

# TECHNO-SECULARISM AND “REVEALED RELIGION”: SOME PROBLEMS WITH CAIAZZA’S ANALYSIS

*by Gordon D. Kaufman*

*Abstract.* Instead of focusing my remarks on John Caiazza’s interesting and important thesis about the way in which modern technology is drastically secularizing our culture today, I examine the *frame* within which he sets out his thesis, a frame I regard as seriously flawed. Caiazza’s argument is concerned with the broad range of religion/science/technology issues in today’s world, but the only religion that he seems to take seriously is what he calls “revealed religion” (Christianity). His consideration of religion is thus narrow and cramped, and this makes it difficult to assess properly the significance of what he calls techno-secularism. I suggest that employing a broader conception of religion would enable us to see more clearly what is really at stake in the rise of techno-secularism. Instead of defining the issues in the polarizing terms of revealed religion versus secularity, I argue for a more integrative approach in which concepts are developed that can bring together and hold together major religious insights and themes with modern scientific thinking. If, for example, we give up the anthropomorphism of the traditional idea of God as creator and think of God as simply *creativity*, it becomes possible to integrate theological insights with current scientific thinking and to formulate the issues posed by the rise of techno-secularism in a more illuminating way. This in turn should facilitate effective address of those issues.

*Keywords:* anthropomorphism; bridge concepts; Christian religion; creativity; double-truth problem; evolutionary theory; God as creativity; God as creator; God as mystery; integrative thinking; revealed knowledge; revealed religion; science versus religion; scientific cosmology; techno-secularism.

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John Caiazza's essay (2005) is an interesting piece, especially in its claim that a new, very threatening form of secularism—dubbed “techno-secularism” by the author—is becoming dominant in Western culture, reshaping our ethics and displacing our inherited religion. The longstanding intellectual warfare between science and religion has come to a kind of “draw,” he holds (2005, 12–14), and now the “magic” of techno-secularism is taking over our sociocultural life. Today “the success of secularism is based on the effects of technological advance rather than on the victory of scientific ideas in the conflict with religious beliefs” (p. 17). Caiazza does not offer any way out of this threatening situation, though he vaguely suggests at the end of his article that if we regain the “mystical intuition of Creation” (p. 20) we might begin to find our way again.

His discussion of the shift in our culture to a dominating techno-secularism is important. In these remarks, however, I do not concentrate my attention on this particular theme but rather examine briefly some aspects of the frame within which Caiazza sets out his thesis, a frame that makes it difficult to address the important problems he is calling to our attention.

By setting out his problematic in terms of the historical debate between the two competing cities, Athens and Jerusalem (Tertullian), Caiazza is led to frame the issue he is seeking to address in terms of the longstanding Western notion that there are “two major sources of knowledge and inspiration . . . , the secular and the revealed” (p. 10). He is careful to show how the secular countervoice to religion has been transformed from the early Christian period to the present, where it is largely incarnated in science, but he does not give the same kind of careful attention to the history of religion in the West; indeed, he seems to believe that religion has been, and should be, substantially unchanging. Throughout his article the word *religion* is used in a very narrow sense, usually designating the Christian religion, which is frequently referred to as “revealed religion.” Although he discusses William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, in his overall argument the customary broad inclusiveness of the word *religion* (which James takes for granted) is largely overlooked or ignored. Caiazza is obviously unsympathetic with James's openness to a wide spectrum of religiosity and with James's pragmatic approach; this may be due to his confidence that he knows what “true religion” (p. 20) is, namely, “revealed religion” (that is, Christianity). The possible relevance of other religious standpoints for understanding the nest of religion-and-science problems, as well as today's techno-secularism, is never seriously considered. He takes for granted (for example) that “It is in the historical context of the separation between secular and revealed knowledge that the 150-year-old controversy between evolutionary theory and religion [*all religion? every religious standpoint?*] is best understood” (p. 10). This narrow approach to the problems being discussed is nowhere explained, and no argument defending it is anywhere offered.

The Christian religion is throughout regarded as based on and defined by “revelation,” the “source” of which is said to have “remained constant” throughout history (p. 10). Both “revelation” and “its source” (oddly described as “the Gospels and the authority of the Western and Eastern bishops of the Christian church” [p. 10]) are also very narrowly understood here. That there are broader, more specifically humanistic understandings of Christianity that might be worth exploring as we seek to address the science/technology/religion problematic today does not seem to have occurred to Caiazza. Thus, the wide and intricate intellectual and cultural context of these large and important problems is warped in his article. In sharp contrast with his narrow standpoint, I will argue that precisely the widespread acceptance of evolutionary theory in today’s world has itself helped transform in a positive way the context within which we now live and do our thinking, and this opens up the possibility of addressing the religion/science/technology issues in new ways.

