay in charge. The intentionally addictive design keeps users engaged on terms that serve the company, not the individual. And the surveillance infrastructure quietly builds the means of control into everyday life. These are the practices of a religion operating exactly as intended, and Epstein's argument is that until we recognize them as such, we have no real chance of pushing back against them.

Beloved Community or The Reformation

Epstein's concept of community within the technology religion mirrors how traditional religions organize their people. Religions do not just have believers; they have congregations, hierarchies of clergy, heretics who challenge doctrine, and apostates who leave the faith entirely. The technology religion is no different in that it has its own dissenters, exiles, and attempts to build alternative communities. As such, in this section of the book Epstein delves into the ways in which we as a society can push back. In doing so he paints a grim picture of how dangerous it is to dissent as an individual, highlights how nonprofits and organized groups have formed collective resistance, and ends by grappling with the difficulties of institutionalizing that dissent without being absorbed back into the system. This provides just a glimmer of hope set within an altogether grim reminder that for many individuals, these apocalypses and extinction events are happening without an ounce of awareness.

Veena Dubal, a labor law professor, serves as Epstein's example of what happens when an individual dissents against the technology congregation. Dubal was a prominent figure and a rising star within the sphere of technological influence. However, this changed when she began to dig into the rotten underbelly of algorithmic manipulation of gig companies such as Uber and Lyft. When in 2020 her own investigations and advocacy propelled the enactment of California Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) into prominence, it resulted in catastrophic effects for her personal life. She was exposed to harassment campaigns, doxxing, and an orchestrated effort to discredit and overwhelm her with fear. Although the campaign did not cause her to quit advocacy, it did see the reversal of AB5 by the passing of Prop 22 after gig companies spent \$200 million dollars. Her writing turns now towards how Silicon Valley works on a caste system, and while Epstein paints someone bowing under the pressure, her final words convey a different opinion: "We've lost battles, but maybe we're winning the war." Dubal's story is Epstein's clearest illustration of the cost of individual dissent within the technology religion, and of the limits of fighting its congregation alone.

If Dubal represents the cost of individual resistance, Timnit Gebru represents an attempt to build something new outside the congregation entirely. Gebru is a computer scientist and cofounder of Black in AI and the Distributed Artificial Intelligence Institute. She is uniquely positioned as another disillusioned employee who came out of Google's parent company, Alphabet, and her beliefs mean that she does not want to tear Technology down. Her advocacy and resistance focus on building a better technology environment divested of the moral and ethical failures of big Technology. She was fired because she was asking questions about large language models that threatened Google's business model, and rather than accepting such a dismissal, she was determined to conduct AI research free from the influence of technology giants.

Epstein extols Gebru's skepticism and her ability to use it in the service of building the change she envisions.

While not the only example Epstein provided to highlight how to institutionalize resistance, his accounts of an encounter at the All Tech Is Human summit highlighted one of his fears about Technology resistance. While speaking at an ethics panel, a Meta employee, Harsha Bhatlapenumarthy, acknowledged none of the harms caused by their business model and there was no pushback from other panelists. However, in a fireside chat with Yaël Eisenstat, significant pushback was encountered because while Meta might not want to see the fabricated news and dangerous content on their platform, they are also unwilling to alter their business model, and social media unavoidably damages democracies. Given this context, while All Tech Is Human is a new type of technology congregation, it will require a significant amount of work to be a truly inclusive organization without falling prey to schisms that diverse funding streams can cause. Epstein's point is that community is the only viable path forward for resistance against the technology religion. Building such a community is its own kind of trial. Individual dissenters like Dubal get crushed. Alternative institutions like Gebru's offer a model but remain small. And new congregations like All Tech Is Human risk repeating the very failures they were created to challenge. The technology religion will not be reformed by lone heretics. It will take organized, self-aware communities willing to hold their own congregations accountable.

The Push of Technology into Education

Epstein's analysis of the technology religion does not exist in a vacuum. The beliefs, practices, and communities he describes have direct consequences for how technology enters public education. Understanding his framework is what will afford Technology Education teachers the lens needed for recognizing why technology adoption in schools so often follows the same patterns as the religious fervor Epstein documents throughout the book. The same doctrines are at work: the promise of salvation through innovation, the charismatic authority of leaders, and the casting of opposition as immoral. When these forces reach the schoolhouse door, they do not arrive through pragmatic and thorough research. This is apparent as early as chapter one, when Epstein is interviewing Morgan Ames about *One Laptop Per Child* (OLPC). In Ames's account, OLPC is offered as an equalizing factor in education where students in underserved areas could receive the equipment they need to excel, regardless of the difficulties of economic inequality. While OLPC initially failed, one-to-one initiatives became even more prominent, especially at the height of COVID, and a critical pathway for continuity of safe education during a period when many states were grappling with how exactly to get students back into the classroom. That solution is pure fantasy for many rural students, especially those without ready internet access. And yet this initiative has not been tempered. If anything,

it has grown exponentially in a post-COVID world. Indeed, this phenomenon has grown into what Ames and Epstein characterize as a charisma machine, in which leaders behind these initiatives paint opposition to such projects as unnatural, or even immoral.

How do such adoptions take place? According to Morrison et al. (2019), researchers at Johns Hopkins and the University of Hong Kong, it is exactly as Epstein and Ames discuss. Procurement of new educational technology is not related to student data in most cases, but instead reliant disproportionately on the goals or desires of a given school district. More concerning, the products procured by a district were often more reliant on peer references. In light of this, should we continue to examine this phenomenon through Ames's charisma machine, at the district level technology will continue to thrive on the enthusiasm it creates, while at the school level it will create measurable friction with students and staff. This friction is especially acute for Technology Education teachers in schools throughout the U.S. where the consequences of district-level adoption decisions can be immediately felt. For example, when a district adopts two-factor authentication protocols, there is the potential for side effects such as locking students and teachers out of tools like CAD software or OnShape that are essential to coursework. Or should a district decide to migrate entirely to a Google cloud environment, teachers who rely on desktop applications that require executable files lose access to the software their curriculum depends on. These are but a few of the direct, practical consequences of adopting educational technology driven by enthusiasm rather than a data-driven understanding of what classrooms actually need. As pointed out by Neil Selwyn in his 2014 book titled *Distrusting Educational Technology*, the consequences of educational technology adoption practices devoid of evidence-based decision making ultimately "does little to challenge or disrupt the prevailing production of social inequities that characterize contemporary education" (p.?). Arguably, for a large majority of technology education teachers throughout the U.S., this scenario plays out every time a district-level decision removes access to the technologies, educational or otherwise, that make their programs functional. The technology religion operates in schools the same way Epstein describes it operating everywhere else: decisions are made by people who believe in the promise of technology, and the teachers and students who have to live with those decisions are rarely consulted.

For the *Journal of Technology Education* readers who reflect the full spectrum of Technology, Engineering, and Design (TED) education, *Tech Agnostic* is not a book about rejecting technology writ large. It is a book about seeing it clearly. Epstein's framework gives educators the language to identify when technology adoption is being driven by narrative rather than evidence, and when the enthusiasm surrounding a new platform or initiative is functioning more like faith than informed decision-making. In *Tech Agnostic*, technological literacy is not just about knowing how to use tools. It is about understanding the

systems those tools serve, questioning whose interests they advance, and being willing to push back when adoption decisions undermine the very programs they are supposed to support. Epstein does not claim to have all the answers, but he asks the questions that Technology Education teachers should be asking in their own schools, their own districts, and their own communities. If only to understand the underlying motivations behind technology, I highly recommend Greg Epstein's *Tech Agnostic* to anyone wanting to peek behind the curtain.

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