

## Living Creatively: Cultures of *Koinonia* in a Technological World

Dr Christine Ledger

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*Dr Christine Ledger is an Academic Associate at St Mark's National Theological Centre and a member of the Public and Contextual Theology Strategic Research Centre, Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia. In 2008 she was CTPI Visiting Scholar and a Visiting Fellow to New College, University of Edinburgh.*

I am grateful to New College and the Centre for Theology and Public Issues for this opportunity to share with you today. More than that, I am grateful for the chance to be a Visiting Fellow here for these months and to strengthen the links between St Mark's National Theological Centre and New College and between CTPI and the Public and Contextual Theology Research Centre of Charles Sturt University (PACT). CTPI and PACT are both members of the Global Network for Public Theology and this is one way we can further our common work.

I have been using my time here in Edinburgh to work on a book springing from my PhD thesis (Ledger, 2004). So what I will share with you today is part of this work in progress.

The title of my paper is *Living Creatively: Cultures of Koinonia in a Technological World*. In this paper, I suggest that human creativity is profoundly relational and that this is implicit in our vocation as the *imago dei*, the image of God. God whose very being is *koinonia*, communion, calls us to develop our cultures in that same spirit. This has implications for technological culture, for our everyday life.

### **Technology**

Technology forms the pattern of our days and the face of our world. Increasingly, we rely on electronic communications, a globalised economy and sophisticated medical systems. We take technology so much for granted that we hardly notice it is there, let alone reflect theologically about it. Debates about the ethics of technology are often limited to the good and bad uses to which technology is put. However, that is only part of the picture. The significance of technology lies not so much in its uses as in the technological culture that is built and expressed through technology.

Albert Borgmann, a contemporary philosopher of technology, suggests that the devices we use each day shape and define our culture in powerful ways. He writes of a "device para-

digim” and critically examines the way in which devices do and do not enhance relationships with other people and with the physical world (Borgmann, 1984). While making commodities available to us, devices are characterised by their abstractness and remoteness from the processes and machinery which operate them. Devices replace what Borgmann calls focal things and focal practices so that once important social traditions have been reduced to the abstract provision of commodities.

For example, central heating provides the commodity of heat conveniently and reliably. Few of us in industrialised societies live with the daily burdens of carting, chopping and burning firewood anymore. We have the convenience of comfort at the touch of a button. The fuel at the power plant may be a fossil fuel, it may be wind or nuclear. Do we know? Do we care? It may or may not be more environmentally friendly. What we do know is that, at the push of a button, we have the commodity of warmth.

What we have lost as we installed central heating is the hearth of the home. The hearth was the focus for community. It was the place where a family gathered. There was a shared knowledge and understanding about the chopping and collection of the wood, the tending of the fire, and the disposal of the ashes. The fire was a place which drew people together and which offered hospitality and stimulated conversation. In centrally heated homes we have the comfort necessary for watching TV or surfing the Internet in the privacy of our own rooms.

The loss of the hearth is not only an example of Borgmann’s device paradigm, it also a metaphor for the effect all sorts of devices can have on our daily lives. I am sure you can find many other examples of community-based practice being transformed in to a commodity. We enjoy music through the privacy of earphones rather than singing in a croaky fashion around a piano. We have burglar alarms rather than a network of well-known neighbours. The fabric of our daily lives is woven in, around and through devices many of which sit on a foundation of complex technological systems.

Recently, an elderly friend who lives alone told me she had bought her first computer and had enrolled in a basic Internet course. Her main motivation was to prepare for the day when she can no longer go out to do her shopping and may need to do her grocery shopping on line. Very sensible and practical but does her decision reveal a deeper anxiety in her heart, I wonder, an anxiety that she will need to rely more and more on her own efforts to meet her needs via a technological interface? What happens, then, if she has that diabetic stroke at home alone? Will anyone notice?

This is not an argument for ripping out our central heating systems, throwing away our iPods, and disposing of our alarm systems in a spirit of nostalgia. It is an argument for attuning ourselves to the way in which our technological way of being can have the effect of robbing our daily lives of focal things and practices that arise from community and that gather us into relationship with the natural and social world. We can become so embedded in our technological culture that we do not look back on to it to see and understand its features and characteristics. Yes, we have the convenience of central heating and Internet shopping. But do we have a good sense of the fuel supply? Do we know, or care, when our neighbours right next door are

in need? In short have our relationships with other people and our awareness of the well-being of the natural world been diminished?