Throughout his essay Caiazza uses such locutions as “revealed religion” and “revealed knowledge” as if they were unproblematic and self-explanatory. He is correct, of course, in contending that for many centuries Christian writers and thinkers took for granted that there were “two major sources of knowledge and inspiration,” and it may well be true (as Leo Strauss suggests) that precisely this tension may underlie some of the “vitality and uniqueness” of Western civilization (p. 10). But these observations do not in themselves justify our continuing use, in public argumentation, of such notions as revealed religion, revealed knowledge, and the like. We need to pay careful attention to the reasons why such language is problematic for—indeed regarded as absurd by—many who have deep interests in the broad religion-and-science issues. I want now to sketch briefly some of these matters to which, it seems to me, Caiazza should have attended if he wanted his argument to be taken seriously by a wide circle of readers.

How should we understand a term such as *revealed knowledge*? Traditionally it has been taken to mean knowledge that humans could not have gained simply by themselves but that was revealed by God, especially in and through the text of the Bible. In the Bible we find stories of God’s acts and of God’s speaking directly with certain human beings; the story of God’s gift of the Law to Moses; stories of the appearance of prophets, who bring the “word of God” to ordinary humans; and, most centrally for Christians, the story of Jesus Christ who is said to be the very “Word” of God (John 1). In addition to biblical “revelations” of these and other sorts, there are, of course, persons who think that God gives private revelations to them from time to time: about what they should do, how they should live, what is true and what is false in some of the arguments (political, economic, moral, religious, and so on) going on roundabout. But what is the justification for this talk about divine revelation(s)?

As it turns out, all that can be said about this question is that it is just one more set of human claims. The Bible, after all, was put together by human writers and editors over several thousand years of Israelite, Jewish, and early Christian history. Hence, most scholars in the West, in seminaries as well as universities, study and teach the Bible as a historical product of specific streams of Near Eastern culture. (Caiazza surely must be aware of this, though it is not mentioned or even implied in his article.) Though the Bible may be called the word of God by some, this is simply a claim made by certain groups. There is no way to verify such a claim. Many men and women have believed that God directly revealed the Bible's text, or the church's creeds, or various prophets' pronouncements. But this tells us nothing about the validity or truth of these convictions. Other very firm convictions of many different sorts have similarly been widely believed but later seen to be false: the idea that the earth is flat, for example, and that the sun daily goes around the earth and can be seen to "rise" in the morning sky. All modern readers have had to make significant adjustments as they attempt to appropriate the sort of thinking about God, the world, and humanity found in the Bible and in early Christian traditions. It no longer makes sense to many of us to hold some of these ancient beliefs. Today's generally accepted understandings of the world and of ourselves as humans have forced upon Christians many major changes in what had earlier been regarded as central religious convictions, convictions underlying important traditional religious behaviors. Future generations will likely find themselves similarly forced to make further changes not now foreseeable.

In discussing public issues as large and complex as the relations of religion, science, and technology in today's world, therefore, one must be careful how one uses such traditional notions as *revealed knowledge*. Employment of this concept seriously complicates the religion/science problem. For some participants in the discussion, such alleged knowledge is regarded as unquestionably true, because it was revealed by God, and for such persons this claim is regarded as virtually self-evident. Others in the conversation are unwilling to concede this point, because they regard all claims, including these, to be simply human claims that must be justified and defended in ordinary human ways. The introduction of revelation language thus produces a blocked situation that is impossible to get around or through. Caiazza's lack of attention to this whole nest of problems raised by his easy use of the notions of revealed knowledge and revealed religion bespeaks a failure to grasp the actual intellectual and cultural context of the issues he is seeking to address. In public discourse there must be a level playing ground for all claims and contentions. To claim—or to take it for granted, as Caiazza seems to do—that some beliefs or ideas have been revealed by God is to hold these particular items as not subject to ordinary human criticism or rejection. However, this itself is just one more human claim,

and if one wishes to make it, it should be explicated and defended in terms intelligible to and acceptable by the public engaged in discussion of the issues under consideration. Unfortunately, nowhere in Caiazza's article is this issue taken up and clearly addressed, so the confrontation between "secular knowledge" and "revealed knowledge"—central to his paper—is never directly joined.

