WHOM TO BLAME FOR THE CHARGE OF SECULARIZATION?

by Lluís Oviedo

Abstract.　　In the last century science and technology have been viewed as guilty of contributing to the modern secularization process and also to a crisis in religion. The extent of this influence is less clear today: while technology is stronger, and an easy target for any kind of social and cultural criticism, science seems weaker than it used to. The aim of this commentary is to examine in a critical way the arguments for and against scientific and technological involvement in the crisis religion faces today. In the end, a revision of the future of religion is called into question, especially in the light of a more "technological theology."

Keywords:　　function of religion; Philip Hefner; Niklas Luhmann; secularization; technology.

Religious people have very often perceived scientific development as a threat, a real challenge to their convictions. Sociological scrutiny noted very early the secularizing effects of science, either in an intentional way, as for example through the positivist social engineering of August Comte, or in an unintentional way, as demonstrated by Max Weber.

The question of the effects of science on religious practice becomes more perilous in light of the crisis of institutional religion in most Western countries—areas where science has expanded further and reached a broader cultural consensus. From an empirical point of view, it is not clear if there is a causal relationship, if science should be deemed as a factor undermining religion. The fear behind any acknowledged negative influence of science in religious dynamics, at least from a Christian point of view, is that faith will suffer further attrition as long as science acquires a cognitive

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prestige in all fields of human life, something theology lacks. If they must compete, faith will probably lose.

One way to cope with the question is to draw some distinctions. The most popular one points to the difference between scientific research and more popular scientific presentations: the latter can take the form of an ideology, so-called scientism. The first should be positive or at least neutral toward the believer's expectations, while the second can become aggressively antireligious. Nevertheless, secularization is not always identifiable with the outcome of culture wars, which in our case are those fought between religious traditions and a scientist-secularist party. Secularization is very often a silent process with complex causes and uncertain results. The cultural tensions contribute clearly to the erosion of religious certainties, especially when the media create a culture of God-silence, but many authors identify this as only one part of the story of the modern religious crisis.

A second strategy is adopted in the article of John Caiazza (2005) and motivates the present study. According to Caiazza, science is good per se. In the past it may have exercised some kind of abusive dominion, even over religion, but now it suffers the attack of postmodern criticism and sociological scrutiny. As a result, it is weakened and unable to cause harm. Technology, however, keeps a strong cultural profile and still threatens many sensitive human and social areas, including religion. For the humanist cause, technology represents the ultimate challenge and an open question even for the survival of the human race. The characterization of "technique" as a dangerous development beyond human control and threatening human values, social solidarity, and any kind of spiritual insight is not new. Martin Heidegger (1957) was among the philosophers most critical of the illusions and alienations linked to technology. Others have followed in the same path of aversion to technology, even if belonging to a different school of thought, such as Herbert Marcuse (1964) and Jürgen Habermas (1968).

In this article I analyze the thesis about the negative effects of technology for religion in advanced societies. To this end, I first review some theories on secularization and science, then summarize recent discussion on technology and religion in order to tackle the problem of its secularizing effect in a deeper way, and finally, after assessing the impact of technology and the possibilities for religion to find a path for survival, explore the future of religion.

SECULARIZATION AS A PROBLEM

Secularization constitutes a very problematic process, as has been described by sociology, history, and philosophy. Even theologians have discussed for decades the meaning of this phenomenon within a Christian framework

(Oviedo 1990, 159–251). It is not clear to anyone, in empirical terms, if it should be associated with modernization. Some authors insist on distinguishing secularization as social differentiation—or autonomy of social systems from religious tutelage—from the crisis in religion. In addition, secularization has sometimes been deemed to be more an ideology that serves the interests of certain social sectors and less a scientific descriptive tool (Glassner 1977, 2; Acquaviva and Stella 1989).

In recent years we have witnessed a broad discussion between two parties: those who defend the traditional secularization thesis, and the so-called *New Paradigm*. The first maintains the conviction, born with the fathers of sociology (Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel), that modernization and social differentiation trigger a loss of religious commitment in individuals and, thus, society as well (Wilson 1966; Bruce 1992). The other side, or *New Paradigm* of the sociology of religion, denies the negative effects per se of modernization on religious forms and looks into the supply side of religious providers to explain the cogent crisis in most Western societies. In brief, it seems that the problem is to be found not in the hypothetical corrosive effects of modern culture and social structure but in the inability of religious institutions to supply better forms to meet people's religious demands, which surely change over time (Stark and Finke 2000).