If our world becomes defined by the ease and illusion of control which technology brings, we are in danger of losing sight of the importance of loving relationships with people, the world around us and God our creator. If we take technology for granted, we may live with the illusion that we can solve any problem, whether it be environmental, social or political, with the right formula, technique or device while at the same time losing touch with the wisdom that comes from knowing the real world with its real people.

As we increasingly interact with the world through devices at the expense of more embodied ways of interacting we lose touch with the materiality and ecology of God's creation. We can become careless of, even blind to, patterns of ecological, social and ultimately divine relationships. Inasmuch as our technological culture does not recognise, take into account and care for this network of relationships, our creativity is stunted. What is needed is a way of thinking about and relating to the world that gives honour and reverence to others and to God. Only then can we grasp our full creative potential. The theology of creation provides resources for doing just that.

### **Creativity**

Relational life, and not self-sufficient isolation, is a defining feature of God and God's creation. The world's relatedness to God is entirely natural in that the very existence of the world depends on God's creative action. Relational understandings of God and God's creation flow from a trinitarian understanding of God's being as communion (Zizioulas, 1985). Just as the persons of God are in communion so too is God's action in the world one of loving relations. This action continues through ecological and social relationships. Human beings, made in the image of God, have a unique vocation in relation to the world. If we were to live true to that vocation of being the *imago dei*, what would be the implications for our technological culture?

This relational understanding of the *imago dei*, while affirming that human beings have a special role in God's world, implies that our role is not to exploit or control others but to nurture loving and life-giving relationships. This requires us to be aware of our createdness as well as our creativeness, to be created co-creators (Hefner, 1993). To forget or deny our createdness is to distort our relationship with God. It can lead us to the danger of idolatry, of worshipping the creature rather than the creator. An appreciation of our relatedness to God and to other creatures mitigates against such attitudes. Our special role as the image of God is to be carried out in a spirit of humility in the knowledge of our contingency and finitude, and also in the spirit of service in the knowledge of our vocation to cooperate with God's purposes for creation. To live out this vocation, we need to accept our limitations and not claim all creative powers as our own.

In this way, a trinitarian understanding of the *imago dei* throws a spot light on to our technological culture. When we drift into believing that the world is here primarily for our instru-

mental and selfish benefit or when we become convinced that, through our own self-sufficiency, we will find technological fixes to all the world's crises, then we lose sight of our God-given relatedness to creation. We set ourselves apart from the world and from God and from the spirit of communion we are called to enter and nurture.

A trinitarian theology of creation helps us to see technological culture for what it is by throwing into relief ways in which our daily life ignores or denies the bonds of relation that link us with God and the world. It also indicates ways of understanding and developing ways of life which give attention to the discovery, or recovery, of creativity arising from loving relations. I call these ways cultures of *koinonia*.

### **Cultures of *koinonia***

*Koinonia* is most commonly understood as the fellowship or community of the church. A trinitarian understanding of the doctrine of creation stresses that the being of the church is an echo of the triune being of God. Just as the nature and activity of the triune God is that of communion, so is the church called to be.

However, God's creative activity is not limited to the church. It embraces the world and all that is. The church does not have a monopoly on communion. Communion as a way of being flows from God to the whole of creation. The social character of human beings flows from God and we are called to exercise our God-given vocation in the full range of economic, legal, political, cultural and personal forms of human organisation.

Just as *koinonia* is not limited to the life of the church, neither are the churches immune from being influenced by technological worldviews and culture in their theology and practice. For example, spirituality itself can be marketed as a commodity. Commodified religion is individualistic rather than communal, self-referential rather than God-centred.

Technological culture also affects sacramental life. Sacramental practices of the church resonate with our daily life practices— for example, sharing bread and wine in the communion echoes our daily meals. However, the everyday culture of preparing and sharing a communal meal is being lost as a daily practice. Shared meals are being replaced by the hasty and private consumption of fast foods. Eating has become an instrumentalist activity rather than a focal practice. Its symbolic power is weakened as it no longer holds the same cultural moorings for those who participate in it.

