

WHAT IS “SECULAR”? TECHNO-SECULARISM AND SPIRITUALITY

by Antje Jackelén

Abstract. I argue that there is no “roaring reality of rampant secularism” with “technological application as its chief agent,” as claimed by John Caiazza (2005). Two phenomena, techno-religion and a spirituality of technology, suggest a different picture of reality: Technology may be an alternative spirituality rather than an ally of a secularism that makes “nutcrackers of the soul” out of people who should be “dancers” (Nietzsche). An analysis of secularism and its manifold causes indicates that secularism is a fruit of both science and religion. The secular is a companion of religion rather than its enemy. Hence, I recommend a heuristic instead of an ontological use of the concept of secularism. In a technological age, religion is changing rather than being displaced. These changes are illustrated by the increase of private religiosity, megachurches, and cyber-spirituality. Energized by the tension between finitude and creativity, technology shares in the marks of spirituality (Philip Hefner) and in the potential for good and evil. In this situation, fundamentalism and dogmatism in religion, science, and technology are a greater threat than secularism.

Keywords: Philip Hefner; humanism; Friedrich Nietzsche; scientific secularism; secularization; spirituality and technology; technology and religion; techno-religion; techno-secularism; theology and secularism.

Sometimes one needs to look backward in order to look forward. Asking whether and how John Caiazza may be right in his proclamation of the arrival of techno-secularism turns my thought to Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher who predates “the roaring reality of rampant secularism” that Caiazza sees in the present day (2005, 15) yet has played a significant part in the critique of religion. In his early work *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche

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criticizes the spirit of science for its belief in a technological mentality as a strategy to solve all of life's problems. Without distinguishing technology from science the way Caiazza does, he says that the spirit of scientific knowledge "combats Dionysian wisdom and art, it seeks to dissolve myth, it substitutes . . . a *deus ex machina* of its own, a god of machines and crucibles, that is, the powers of the spirits of nature recognized and employed in the service of a higher egoism; it believes that it can correct the world by knowledge, guide life by science . . ." (Nietzsche 1967, 109).

In this view, technology appears as an alternative spirituality rather than secularism. A statement in Nietzsche's later work *On the Genealogy of Morals* shows the same tendency: "Our whole attitude toward nature, the way we violate her with the aid of machines and the heedless inventiveness of our technicians and engineers, is *hubris* . . . We violate ourselves nowadays, . . . we nutcrackers of the soul, . . . as if life were nothing but cracking nuts" (1989, 113).

Here, Nietzsche seems to anticipate the ecological critique of science and technology as it would be voiced during the latter half of the twentieth century. Moreover, he relates the violation of the outer environment to a violation of the inner sphere of human life. Again, it is less a question of the lack of spirituality than a question of "wrong" spirituality—a spirituality that makes "nutcrackers of the soul" out of people who should wish nothing more than to be good "dancers." For Nietzsche, the problem is the lack of passion for life, the sacrifice of the Dionysian on the altar of an Apollonian asceticism and the failure to realize the role of the aesthetic. The spirit of science—understood as faith in the explicability of nature and in knowledge as a panacea—needs to be pushed to its limits. It cannot "heal the eternal wound of existence" (Nietzsche 1967, 109). When we have understood the failure of its claim to universal validity, we can expect art to play its redemptive and salvific role (1967, 104–9). In Nietzsche's perspective, the aesthetic provides a sense of tragic realism that is able to keep science from the excesses of positivism, scientism, or technocracy and religion from the decline into moralism. This is where wisdom is to be found.

Where Nietzsche sees a battle between competitive spiritualities, Caiazza diagnoses the displacement of religious belief by technology, a phenomenon he calls techno-secularism. His is a more dualistic approach compared to Nietzsche's bold complexity. Who is right, Nietzsche or Caiazza? In order to explore this issue, the first question to be asked is:

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS SCIENTIFIC SECULARISM?

Caiazza points out that the triumph of the secular in our culture is largely the result of the triumph of empirical science. This statement seems to assume that secularism is a product of science. It also seems to assume that the triumph of the secular is a univocal mark of "our culture." Even if "our

culture” is taken to mean “Western intellectuals,” the picture is far from univocal. It becomes even more problematic if *culture* is taken to describe the dynamics of life in a given society as a whole.