Clearly, the sociological framework chosen to analyze the present religious crisis determines the judgment on the secularizing effects of science and technology, and whom to blame.[1] We return later to this question, after checking the standard arguments that pertain to the secularization charge regarding science.

One author who demonstrated greater concern for the negative effects of science on the religions of brotherliness is Weber. In a brief text, the so-called "Excursus," the sociologist affirms that scientific knowledge—rational, empirical, and mathematical—has caused the greatest disenchantment (*Entzäuberung*) with the world, revealing its structure of "causal mechanism" and negating the reality of any ethical meaning as perceived by the religious traditions. One unintended outcome of this process has been the displacement of religion "from the rational realm to the irrational, becoming identified with supernatural, irrational power" (Weber [1920] 1988, 564, 571; [1919] 1951, 578, 581, 582). Weber acknowledges in the same excursus that religion, at least Christianity, has striven repeatedly in the past for cooperation with intellectual sources as a way to go on with its apologetic endeavor. Furthermore, he admonishes against any attempt to resort to science as a substitute for religion in modern societies, where religion is no longer able to furnish its stimuli and hopes (Weber [1919] 1951, 593–96).

Surely, the situation has changed since the beginning of the twentieth century. Science has lost some of the social and cultural prestige it had at

that time. But the secularizing effects of science seem to persist despite its perceived weakness. There are arguments to support this view. Recall the criticism shown by philosophers belonging to the Frankfurt School against the "postulate of neutrality" of science, in a broad sense. It seems that its impact on religious ideas should be taken into account and tested more carefully. This effect is not intentional but a kind of non-desired consequence (as Karl Popper characterized it) of scientific development. Moreover, social systems theory points to a normal process of differentiation between the several systems in modern societies that renders science independent from other areas such as economics or religion. In this process of differentiation there have been both winners and losers: it has benefited social systems like science and economics and has damaged religion and family (Luhmann 1977, 255f.). Often the victory of some systems is associated with the defeat of others.

Among the practical signs are the pervasiveness of a more scientific culture and representation of reality, thanks to the extension of middle and higher education, and the popularity of programs of scientific presentation in the media, normally without ideological or antireligious bias. It is hard to measure empirically the effect of this process on the religious mentality of the people or to ascertain to what degree it triggers an erosion of faith. Perhaps more alarming as a sign is the theological reception of the scientific worldview, which has motivated, in certain sectors, a determined assumption of a naturalistic credo.[2] Even if the scope of this naturalist theological party is rather restrained, it functions as a cipher of the undesirable scientific corrosive effects on the supernatural understanding of reality that is the core of traditional religion. In this case, theology becomes part of the secularization process and even contributes to it instead of being an answer or remedy.

To link secularization to an isolated social process is impossible. It depends on the conjunction of several factors, including the economic development driving an affluent society; the extension of a personal regime of freedom and rights; the autonomy of realms such as sexuality, aesthetics, or the media; and the pervasive presence of a consumer culture in which religion is absorbed into a broad mentality of consumption and narcissistic individualism. Some scientific writers have marshaled themselves in a war against religion; their publications have added to the already negative effects of science on religion. But even if this strong criticism should miss its target or its campaigners fall out of fashion, religion as it has been in the past and still is in many social settings would suffer from the extension of scientific progress and education. This is proposed as a thesis, because we lack empirical proof. Science seems to be involved in religious crisis, despite apparent weaknesses resulting from critical scrutiny at the hands of some intellectual elites, the perceived limits of its enterprise, and the vindication of alternative cultural values and topics (Oviedo 2002, 280–86).

WHAT ABOUT TECHNOLOGY?

Technology seems to be an easier target than science for contemporary criticism and a better candidate for the charge of secularization. The argument for the negative cultural and religious effects of technology has gone on at least since the middle of the nineteenth century. Christians were not alone in feeling affected by such developments. Several thinkers, culminating in Heidegger, complained about the dissolutive consequences of technology for modern ideals of human self-expression and authenticity. Interestingly, the dispute has a humanistic, enlightened side quite distant from religious sensibilities. Even today the predominantly secular character of the antitechnological resistance and protest is noteworthy. Religion has been concerned with the debate as well, but it is hard to say whether the secular or the religious side is inflaming it more.

