BOOK REVIEW

Power Failure. Christianity in the Culture of Technology

Albert Borgmann

“Many of us share the intuition that contemporary life is uniquely inhospitable to Christianity.” (p.65) This radical affirmation is the starting point and the guiding thread of this book, written by one of the most important founders of “philosophy of technology”, whose more systematic book on this matter is Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: a Philosophical Inquiry. This Power Failure is a difficult book, not only in its reading, but also in its understanding. The reason takes root, surely, in the fact that it is not a book conceived as a unitary totality. On the contrary, the book is the result of a compilation of eight independent essays linked and updated by Borgmann for this volume. Although often it is difficult to find the underlying sense of the whole, from my viewpoint that above mentioned affirmation is the concern that, in one way or another, ‘impelled’ this aged professor of philosophy (Ph.D. in Munich in 1963) to the edition of this book. Although he is not a theologian, he is a Christian philosopher who has wanted to rethink — from his experience and knowledge widely recognized in the academic world — the link that exists between Christianity and the technologically structured society of the advanced countries. And, in this sense, for him it is undeniable that “there is a connection between the progress of technology and the decline of faith.” (p. 7) It might be thought for this type of affirmation Borgmann is a technological pessimist. Nevertheless, he himself wants to move away from two extremes: from an ingenuous optimism and from a vain luddism. He says: “We should neither try to demolish technology nor run away from it. We can restrain it and must redeem it.” (p. 8)

In any case: why — according to Borgmann — there is this incompatibility between Christianity and technology? It is correct to notice that at the beginning of the industrialization, but very especially in the first half of the XXth Century, theologians had to face the problem of the relations between an increasingly technological culture and the Christian message. It might say that Power Failure takes part of the same reflexive spirit. Those who still see technology as ‘applied science’ will think it is odd that an opposition could exist between technology and Christianity. It is important to notice that those that are unfamiliar with the historical, sociological and philosophical analyses of technology, tend to consider it to be a simple ‘mean’ or neutral instrument,
because they believe technology is simply ‘applied science’, as Mario Bunge conceives it (M. Bunge, Technol. Cult. 7(3) (1966) 329). Currently, this vision every time is more discarded, because it has been demonstrated that technology embody values and mentalities.

Nevertheless, Borgmann moves away from conceptions instrumentalists and considers, rather, that technology “is meant to designate not just an ensemble of machines and procedures, but a type of culture, the kind that is characteristic of the advanced industrial societies” (p. 7). This means that the problematic of technology for Christianity is the mentality or the cultural structure that technology implies. To explain the typical structure of our technological culture, Borgmann proposes the ‘device paradigm’. This paradigm is the result of a dual circumstance: technology or device paradigm is the union of ‘commodity’ and ‘machinery’. The former alludes to the fact that one of the distinctive features of technology is the availability of commodities. The latter introduces the concept of machinery (or hardware), because this mass availability of commodities is possible thanks to a machinery or material body (p. 17-18). This is what characterizes to our culture: it is structured round about the device paradigm; that is to say, round about the consumption of commodities through machinery.

Borgmann, however, thinks this paradigm is not clear for all people. That is why he affirms: “and yet it seems to me that contemporary culture is essentially blind to itself. It is ignorant of its essential character.” (p.11) In fact, now ‘things’ have been replaced by ‘devices’. “A thing, in the sense in which I want to use the term, has an intelligible and accessible character and calls forth skilled and actives human engagement. A thing requires practice while a device invites consumption.” (p. 31) At the end of the day, for Borgmann the question is precisely to turn to focal things and practices, moving away from devices. Focal things and practices imply an ‘engagement’ that does not exist in the mere consumption of commodities. In this sense, the communities of celebration (round about focal things and practices) are a need for our individualized and atomised technological culture. These communities of celebration (including religion) must be supported for State (p. 58).

