Technology is a religious issue

November 14, 2014

Technology is a religious issue. It is part of how we live our daily lives and a part of what we ultimately value. Look, for example, at the issues at stake in net neutrality. The Internet is the “key to innovation” the White House says, and Obama calls it a key to freedom, bowing to two of the biggest icons of American civic religion: what is new and what is free. These are the things we worship, value, and protect. Look at the electrical engineering building at the University of Washington: it looks like a cathedral.

But these examples, the rhetoric of net neutrality, UW’s cathedral, risk trivializing the vital point they illustrate: that technology is deeply, historically, inextricably, bound up in what we believe and how we behave. The point about behavior is manifest: look at what we carry, everywhere, all the time. The point about belief is more subtle, and deeper than a question of what we value. It is realizing that we are now powerful enough to make our own worlds, and realizing that this is a creative power, some say on par with the power that created our starter-world, this world out of which we build.

So calling technology a religious issue does not merely mean that we value or worship it, although it is true that we do. Nor does it primarily call attention to individual spiritual experiences in the technological world – although these are vitally important. It calls attention instead to the great traditions through which people have understood the world they inhabit and their roles within it, and how those traditions intersect with technology. It calls particular attention to the Christian religion, with its emphasis on creation and its role as the predominant faith in the regions from which modern technologies arose. Speaking of technology as a religious issue calls attention to what we can do, what we do do, and what we leave undone. It is ultimately about surveying what we have created, and asking: is it good?