The suspicion against technology is concomitant with modern technical development and its appraisal. There is a dialectic between the emergence and evolution of technology (stressing at the same time the advantages of technical applications, even from a theological point of view) and the dangers inherent in them. It would be misleading to identify the critics as reactionaries against the modernization process. The phenomenon is more complex and knows both extremes of the political-ideological spectrum, conservatives and liberals. Ironically, it may be said that technology has managed even in this field to generate consensus—against itself!

The legacy of the struggle for and against technology reaches our own time. Many thinkers still view technology as a kind of secularized devil that requires salvation and perhaps as the last great temptation and danger confronting humanity (Galimberti 2000), while others continue to praise its achievements and beneficial effects for all. Both lines are identifiable inside the theological field as well. To assess the effect of technology on religion is not easy and requires a critical and an empirical approach. I propose to gather the arguments of each from a theological perspective: the pro-technology position, which, of course, excuses it from any charge, and counter-technology, which takes the opposite line.

Theological Neutrality and Positive Engagement with Technology. The most obvious argument favoring technology points to its prominence in practical life. It seems at least paradoxical to write an essay against it using a state-of-the-art personal computer or to attend an international conference on the dangers and threats of modern technology after a quick journey in a state-of-the-art airplane. The first reason to support technological advancement has to do with the obvious realization that the opposite option would be self-defeating and that, even from a theological point of view, it is impossible to resist technology in a practical way because it expresses our way of life, something we can not avoid—as it would be naive and unrealistic to resist democracy, the modern system of human rights, or

the market economy. In normal circumstances, and with perceptible advantages, the factual realm is indeed theologically assumed and legitimated as responding to God's plan.

The historical record helps to ascertain the doubts and, ultimately, the acceptance and blessing of technology from a Christian point of view. Some studies have documented the Christian struggles since the middle of the nineteenth century to assimilate technological advancement and to incorporate it into the theological imagination (Lagrée 2003). The result seems to be a predominantly positive reception of this evolution. Christian churches have benefited from many technological applications. This reflects God's will and stresses the creative human skills as "God's image." Many scholars have discovered a correlation between Christian faith and the technical impulse. Therefore, we see the logic in the statement "Technology is not inevitably the main agent of the world's disenchantment" (Lagrée 2003, 179) as a response to Weber's classical opinion.

The argument has been more explicitly articulated in a theological way by authors such as the German Friedrich Gogarten, who wrote in the 1950s that science and technology reflect the human vocation to develop creation free from the view that nature is a numinous realm and that manipulating it is sin; we are rather ordained to work for the improvement of our world (Gogarten [1953] 1987, 74f.). A basic tenet of this theology of secularization, since that time, has been the stress on the difference between the worldly realities entrusted to the human race and the realm of ultimate meaning and salvation belonging to God. Doing theology means asserting this border, drawing the lines between worldly and Godly spaces, respecting and blessing human transformative activity to improve all social areas, and preserving the limits of transcendence and the conditions of the possibility to work within a salvation schema.

It is not clear how long such a distinction can stand or whether it is able to cope with the real problem of secularization as religious crisis. Nevertheless, theologians supporting that view tried to acknowledge the inevitable evolution of human science and technology without doing away with Christian faith and principles. They were counting on the survival of religion in a scientific-technological civilization, rescuing faith from the dissolutive effects of a restrained understanding of the new social conditions.

Going further, recent theological reflection has shown the futility, and even damaging and counterproductive effects, of any resistance to technology promoted by theologians and churches. Fundamentally, the argument is metaphysical and seeks to overcome the typical dualism associated with modern criticism, where technology was opposed to nature or to culture. Theologians such as Philip Hefner and several others who follow his thinking acknowledge the deep unity between nature and technology, which composes a kind of "techno-nature," "techno-culture," and even, in anthropological terms, a "techno-sapiens" (Hefner 2003). To oppose technology

would mean to oppose nature, culture, and even the human person, because at this point of our evolution they are indistinguishable realities. A theology espousing that thesis will engage in a constructive participation in the process, providing the right interpretation in order to facilitate a better integration (with culture, for example) and to cope with the challenges confronting our world, looking for survival and improvement.