This may be because it is virtually impossible in today's open public square to develop a convincing argument that some knowledge claims must be accepted as true simply on the ground that God is alleged to have revealed them. This is not because of some scientific "reductive agenda that attempted to delegitimize revealed knowledge," as Caiazza suggests (p. 12). (Calling the agenda of the sciences "reductive" is an old and widely used slam.) Nor is the critical attitude respecting allegedly revealed knowledge due to the claims that in the end science will produce "a sure result, undeniable and irrefutable, so unlike theology and metaphysics" (p. 13): an important feature of today's scientific method is, in fact, its continuous review, reconsideration, and reformulation of major assumptions and presuppositions. In current Western argumentation all widely contested claims are expected to be defended and justified by what are generally regarded as plausible arguments. It may be that Caiazza does not bother to take up this matter because he senses the difficulty (impossibility?), in today's world, of making a persuasive argument for his revelation language. In failing to do so, he ignores issues that need to be addressed in his essay and goes blithely forward seemingly taking for granted that the ongoing religion-and-science problematic is largely an outcome of the irreconcilable tension between revealed knowledge and secular knowledge. Although this is qualified slightly by his view that today "we must distinguish scientific theory from its applications—that is, science as explanation from science as technology" (p. 14), it still remains too simple a judgment, for there are other alternatives that could well be considered.

We are likely, I believe, to make better progress in grasping and addressing the problem of techno-secularism if it is formulated in less contested terms. For example, we might explore the question of whether and how Christian (and other religious) insights, understandings, values, and meanings can be brought into significant relation with modern scientific conceptions of the world and the human place within this evolutionary world. This is a broader and looser approach than Caiazza's, but it enables us to make an end run around the whole revealed versus secular knowledge issue. When formulated in this way, all of the pertinent issues can be freely considered by anyone interested in them. This approach, as we shall see, does not necessitate giving up entirely the notion of divine revelation; it is principally the notions of revealed *knowledge* and revealed *religion* that get in the

way of free and open discussion (in Caiazza's essay) of many of the important issues. In the approach I now sketch, God is regarded as *revealed* to us in a profoundly mysterious way, but a way that is simple, direct, and accessible and comprehensible to virtually everyone.

Fortunately, modern scientific cosmology—beginning with the Big Bang, moving through a cosmic evolutionary process for some billions of years during which the universe takes shape; and later on life's emergence and evolution into countless diverse forms (including us humans)—opens up the possibility of bringing evolutionary thinking about the world, and the web of life within the world, into significant connection with Christian theological themes. This is not the place to present a full-blown alternative to the dualistic framework (secular versus revealed knowledge) within which Caiazza works in his article. But I would like to present a quite different way of thinking about the issues with which he is concerned, an integrative approach in which concepts are developed that can bring together and hold together major Christian insights and themes with modern scientific thinking. Caiazza seems to believe that such integration is not possible, at any rate that it has never been achieved: "the integration of revealed knowledge found in the Bible and religious tradition with secular knowledge has never actually been accomplished" (p. 10). It should be noted that in this remark Caiazza, instead of using a neutral concept like "religious thinking," takes for granted that the question of integration of religious and secular knowledges is to be formulated in terms of uncritical acceptance of the concept of revealed knowledge, precisely the notion that makes the traditional duality unbridgeable. But what if we no longer think of the religious dimension of our knowledge as revealed? Then significant integration may be achievable.

As an example of what I have in mind here, I suggest that we look briefly at the integrative concept of *creativity*. In contrast with Caiazza's program, which never raises serious critical questions about either revealed knowledge or revealed religion, the approach I am proposing is much more open and flexible. Some of the problems with which Caiazza is concerned are, in my view, generated by the tacit assumption that although everything else is always changing, sometimes in drastic ways, religion (its beliefs, practices, and institutions) remains, and should remain, substantially as we have inherited it. This assumption certainly seems to underlie Caiazza's position. First, he frames his analysis in terms of a concept of divine "revelation" never critically examined. Second, he does not even raise the question of whether traditional Christian religion itself may be a significant contributor to the problems with which he is concerned. He seems to consider these problems to be entirely the result of historical changes in the sciences and in our secularity. This may be because of his tacit and seemingly uncritical acceptance of what I call the orthodoxy/heresy tradition, often taken for granted in theological reflection and construction.

This tradition mandates understanding and practicing the Christian religion basically as it has been defined by certain past ecclesiastical decisions. Is Caiazza working within constraints of this sort?

