While Scimecca points to the social location of sociologists and their atheistic milieu, Smith does a more thorough "sociology of sociology" that shows the link between the objective modern pretense and the postmodern political bias. This is similar to what George Marsden does in his anniversary edition of *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, as well as what Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff argues for in his apologetical work, *Religion in the University* (2019); they describe the postmodern moment as a crack in the secular, opening up a postsecular option that is potentially more friendly to religion.

This seems like a better strategy to me. Scimecca's history is a valuable addition to the conversation about Christian faith and sociology. His description of shadow nihilism and the imperative of a moral core for sociological analysis tied to some notion of transcendence is vital for the common good. What we need is an articulate Christian sociology that is primed for a pluralistic academy, where Muslim, Jew, feminist, and LatCrit theorists can all have a place at the public academic table. This needs to be done not only with the American sociological network in mind, but also with intentional reference to sociologists in the global church and partners beyond.

Note

[1]E.g., David A. Fraser and Anthony Campolo, *Sociology Through the Eyes of Faith* (HarperOne, 1992); Russel Heddendorf and Matthew Vos, *Hidden Threads: A Christian Critique of Sociological Theory* (University Press of America, 2009); David Lyon, *Christians and Sociology* (InterVarsity Press, 1976); and Matthew Vos, *Strangers and Scapegoats: Extending God's Welcome to Those on the Margins* (Baker Academic, 2022).

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Technology

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SUPERBLOOM: How Technologies of Connection Tear Us Apart by Nicholas Carr. W. W. Norton, 2025. 260 pages including notes, references, and index. Hardcover; $29.99. ISBN: 9781324064619.

If you've been paying attention at all over the last ten years, you already know that many modern technological "developments" have either caused or at least coincided with significant social challenges—increases in depression and anxiety, pervasive factionalism, internet addiction, and so on. This book seeks to answer some big questions: How did we get to this point? And, is the rise of social media, smartphones, and AI the cause of these problems?

Nicholas Carr, best-selling author and journalist, addresses these questions by deftly pulling in significant events in technological history, along with current research from sociology and psychology. He unifies it all under the umbrella of a study of "communication."

The author looks at historical mechanisms of communication and their ties to social change. Specifically, he looks at the publishing of magazines and newspapers, creation of the telegraph, the introduction of the telephone, and then the rise of radio and TV. With each technology, authority and control became more concentrated on a select number of companies or individuals. However, promoters of the new technologies repeatedly and consistently saw each technology as a hopeful agent for democratizing the sharing of information and opinions. Then came the Internet and Facebook, which continued the trend with its stated "social mission to create a more perfect society by getting people to communicate more" (p. 15). I think we all know how that turned out.

Why are the creators of new communication technologies so hopeful? Carr claims that they all believe that "if communication is good, more of it must be better" (p. 20). However, what we are seeing is that more-efficient communication mechanisms leave less time for reflection or consultation, demanding immediate and often hasty responses. Chapter 2 explains from a legal perspective how we got where we are. The author usefully gives some background regarding the laws concerning privacy and personal and mass communication, and how the laws did not adapt quickly as communication mechanisms evolved. Especially noteworthy are the Radio Act of 1927 and the creation of the Federal Communications Commission in the 1940s, both of which prohibited broadcasters from promoting causes and candidates. A "fairness doctrine" existed that allowed radio stations to express their own opinions on issues but required them to allot time for other views. These regulations could be implemented because mass communication was still one-to-many via radio and TV.

People had some control of their media consumption. They could change radio stations, subscribe to different newspapers or magazines, or switch TV channels. With the advent of the Internet, communication becomes many-to-many, especially with the creation of social media. Under President Reagan, deregulation removed the requirements of common carriers to take account of the public good. Still, on Facebook you could choose what to see—by choosing and following your friends.