Drawing more attention to the last line of argument, the present strategy counters the former line advocated by the theology of secularization. Instead of stressing separation, Hefner and his followers affirm the need for integration and unity. While Gogarten established a border between the secular realm and Christian faith, forbidding the crossing of those borders, Hefner speaks of "interface" and a needed interaction between the religious point of view and the whole process going on within technological civilization (Hefner 1993, 152–56).

Further developments have given rise to what can be described as a "new theological paradigm." Indeed, it is not only a metaphysical vision that is at stake—the overcoming of dualism—but an anthropological and a theological one. Authors who follow Hefner's suggestions stress the change that human nature undergoes within a technological civilization, eventually becoming "techno-sapiens," in which one's personal configuration is indistinguishable from technical elements, which are not just tools or replacements but part of one's own constitution. The same process affects our image of God, as it corresponds to the "created co-creator" axiom. In recent articles by Patrick Hopkins (2002) and Willem Drees (2002), the new theological model calls for an overcoming of the schema of "competing subjects" (God and humans) predominant in many traditional theologies in order to discover the positive meaning of human activity as "playing God" as a metaphor of technical advancement.

No one denies the real dangers associated with the uncertain future of technological civilization, but the ethical challenges are confronted from a position not of critical and naive antagonism but of theological integration. The theologian acknowledges the complexity of the present situation and calls for necessary religious involvement in the entire sociocultural process, which generates, inevitably, new *technical* solutions. It is important to stress that the new paradigm arising from these proposals means that theology assumes a technological physiognomy as well, so that we can speak of a kind of "techno-theology" whose endeavor is threefold: to keep in touch with a culture inherently technological, to provide its own input in order to better facilitate ongoing cultural evolution and overcome the threatening dangers, and to propose a model of theological survival in the face of a worse secularization scenario, religious marginalization.

In light of this review, technology is guilty of secularization only if theology and religion resist the call to get involved in the dynamics characteristic of the present process. Religion plays a great role and becomes more

needed if it accepts the challenge to assume its own responsibility and adapts its myths and rituals to the language and requirements of the new culture.

Critical Positions: Religion against Technology.   It is relatively easy to find arguments showing a deep antagonism between religion and technology. From a historical point of view, they are quite well documented, and their roots can be located in Christian suspicions that technology and cultural artifacts are "unnatural." Reasons for these suspicions are, first, the fear of novelties, especially for a religion based on tradition and past certainties; second, a kind of perceived competition between religion and many facets of technological advancement; and third, the perception of ethical dangers associated with specific applications.

The second motive deserves closer examination. Some studies published in the 1990s propose as their topic the "religion of technology." This corresponds not only to a kind of "witchcraft" that could be perceived in certain new technical achievements but more to the ideological outcome of a practical evolution, leading to the latent idea that technology can substitute the means to achieve promised salvation from any human distress, that it delivers better tools to cope with many human social needs (Noble 1997; Newman 1997). From this point of view, technology becomes an active agent of secularization.

Taking a more abstract position, the theory of social systems provides some elements for further analysis. Niklas Luhmann considers technology to be an evolutionary achievement that renders indistinguishable nature and culture. He points to some relevant features of this evolution. Technology manages to serve as a "consensus" and thus release individuals of the stress needed to reach it. It simplifies many dynamics by operating well and reduces complexity in social processes. An attentive reader of his work on the "function of religion" will notice that these contributions sometimes supersede traditional religious ones, calling for a redefinition of religious function in the new social reality. Indeed, religion has been a means to create consensus, and has been intended as a code of social simplification, and was, by definition, a means of complexity reduction (Luhmann 1977; 1997, 517–36; 2000, 256). Inevitably, a kind of silent conflict arises; consequently, religion becomes displaced by a new agency that provides better means and results in the competing fields. *Secularization* is for Luhmann the word that designates this displacement, the change between pre- and post-technological time. Apart from this, a contrast can be seen between the place Luhmann awards to religion in his functional schema and the protagonist's role accorded it by Hefner. The first stresses differentiation and autonomy as a condition of religion functioning well; the second calls for integration with other social systems.