For years I have been speaking and writing of God as *creativity* (more recently as *serendipitous creativity*) rather than as creator. The word *creativity* does not presuppose or imply the existence of some kind of quasi-personal creator who deliberately decides to bring new realities into being; it simply expresses the understanding that realities which had not previously existed do come into being in time. This has occurred in the past, and it is almost certainly still going on. The word *creativity* leaves open the question of how or why the new comes into being, and the word *God* (in my view) should today be understood as the religious name for precisely this mystery of creativity, a mystery beyond human comprehension. The metaphor of creativity—a descendant of the biblical concept of creation, and directly implied in the idea of evolution—has resources, I suggest, for constructing a religiously pertinent and meaningful postmodern conception of God, an understanding that can quite appropriately become the central focus today for Christian faith and perhaps some other theocentric faiths as well.<sup>1</sup> (This does not conform well with what Caiazza takes to be revealed knowledge, so I suspect that he would not be willing even to consider a proposal of this sort.) “Creation is the greatest mystery of life,” as Nicholas Berdyaev has said, “the mystery of the appearance of something new that had never existed before and is not deduced from, or generated by, anything” (Berdyaev 1937, 163). The traditional idea of a quasi-personal creator who has brought everything into being, it should be noted, weakens this profound mystery of why there is something not nothing, for it involves the claim that we know something that we have no way of knowing.

It is not possible to connect in an intelligible way today’s scientific cosmological and evolutionary understandings of the origin of the universe and the emergence of life, including human life and history, with a conception of God constructed in traditional anthropomorphic terms as a kind of person-agent. What could we possibly be imagining when we attempt to think of God as an all-powerful personal reality existing somehow before and independent of what we today call the universe? As far as we know, personal agential beings did not exist, and could not have existed, before billions of years of cosmic evolution of a very specific sort, and then further billions of years of biological evolution also of a very specific sort, had transpired. How, then, can those of us who think of the universe in our modern evolutionary way—according to which neither life nor consciousness can be imagined apart from these specific evolutionary developments—continue to imagine God in such anthropomorphic terms? How can we today think of a personlike creator-God as existing before and apart from any such evolutionary processes? In many current discussions

of religion-and-science issues by theologians who otherwise seek to take modern evolutionary biology and cosmology seriously there is a failure to face this problem directly.

The idea of creativity, however (in contrast with the notion of a creator)—the idea simply of a coming into being through time of the previously nonexistent, the new, the novel—remains plausible today; indeed, it is bound up with the belief that our cosmos is an evolutionary one in which new orders of reality come into being in the course of exceedingly complex temporal developments. As brain scientist Terrence Deacon has observed, “Evolution is the one kind of process able to produce something out of nothing . . . an evolutionary process is an origination process. . . . Evolution is the author of its spontaneous creations” (Deacon 1997, 458). In my view, if we are interested in exploring thoroughly the problems taken up by Caiazza—problems involving broad social, cultural, and intellectual issues—we should not regard such notions as revealed knowledge simply as givens that cannot be tampered with, thus leaving the intellectual situation in an unbridgeable “double-truth” dualism between the revealed and the secular (to apply Siger deBrabant’s term quoted by Caiazza [p. 12]). Instead, we should seek to develop concepts—such as creativity, a notion that does not presuppose the anthropomorphic creator-agent idea—that can directly connect with crucial points on both sides of the religion-science divide. New and fresh ways to think about the issues with which we are concerned may then come into view.

Although creativity is not a word much used by scientists, it can be very useful philosophically and theologically, for it encourages us to focus on and hold together in a single concept a very significant feature of life and the world as understood today: that novel realities come into being in time. This belief goes all the way back into ancient times, when such occurrences were associated with God’s activity (Isaiah 43:19; 45:6–9). The understanding of God as creativity enables us to connect the concept of God with current thinking about the cosmos, the evolution of life, and the emergence and development of human life and culture on planet Earth.

The notion of creativity draws us into a deeper sensitivity to God-as-mystery than our more traditional religious conceptions do, with their talk of God as *the Creator*. This earlier concept seems to imply that we know that the ultimate mystery (God) is a personlike, agentlike being who “decides” to do things, who sets purposes and then brings about the realization of those purposes. This anthropomorphic model of God is found, of course, in the creation stories of the Bible: God is seen to be like a potter or sculptor who creates artifacts (Genesis 2) or like a poet or king who brings order and reality into being through uttering words (Genesis 1). With Darwin, however, we have learned that significant creativity can be thought of in other ways. Indeed, according to evolutionary theory these human forms of creativity have themselves come into being (“were created”) as



cosmic processes over long stretches of time brought into being very complex forms of life. The foundational kind of creativity for us today, therefore, is that exemplified in the evolution of the cosmos and life rather than that displayed in human purposive activity. Though we can describe this evolutionary model with some precision, it in no way overcomes the profound mystery at the root of all that is: Why is there something and not nothing? Why and how can something truly new come into being in the course of time?