If, then, we are to develop cultures of *koinonia*, a transformation of both church and daily life and the bonds between them is called for. A key to this transformation is the nurturing of what Borgmann calls focal things and focal practices that arise from creativity and focus community. Churches have focal things—chalice, book, font—which are not meaningless objects. They are created with care and used with reverence. They become holy as we engage and interact with them in worship. Our corresponding daily practices, e.g. sharing a meal, are those activities which require discipline, commitment and engagement with the world and others. Through repetition they form a lifestyle. Gathering around a meal table or communion

table is an act repeated over and over but each occasion has its own character which can't be predicted. Universality and particularity co-inhere. It is unlike the homogeneity and predictability of the repetitive technological production process.

How, then might we seek out and develop things and practices which spring from and deepen our relational life, our *koinonia*? The simpler course is to identify things and practices known to us which are endangered. That is, what aspects of our lives are threatened by technological culture? Is it important to preserve them? Or are we being unnecessarily romantic and nostalgic? A second course is to recognise new things and practices emerging from creative community which require our care and nurture. The third and most difficult course is to exercise our creative imaginations together to create new things and practices which speak of *koinonia*. For each of these courses of action, the guiding theological principle is that creativity is profoundly relational.

In this way, we can change the rules. Instead of technological devices taking centre stage, we see them more clearly with their limitations as well as their usefulness. While they might deliver useful commodities, they are limited in the power to protect and nurture our community.

Cultures of *koinonia* draw upon our natural creativity that is grounded in loving relations as revealed in Christ. They flow from the recognition that that we are are not self-sufficient beings in total control of the world but, rather, that we are created co-creators called to echo God's being in communion. Cultures of *koinonia* recognise this and are formed in this spirit. They are cultures which give time and importance to learning about, understanding and respecting the ecology of the natural world and its diversity. Cultures of *koinonia* recognise our contingency upon God and our createdness. Our creativity springs from a humility and love, not arrogance and selfishness.

So, now let us turn to some specific aspects of our daily lives where we might discern and practise cultures of *koinonia*.

### **The culture of the table**

The first culture of *koinonia* I would like to address is the culture of the table.

Food and drink. The stuff of life. Those of us who live in prosperous technological societies take it for granted that it will be there on the supermarket shelves and in our refrigerators, whatever the season. It is packaged and prepared for our convenience, washed and ready to microwave. Better still, we can buy it already cooked to be eaten on the run. Food is a commodity, prepared for individual tastes, often eaten alone while at our desks or in front of the television and packaged in amusing ways for our entertainment. What is happening to the meal around the table with family and friends and the sharing of news and views, joys and grievances?

Today we read about a global food crisis in the newspapers. The reasons for this crisis are complex and include land degradation, global warming, drought and the rising cost of fossil fuels. At the same time there is gross wastage of food in industrialised societies which also transport food large distances. A simple lunch brings the world to our table but how aware are we of the ecological and human cost?

So how do we see and imagine a culture of the table based on *koinonia*?

The answers may range from a family simply deciding to eat together once a week, to a church establishing a neighbourhood garden, to governments and nations together addressing carbon emissions and just access to seeds. Just our technological culture is embedded in our lives at all levels of life, so too must our response be multifaceted. Each facet should remind us of our contingency, our dependence upon God our Creator. It should, in effect, be an expression of our prayer "give us this day our daily bread". The communion table should then remind us of gathering around the dining table, and *vice versa*. And not only the dining table, but also the neighbourhood garden, the wheat fields, environmental groups, the international forums addressing pressing economic and ecological matters. The Eucharist is central to *koinonia*. As we gather around the table, we are focused upon God in recognition and respect and our awareness of our createdness and our relatedness is heightened. The Eucharist is the gathering of the people of God in full relationship, celebrating *koinonia* with God and the whole creation.

I attended a conference after Easter at Scottish Churches House in Dunblane. A small group I was part of chose table fellowship to describe their hopes and visions this way:

"All people hunger for food, love and purpose. Our hope therefore is that all can practise more fully table fellowship. A table where hostility is transformed into hospitality. A table where all are both hosts and guests and where diversity is honoured. A table where we learn about the pains and hopes of each other, creation and God. A table of mercy and reconciliation where we celebrate God's faithfulness."

### **The culture of the word**

The second culture of *koinonia*, the culture of the word, refers to patterns of language, communication and information.

Information technology has brought whole libraries and mountains of mail, junk and otherwise, into our homes, offices and airport lounges. It is becoming less and less necessary to put pen to paper, visit a library, open a book, or engage in a face to face conversation. We have become very fond of our computers and can be quite distraught if they fail us. They connect us to our friends and to the world and we have become very reliant on them for communication and information. We are lost without them.