But in order to turn to focal things and practices and to meet us around about these communities of celebration, we must re-discover the moral significance of material culture. We no longer can keep the character of our advanced societies (the device paradigm) concealed and invisible. It is needed to make explicit its way of acting in society and of beginning to reflect on its moral significance. This is necessary because “the factor that most decisively channels the daily course of life is not moral theory but material culture.” (p. 24) Thus, “assessing the moral significance of the material culture, then, comes in large part to asking what the moral consequences of the rule of the paradigm device are.” (p.32)
The crucial problem of the relation between Christianity and the new device paradigm takes root here. What does this paradigm consist? Why is it opposite or inhospitable to Christianity? The responses to these questions are centred round about the concepts of ‘grace’, ‘contingency’, ‘poverty’ and ‘frailty’. Thus, for Borgmann “the indifference of contemporary culture to Christianity is, theologically speaking, a problem of grace, of God’s presence in our world.” (p. 65) Therefore, if our culture dominated and canalised by the device paradigm is blind to Christianity it is because its own ‘structure’ makes impossible to understand the need of Divine Grace. Why? A phrase of our author is very clear on this matter: “Grace is always undeserved and often unforethinkable, and a culture of transparency and control systematically reduces, if it does not occlude, the precinct of grace.” (p. 65) In this sense, it might say that Weltanschauung incorporated into device paradigm is incompatible with conception of the human underlying to Christian theological anthropology. Although Borgmann does not express himself in these terms, it seems to me that this is what it wants to indicate when it introduces the concepts of ‘contingency’, ‘poverty’ and ‘frailty’.

In fact, in repeated occasions our author express the idea of that technology tries to liberate the human from illness, famine, ignorance, immobility, etc. As Borgmann states: “The promise of technology is one of material and social liberty, the promise of disburdenment from pains and limits of things and the claims and foibles of humans.” (p. 120) From my viewpoint, in certain way, this is the Biblical Christian message, although with differences. Thus, often God's Kingdom was confused in history with an earthly paradise established by political forces and technological advances, similar to the Marx’s communist paradise. Although, truly, Christianity accepts all what it improves the conditions of life of people, his message goes further away. The God's Kingdom is another much deeper and religious thing. As the theologian Olegario González de Cardedal affirms:

“The Kingdom is neither a resultant fact of nature, nor a fruit of culture. It is not the kingdom of the universal peace, not neither of the ends, nor the alternative society, nor the realized Utopia. The ideals of Illustration, Kant, Marx, socialism, capitalism and Bloch have born of the heart of the humanity, affected by the kindness and the sin of the world. As expressions of kingdom of the human have the glory and the proper limits the human. God's kingdom preached by Jesus is a spiritual resultant process of the divine plan and not of a mere ripeness of the human conscience. [...] God's kingdom comes to life of the human, when God becomes definitively real for him, for the reception of Jesus’ word and the assent of the offered love. The Kingdom is what happens to the human when he integrates Christ, is left to encourage for his dynamism, answers to his requirements and lives before God as him”. (O.G. de Cardedal, Cristología, BAC, Madrid, 2001, 48, 52)
In this sense, Christian message does not reduce to liberation from poverty and misery physical. On the contrary, it also is a message about frailty and contingency radical of the human. Borgmann makes clear something similar — but not equal — when he does a distinction between ‘brute poverty’ and ‘advanced poverty’. Thus, whereas brute poverty is the poverty and misery physical of developing countries, advanced poverty is “the lack of untamed life and of intimacy with living things” (p. 106) and the “incapacity to be moved by misery” (p. 105). Nevertheless, Borgmann seems to have left in the surface what means poverty, contingency and human frailty. He does not put it in the ontological sphere, but he remains more in the sphere of practice (of fortitude and of morality): “This is to experience and to take human frailty seriously. Such serious attention, however, should not segue in the attempt to furnish an ontological and transcendental proof for the necessary or universal debility of human existence. Not only is such ethical foundationalism doomed to fail in point to theory. More important, it tends to go hand and hand with a soteriological imperialism.” (p. 107) It seems to me that Borgmann does not realize that frailty and poverty, which the advanced societies experience, takes as a ‘foundation’ the ontological contingency about which he does not want to think theoretically. Truly, the religious experience does not reduce to the experience of contingency, but the former cannot to be understood without the ontological substratum that the latter provides to it. The metaphysical character of the human, that is to say, his experience of finitude and ontological contingency and the search of the Absolute, is what does of Religion an universal fact: “The universality of religious fact in space and in time, which relates to the exigency of Absolute that we have analyzed more above, is in its turn and in a bigger degree, one of the most evident and surprising expressions of metaphysical character of the human. In fact, it is in the religions where is always concretised the metaphysical exigency of Absolute and this much less of speculative way (but explicitly) than of a practical way: of a conversion of the conscience to the divine” (R. Jolivet, L’Homme métaphysique, Fayard, Paris, 1958, 20.)