There are, I suggest, three significantly different modalities of creativity, each of which manifests this profound mystery in its own distinctive way. The first is the initial coming into being of the universe in which we find ourselves, what is today commonly called the Big Bang—something momentous indeed, seemingly coming from nothing. A second modality is the creativity manifest in evolutionary processes, the ongoing coming into being of increasingly complex novel realities. In this mode creation is not thought of as simply and straightforwardly from nothing. It is, rather, creation in the context of other realities, the kind of complex processes that today are believed to have produced, over billions of years, countless different sorts of creatures, including humans. A third modality of creation, quite different from either of these two, is the human creation of cultures, languages, and other symbol systems—human symbolic creativity. There are doubtless other ways of thinking about the concept of creativity, but this threefold classification makes clear that this word, even though the sciences have not made much use of it, focuses our attention on something very widespread, indeed virtually all-comprehensive, in the universe as presently understood in scientific and humanistic thinking. This word can thus be used to connect our secular and our theological modes of thinking and can provide a way to overcome the double-truth dualism between secular and religious knowledge, in connection with which Caiazza has framed his reflections on techno-secularism. I do not explore here how these developments in our technology and our secularity might look were we to frame our inquiry with reference to this bridge concept.<sup>2</sup> But I would expect that a quite different description and assessment of techno-secularism would likely appear.

Like every other theological proposal, thinking of God as creativity is not without problematic features. Entirely giving up the concept of divine revelation, however, is not one of them. For creativity does indeed *manifest* itself: it is *revealed* whenever and wherever new realities come into being. God (creativity) has been and is revealed throughout the cosmos from the Big Bang on, and throughout human existence. Giving up the anthropomorphism of the traditional God means, of course, that the notions of revealed knowledge and revealed religion must go. For both knowledge and religion, though important products of creativity, are well-known features of human culture; they must therefore be understood, examined, and

assessed in terms of the values and meanings they introduce into human life. Thus, the dualistic double-truth problem in Caiazza's analysis is completely overcome, and all knowledge claims are put on an equal footing as strictly human, to be assessed in whatever way seems most appropriate.

So where does this leave us? The major issue which Caiazza wants to call to our attention is

the roaring reality of rampant secularism seen in the present day, and of science in the form of technological application as its chief agent. . . . Technological effects have acquired a life of their own, achieving a qualitative level of change so that now technology has its own ethics, theology, and unanticipated consequences. The displacement of religion from civic life is more the effect of technological ubiquity and power than the result of direct cultural and intellectual causes, a phenomenon that I call *techno-secularism*. (pp. 15, 18–19)

This is an interesting and important thesis that certainly deserves considerable attention. But how is the problem that Caiazza identifies here to be addressed? There is no discussion of that question in his essay. The framework in which he has set out this problem—radically distinguishing secular knowledge from revealed knowledge—leaves completely unexplored what is possibly one major root of the problem: the very idea of revealed knowledge, an idea held by many traditional Christians and regarded as not to be questioned. This idea, by emphasizing a kind of knowledge that is understood to be both indispensable for grasping what human life is all about and yet is by definition inaccessible to many intelligent and thoughtful women and men, makes it impossible to explore important matters that need careful scrutiny if the problem of religion/science/technology is to be addressed effectively. In contrast, the integrative approach that I have proposed, instead of focusing all its attention on the “secular” features of the problem (in the manner of Caiazza) and failing to examine the possibility that something is not working properly in the religious sphere, insists that *all* of the dimensions of the religion/science/technology complex must be carefully examined as we seek to diagnose more fully why and how things seem to be going dangerously wrong in our techno-secular world. Every feature of this world, including those supposed by some to be divinely revealed, must be carefully explored without prejudice if we are to discern an effective way to address these problems. Unfortunately the format within which Caiazza is working conceals the impact of some of the most important dimensions of the social, cultural, religious, scientific, technological world in which we live.

We should not be surprised, therefore, to discover at the end of Caiazza's paper that the most he is able to offer in addressing the serious issues he has called to our attention is the vague suggestion that we seek out “symbol[s] of mystical intuition of Creation” (p. 20). Just what he means by this vague suggestion is left completely unexplained. In contrast, the more

integrating and therefore more comprehensive approach that I have proposed—and have illustrated with God thought of as *creativity* instead of as *the Creator*—brings all of these dimensions of our human world together on a level playing ground. If something of this sort is followed through carefully, it may help us address the important problem that Caiazza has brought to our attention.

#### NOTES

1. A full discussion of creativity, from which these paragraphs are largely drawn, is found in Kaufman 2004. For an earlier less compact discussion see Kaufman 1993, chaps. 19–22.
2. For a fuller elaboration of these matters see Kaufman 2004, chap. 3.

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