However, computer-mediated communication is only one way of communicating and accessing information. Borgmann makes the distinction between information *about* reality, information *for* reality and information *as* reality (Borgmann, 1999). Information about reality are natural and human-made signs about the world. Kangaroo tracks and mole hills are information about reality. Information for reality include recipes, musical scores and architectural plans. They arise from our creativity and aid our creative endeavours. Information as reality is what we often call virtual reality, the information and communication we glean from the computer screen. All these forms of information exist side by side and interwoven but as we spend and more time with the computer, the other kinds of information exchange are being squeezed out of our daily lives.

Information about and for reality is familiar and incorporated into culture. However our ability to read, understand and use some of this information is fading as we become more remote from the natural world and lose some cultural skills. The skills for reading kangaroo tracks and recognising mole hills, the time to read a good book, or even the time and confidence to interact socially face to face can be eroded. More than that, communication by email and mobile phone, increases our capacity to treat others as objects to be screened out or turned off without dealing with inconvenient or uncomfortable demands.

The way we use our time and our effort in our technological world has changed. Many devices are time and labour saving. We can send an email to hundreds at the flick of a switch and have answers in five minutes. This certainly extends our capacity to connect with people. This is just one way in which it appears that the world is more engaged in building relationships than ever before in history. Yet, can this connectedness be equated with healthy community, with *koinonia*? It takes time and inconvenient effort to visit someone in hospital or to take a bus to meet a friend. While the emails may play a part in building community, if the time spent at the computer becomes our dominant and preferred mode of communication a dimension of embodied community suffers.

Theologically, the culture of the Word has powerful connotations. The Word became flesh and lived among us. The information, the communication that God has with creation takes the form of a person, Jesus Christ. This incarnation is a profoundly embodied and relational culture of the word. But, just as the culture of the communion table is in danger of losing its echo in daily life, so too is the culture of the word in danger of losing its cultural moorings as information exchange becomes increasingly disembodied and disengaged from the natural world. In our worship practices, the reading of the Bible, the sermon, the offering of prayers and communal praise are ways in which knowledge about God, the world and each other is shared and *koinonia* deepened. These practices may seem archaic in a world flooded by electronic communication. But the gathering of community to share stories of their lives speaks of the Word of God being received in our embodied particularity and in diverse community.

How might we practise the culture of the word in our daily lives? Storytelling circles, book clubs, wildlife clubs, walking groups, choirs, support groups for those in trouble or crisis are examples of ways in which people gather, not only to learn about the world, but also to meet each other. Education policies and practices which enable rather than hinder the development

of communities of scholars are important too. While distance education is a valuable tool especially for those in isolated communities, should it become the norm for all learning?

### **Culture of the body**

The third culture of *koinonia* is the culture of the body.

Medical technology has brought great relief from physical pain and suffering and this is to be celebrated. However, it has also brought changes in our attitudes to the human body. We regard our bodies as objects to be controlled. We own, maintain and repair them as we do a car and become angry or frustrated when they do not bend to our will. Plastic surgery, attempts to halt or slow the ageing process, gene therapy whereby everything from serious illnesses to minor defects might be corrected or screened out—they all reveal an expectation that the perfect body is to be striven for. This pursuit of perfection has led us to regard illness, deformity and death as defeats and failures of our technological capacity to control the machinery of our bodies. These defeats make us angry or frustrated. There is an irony that when we are sick we are called “patients” when patience is a increasingly difficult virtue to practise (Hauerwas, 1996).

Under the influence of this medical culture, it is hard for us to accept our very mortality and finitude. Ageing itself has become a disease. We come to believe that our physical destiny is in our own hands and that perhaps our very finitude can be designed, if not overcome.

A culture of *koinonia* in relation to the body involves recovering the practice of patience. This derives from our knowledge of God’s loving and patient care of us and our world. It is informed by our awareness of our own createdness and contingency and an acceptance of our frailty and limitations. This does not mean that we should disregard and fail to care for our bodies. Quite the opposite. It requires us to listen to and learn from our bodies, to treat them with respect and to live as healthily as we are able.

Living in a technological society gives us many opportunities and excuses for not exerting ourselves physically. Transport, communication and entertainment systems relieve us of this burden. In the process, we lose touch with our own bodies and the world around us. Physical activities, whether a simple walk to running a marathon, remind us of the abilities and the limitations of our bodies. Such activities, practised alone or with others, require discipline, time and effort. They engage us with our bodies and the world in a way that cars and television do not.