It seems to me that it is precisely this rejection to think in depth the ontological structure of the human, which does of Power Failure a little superficial book in its answers. Truly, for Borgmann it is needed “to make room for Christianity” (p. 8) in the technological culture. And for that he appeals to a return to focal things and practices and celebrations communities: “The things I have in mind are good books, musical instruments, athletic equipment, work of art, and treasures of nature. The practices I am thinking of are those of dining, running, fishing, gardening, playing instruments, and reciting poetry. On closer inspection some such thing and a practice are always correlated. These are focal things and practices in the small and communal celebrations in the large.” (p. 124) But from my viewpoint this answer that Borgmann proposes is only possible if earlier we return to a consideration of ourselves as radically finite. Justly, it is only possible to make room to Christianity if we take conscience of that the ‘inner structure’ of the human is only explained appealing to Divinity.
Slightly deep answers are the focal things and practices. I believe the problem of Christianity in our technological societies is such because it does not take conscience of structure of the human as opened to Divinity. The Jesuit philosopher Manuel Cabada Castro thinks it is possible and necessary a philosophical ‘access’ to God from the human’s inner structure: love, thinking, freedom, will, and, above all, the athematic presence of Infinity in our mind or soul are only possible to be understood appealing to Divinity, the possibility condition from them. (M.C. Castro, *El Dios que da que pensar. Acceso filosófico-antropológico a la divinidad*, BAC, Madrid 1999)

The device paradigm has concealed this deep and divine dimension of the human. That is why, before make room to the communities of celebration, it is needed to make room to grace (as noted Borgmann), but through experience of finitude and contingency, and the yearning of the Absolute. Our author is right in that “a culture informed by the device paradigm is deeply inhospitable to grace and sacrament. The productive side of technology is an enterprise of conquering and controlling reality. The notions of human incompleteness and deficiency that signify a primal condition for the advent of grace are mere grist for technological mills”. (p. 127) And precisely these incompleteness and deficiency are needed to put them in the ontological-metaphysical dimension.

At any rate, this Borgmann’s good book is trying to throw light on the problematic situation of religious experience in a technological society. Borgmann tries to come to God and to Christianity from the recovery of experiences with focal things and from communities of celebration through focal practices. But, from my viewpoint, it is only possible to come to God from God; that is to say, taking aware of that experience of God is the deepest experience of the human and that the inner human structure that sometimes astonishes us (and that has remained concealed under device paradigm) is a reflect of the presence of God in us. That is why, as distinct from Borgmann, it seems to me that the solution is more reflective and contemplative than purely practical: the sincere silence with oneself is more necessary than the noisy celebration with others. In this way, we can conclude with the words of Karl Rahner: “Die Gotteserfahrung ist... die letzte Tief und Radicalität jeder geistig-personalen Erfahrung, ... und ist somit gerade die ursprünglich eine Ganzheit der Erfahrung, in der die geistige Person sich selbst hat und sich selbst überantwortet is.” (K. Rahner, *Schriften zur Theologie*, IX (1954) 173.)

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