

Poets and Prophets in a Machine Age: Reinhold Niebuhr on Technology

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Reinhold Niebuhr, the mid-twentieth century theologian, political philosopher, and social critic, wrote frequently about the deeper implications of technology. More specifically, he examined the moral and spiritual consequences of rapid technological change. In his view the industrial revolution mechanized social relations in a way that undermined the innate human awareness of the interconnection between the self, the universe, and other human beings on which morality and spirituality is built. He argued for the possibility of reestablishing awareness of these interconnections in industrialized societies by reclaiming the social roles of the poet and the prophet. This article outlines Niebuhr's strategy for recasting these poetic and prophetic roles in the context of technologically advanced societies, analyzes Niebuhr's own prophetic stance toward technology and society in his classic 1952 work *The Irony of American History*, and examines how Niebuhr's vision for the poetic and the prophetic provides a framework for own attempts to work with technology in a morally responsible way. . [Article copies available for a fee from *The Transformative Studies Institute*. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2012 by *The Transformative Studies Institute*. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS: Niebuhr, Technology, Religion and Science, Poet, Prophet.

It may initially seem odd that the individual featured on the cover of Time Magazine's 25th anniversary edition in 1948 was, of all things, a

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