Chapter 3 highlights a significant change with the advent of the Facebook News Feed. What changed is that Facebook started to make decisions about what people see. With the News Feed, "Facebook was a different beast—part broadcaster, part wiretapper, part propagandist" (p. 69). Although Facebook (and YouTube) had to start regulating themselves to filter out hateful and pornographic content, leaders of tech companies still maintained unrestrained optimism.

The next section of the book ("The Tragedy of Communication") explores the consequences of fast, efficient, unregulated communication via email, texting, and social media feeds and near-constant smartphone notifications. The consequences include the creation of textspeak, which includes emojis, thus allowing social media platforms to directly monitor the emotions of its users. Textspeak includes less depth and rigor because of the expected "requirement" to answer quickly. "The language we use shapes not just how we express our thoughts; it shapes the form of our thoughts. It influences how we think as well as how we talk" (p. 100). "People no longer have the luxury of careful reading, methodical evaluation, and contemplative inquiry" (p. 101).

Another consequence is "antipathies." This section answers the question, "Why does social media cause factionalization?" by bringing in a fair amount of sociology and psychology research. Consider this observation: "By turning us all into media personalities, social media has also turned us all into rivals" (p. 109). Sociology and psychology also have shown that oversharing leads to lack of empathy.

The predictions that the democratization of information would lead to an enlightenment of participants to myriad viewpoints is shown to be wrong. Unchecked, unfettered, efficient communication leads to a pollution of the public square with lies and misinformation, and divides people into bitterly opposed camps. Moreover, real facts are boring; sensational extreme opinions are shared wider and faster. Thus, it is easier to be less informed.

The final section of the book ("Everything is Mediated") reads a bit like a doomsday prediction. Here, Carr addresses the question of who we see ourselves as, in this age. People have always identified themselves in relation to their society. Now, with social media and social distancing, we do it even more by managing our online profiles and observing how others react. "We're all masters of 'the arts of impression management'" (p. 160). "The social and the real have parted ways" (p. 162). And, "in 2012, half of American teenagers said they'd rather socialize with friends through screens than in person" (p. 170). The result? An epidemic of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, especially among, but not limited to, teenagers.

Today, machines create content in the form of chatbots, therapists, and virtual friends. People are not just gullible, believing false "news," but are becoming cynical about all they sense. "Authoritarian regimes and leaders with authoritarian tendencies benefit when objective truths lose their power" (p. 198).

The author wonders if we will soon see people living in a completely virtual world made possible by using VR/AR goggles. He argues that people are already living in a virtual world by constantly staring at their smartphones. Why do we do this? Perhaps to get back some control of how we are perceived. But also, unwillingly, we are victims of brain-manipulating algorithms. And, even knowing this, we choose it. "We're being given what we want, in quantities so generous we can't resist gorging ourselves" (p. 217).

Is reform possible? Perhaps. The European Union has attempted to do so by regulating tech. But their efforts haven't really worked. Groups of people want to add "friction" to the system—to slow it down or regulate it—by adding desirable inefficiencies. Can we take back control and free ourselves from technological tyranny? It is hard to change the ways of the oligarchy who have become famously wealthy by providing the technology. "But maybe it's not too late to change ourselves" (p. 228). We need to be rooted in the real world. We need to sense and feel actual things. Otherwise, we'll be trapped in hyperreality, which is all surface and no depth. "You can only get beyond the material by going through the material, by suffering and surmounting its frictions. And that becomes harder and harder to accomplish or even to imagine the more that life is mediated by mechanisms of communication" (p. 231). "Maybe salvation, if that's not too strong a word, lies in personal, willful acts of excommunication" (p. 232).

Although Nicholas Carr does not claim (publicly) to be a Christian, you will notice significant Christian themes in his writing and especially his limited hope for remediation. Undoing the harm of social media includes Christian themes such as incarnation—*being* in the real world—and grounding your identity not in others' opinions but, for Christians, as a beloved child of God.

Perhaps the state of our world offers new opportunities for Christians to share God's love by help-

ing people throw off the chains of the tyranny of over-communication.