A culture of the body shaped by *koinonia* is informed by Christian understandings of the incarnation, the resurrection of Christ and the church as the body of Christ. The church is likened to a body of mutually dependent members with diverse but equal gifts. Death is a transformation rather than a defeat.



Baptism leads us to understand our bodies in terms of Christ's life, death and resurrection. It reminds us of our createdness, it assures us that death is not to be feared and it promises us the joy of the reconciliation of God's creation. In baptism, we are promised perfection and transcendence but in a very different way from technological perfection. We are promised reconciliation, communion, the fullness of life and relationship not the isolation of self-sufficiency.

A culture of the body shaped by *koinonia* does not eschew medical technology but rather puts it in proper perspective. It is formed by an attitude whereby we respect and care for our own and each other's bodies as creatures of God but do not idolise them as objects for control. Such an attitude helps us to discern between medicine that assists the compassionate relief of pain and suffering and that which belies a selfish or idolatrous preoccupation with perfection. This does not mean that we are thereby provided with a blueprint for ethical limits for particular technologies. Rather, we are encouraged to set aside an instrumentalist approach to our bodies and embrace one which identifies with the story of Jesus' incarnation, life, death and resurrection.

This culture of the body is relational rather than individualistic. Just as Jesus' ministry of healing was grounded in the healing of relationships, a culture of body based on *koinonia* sees each of us as a member of the body of Christ to be cared for and comforted by the community, not as an individual and autonomous sick body to be cured. When one hurts, the whole community is affected and involved. Pastoral care, intercessory prayer, anointing, counselling, practical assistance are all aspects of this culture of *koinonia*. We belong to God and to one another and share in the gift of life.

## **Conclusion**

So far, I have spoken about three specific cultures of *koinonia*, namely the culture of the table, the culture of the word and the culture of the body. There are other cultural aspects of our daily lives which can be similarly elaborated. Here I will simply note them.

**There is the culture of vocation.** How is our daily work shaped by technological culture? Are our industrial relations policies and practices informed by *koinonia*? Is our creativity and identity too narrowly linked to our paid employment? How might our work, our work places and work practices more clearly be an expression of our vocation to be created co-creators?

**There is the culture of peace.** Security systems, surveillance cameras and military technology are based on a culture of fear of the other. A culture of peace finds its basis in recognition and respect. Security is found in strong social and ecological relationships and in the knowledge and love of God. This has implications for conflict resolution and peacemaking from the domestic to the international levels of life.

**There is the culture of celebration.** Communal celebration in contemporary culture is often supplanted by products to entertain and divert us. The very shape of our cities can hinder our capacity to celebrate if the shopping malls and freeways devours our public space. The cul-

ture of celebration leads us to understand the importance of gathering in community. This has implications for urban planning and architecture.

The table, the word, the body, vocations, peace, celebration- these are all aspects of our daily lives which find their echo in the *koinonia* of the church's worship. The culture of the table finds its echo in the communion table. The culture of the word finds its echo in the reading of the Bible, sermons and prayers. The culture of the body in the sacrament of baptism, the care and anointing of the sick. The culture of vocation finds its echo in being sent out into the world to love and serve the Lord. The culture of peace in confession, forgiveness and the passing of the peace. The culture of celebration in our very recognition and praise of God.

Cultures of *koinonia*, if practised and enjoyed, have the potential to enrich our daily lives as citizens of the world and members of the church. I leave you with the three questions that I am currently grappling with as I write.

First, what are the cultures of *koinonia* disappearing from our lives that we want to protect?

What are the new and emerging cultures of *koinonia* we want to encourage?

What are the cultures of *koinonia* we can imagine and work towards?

The answers to these questions cannot be trite formulae or prescriptions to be handed down. If it is true that our God-given creativity is relational, the manner of our decision-making is as important as the decisions themselves. The questions are challenges to our corporate creativity to be grappled with together and in the spirit of community we seek. They are questions for families, for churches, for governments, for nations—wherever people gather in constructive relationship to listen to God, each other and to the environment.

So, thank you for listening to me. Thank you for the work you are doing here in Edinburgh that you have shared with me, not least CTPI's *Netting Citizens* (McKay, 2004). And thank you for the spirit of hospitality and *koinonia* with which you have welcomed me into your community.

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