Returning to the theological discussion, not everyone agrees with Hefner's program of "techno-theology." Some have criticized his extension of redemption to technology, a move that empties the true significance of Christian redemption (Scott 2000). Other suspicions coalesce around a theological statement that could bring still more secularization as theological ideas are assimilated to social needs and religion becomes functionalized inside a secular agenda.

Again, it is difficult to assess the empirical reach of the negative effects of technology on religion in advanced societies. All of the arguments cited so far are just hypotheses, and they should be taken into account within the context of many more social and cultural elements influencing the negative tendencies in the religious realm. Be that as it may, it seems that theoretical arguments do not suffice to decide the real secularizing impact of technology, at least as long as the ambiguity and disagreement between theological pros and cons lasts.

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

To sum up, discernment is needed in order to cope with the real state of affairs today. Which is the most convenient response before the possible crisis confronting religion in modern, technocratic societies?

Within an evolutionary-technical paradigm, the present social process goes beyond the decision-making capacities of any particular social organizations, that is, the social realities capable of decision making. It seems hardly tenable that religious institutions could drive social evolution. The logic of evolution encompasses a threefold process: the emergence of variations, a process of spontaneous selection, and further restabilization. All of this seems to be beyond a rational calculus.

In my own view, secularization is an inevitable outcome of social processes, which causes a realignment of the entire social fabric. As a sensitive part of a whole system, religion suffers the displacements triggered by other systems, including science and technology. This means that former religious organizations and ideas will not survive if they are not being updated to the new conditions. In a schematic way, these dynamics imply two possibilities of depiction: Social differentiation → scientific and technological advances → crisis of religious systems. But religion can react and the story can move on: Religious reaction → new religious variations → religious restabilization.

The dynamic described has already happened in the past, and religious systems have shown that they are able to adapt to new, unstable conditions. Religion is not able to govern the entire process, including other social subsystems, which are part of its ambient culture. The only thing that any such system can do is to generate new variations until some of them are selected and manage to reach a new equilibrium. We are not sure

which variations are actually needed and will be selected. One indication emerges from Luhmann's analysis: religion should leave aside other secondary functions—economists would say "an excess of diversification"—and concentrate on its own specific target: transcendent communication. This strategy, a kind of "back to the essentials," is intended not as a withdrawal but as a call to concentrate on a specific mission, the only one religion can deliver.

Sociologists are correct in pointing to the responsibilities of religious institutions in the implementation of their survival abilities. Recent empirical work already shows some at least apparent trends in this cultural evolutionary process. Maybe several models or options will survive or be selected that are capable of propagating needed religious functions in new social settings marked by technological opportunities and challenges. Interdisciplinary work is required in order to ascertain which religious forms are best equipped to accomplish that function and to attend to the still significant demand for transcendence and otherworldly salvation. At the moment, from an empirical point of view, we can register the amount of religious variation, which seems quite impressive—the forms that seem to fall out of fashion, and others that are more adapted to the present situation and manage to contrast with the secularizing dynamic.

A scientific-technological view of the problem will be very useful in this case. Theologians and church leaders can learn from it that a kind of trial-and-error method, or a scientific empirical and pragmatic attitude, can help in this process far more than theoretical developments. In the end, what counts will not be which forms provide better theologies but which are able to survive and the reasons why. Theology is required in order to mitigate too much costly variation, and to help in the task of discernment. Following that line, theology becomes more technological, imitating a style that points to performance and usefulness.[3] After all, Christians have been called from the very beginning to learn from this-worldly wisdom as well.

NOTES

1. Indeed, some of the authors of the "new paradigm" insist that the problem is not so much the empirical and natural sciences but social sciences and humanities in general (Berger 1999, 10; Stark and Finke 2000, 1–23).

2. One of its representatives states, "In contemporary theology it is widely agreed that classical super-naturalist theism is untenable both philosophically and religiously" (Hardwick 1996, 7).

3. As George Lindbeck stated twenty years ago, "The ultimate test in this and other areas is performance. If a Post-liberal [theological] approach in its actual employment proves to be conceptually powerful and practically useful to the relevant communities, it will in time become standard" (Lindbeck 1984, 134).

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