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Theology

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GENDER AS LOVE: A Theological Account of Human Identity, Embodied Desire, and Our Social Worlds by Fellipe M. do Vale. Baker Academic, 2023. 272 pages. Hardcover; $69.99. ISBN: 9781540967022. Paperback; $35.00. ISBN: 9781540966971. Ebook; $34.99. ISBN: 9781493443925.

Theoretical approaches to gender, and consequently theologies of gender, have historically divided into two opposing camps: the definition of gender as a social construct, and the definition of gender as a biological essence. In *Gender as Love*, Fellipe do Vale, theology professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, connects the two approaches to argue that gender is an essence (though not necessarily biological), which is "concerned with selves or identity and with the way selves organize social goods pertaining to their sexed bodies" (p. 23). That is, do Vale defines gender as an identity which involves biologically sexed bodies and the meaning given to sexed bodies in specific social contexts. Within the divine economy of salvation, he argues that a Christian theology of gender must center on love. The social goods we love as gendered individuals define who we are as gendered individuals. For do Vale, gender is love.

He begins in chapter 1 by developing John Webster's "theological theology" with its focus on God and the divine economy as a framework for his own approach to gender. Locating gender in the divine economy allows do Vale to distinguish between what qualities are essential or innate to being a gendered human, and what qualities are limited to a particular stage of the divine economy (even if those qualities are universally experienced).

In chapter 2, do Vale thoroughly reviews the history of theories of gender as a social construct. He critiques these theories for their rejection of any stability or consistency in gender categories across time and space. If there is no consistent understanding of what "women" are, then the category "women" has no moral value. That is, if it is impossible to identify "women" in particular historical or cultural contexts as the same kind of being as "women" in other particular historical or cultural contexts, then it is also impossible to make claims concerning gender justice and injustice. According to do Vale, although social construct theories of gender are guided by the desire for gender justice, they functionally lead to injustice. They are ultimately inadequate for the work of defining gender.

Chapter 3 begins with a too-brief analysis of biological essentialism. Given the importance of definitions of gender that prioritize the body to the exclusion of social and cultural contexts within contemporary politics and church practice, it would be helpful to have a more robust discussion and critique here. Do Vale then charts his own middle path between essentialist and social construct theories. Drawing on insights from philosophers Charlotte Witt and Mari Mikkola, he argues that gender is an essence, though because of our location in the divine economy, we cannot fully define it. However, defining gender as an essence makes categorization as (for instance) "woman" or "man" possible across time and space, which in turn makes gender justice possible.

Finally, do Vale develops his definition of gender as an identity, which involves biologically sexed bodies given social meaning through the organization of gendered social goods. Social goods vary throughout history and across cultures, so the work of theology is descriptive: to discern and morally evaluate (based on justice and the gospel) the gendered social goods in a particular time and space. "Gender is tied to our created, sexed embodiment, but discipleship consists in knowing how to make use of and attach ourselves to cultural goods in ways consistent with the gospel" (p. 110).

The second half of the book develops do Vale's definition of gender as love, beginning in chapters 4 and 5 with Augustine's theology of love. According to Augustine, the objects of our love shape who we are. Do Vale extends this connection of love with identity to gender. If gender identity is defined as the organization of social goods around sexed bodies, and identities are formed by love, then what we love as gendered beings shapes and defines our gender identities.

> [T]here are many things we love in virtue of our sexed bodies. Doing so grants these beloved objects a social meaning and to us a social role, and this is our gender. More than that, we identify with these beloved goods, for they make us who we are and shape our narratives. Because our chief love is to God, moreover, Christians always have an obligation to evaluate these gendered goods in accord with the moral norms of all properly ordered love. (p. 144)

Do Vale's theory of gender resembles theologian Sarah Coakley's work on gender as desire. In his review of Coakley, do Vale notes the ambiguity of her definition of