According to Caiazza, the triumph of science over religion is questioned only by people like antiprogressive philosophers, feminists, and multiculturalists—in short, by postmodernists (2005, 13). The inadequacy of Caiazza’s rendering of postmodernism has already been pointed out by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (2005, 33–41) and is not reiterated here. Elsewhere I have developed my view of postmodernism as a positive challenge to the dialogue between religion and science (Jackelén 2004).

Caiazza states that scientific secularism still prevails, although its position of triumph can no longer be argued for on the basis of science alone. Rather the focus of the argument has to be moved to the application of science, that is, to technology.

Before following that move, the concept of secularism deserves a closer look. It is an unfortunate reduction to set up secular and revealed knowledge against each other and let the first be represented by science and the other by religion. By virtue of that definition the thesis of scientific secularism—secularism caused by science—becomes a tautology. It is more fruitful to specify different types of knowledge within both science and religion. Religions do not deal exclusively with revealed knowledge. On the level of theological reflection as well as on the level of religious practice, secular knowledge plays quite a role. In fact, what goes into the words of proclamation, the words of pastoral care, and the words of prayer emanates to a considerable extent from empirical and secular knowledge. Holy Scriptures, as for example the Bible, integrate secular knowledge. Wisdom literature especially contains examples of internal religious secularization. Books such as Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Job bear marks of the attempt to organize problematic experiences from an immanent viewpoint and an empirical perspective. On the level of theological reflection we might even speak of a “theological secularism.” The God-is-dead theology in the 1960s was a theological enterprise. The critique of onto-theology that led to “the death of the metaphysical God” is not a murder committed by some wily enemies of Christian faith; it needs to be understood as an insider job carried out by theology itself (see Westphal 2001). If we can speak of scientific secularism, we can also speak of theological secularism.

As regards secular humanism, two complementary interpretations are reasonable. Secular humanism can be and has been seen as both an apostasy from religion and a fruit of religion. Understood as the climax of human hubris, secularism can indeed be read as the utmost repudiation of religion. Yet, interpreted as the realization of the love command that demands respect for the dignity of every person regardless of faith, sex, ethnicity, and race, humanism can be read as a congenial expression of religion. Tolerance becomes an apt emanation of faith.

In regard to Christian theology, thinkers have argued repeatedly that the Christian model calls for both distinction and relation between the secular and the religious. Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms can be seen as an attempt to hold the two dimensions distinct yet related. It has been demonstrated that the Reformation's impact of giving the Bible and the Catechism to the people in the people's language increased general literacy in Protestant countries to a degree that could be measured as late as the beginning of the twentieth century. This suggests that the democratic developments of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not happen only aided by science against religion but together with the fruits of both science and religion.

A hundred years ago, Max Weber famously argued that capitalism is the fruit of Calvinist teachings of providence that produce the will to live a life that bears the mark of the regenerate. Friedrich Gogarten is remembered for his distinction between secularization and secularism, which he combined with the claim that secularization is the legitimate consequence of faith, whereas secularism is the antagonist of faith. Secularization can be embraced, because it affirms the worth of the world and worldliness. Secularism needs to be resisted because of its tendency toward totalitarian claims and its limited ability to address the radical challenges of finitude and finiteness. Others read the history of secularism as a more or less dramatic process of the emancipation of the secular realm from ecclesial dominance. Still others see secularism as a natural stage in the life cycles of religions—a stage that can be followed by anything between the terminal decline of the religion in question and its revitalization. Others describe secularism in the Western world as a result of secularized Christian eschatology: Transcendental hopes have turned into immanent strategies for progress.

These examples indicate that there are multiple causes of secularism. Science, or more generally the trust in reason and sometimes in reason alone, is certainly one of them, but not the only one and maybe not even the major one. Taken together, these examples support the claim that the secular is understood more adequately as the dancing partner or companion of religion rather than as its antagonist only.

Furthermore, there needs to be some clarity about how a concept is used in an argument. When we talk about reductionism, for example, it is clear that there is a significant difference between a heuristic or methodological use of the concept and an ontological use of the concept. Whereas the ontological use easily ends up in reductionism, the methodological use in many cases continues to be an excellent way of doing research. Likewise, the distinction between a heuristic or methodological use of naturalism and an ontological use needs to be noted in order to avoid misunderstandings about the philosophical and theological implications of the concept. In a similar way, arguments about secularism are dependent on whether the concept of secularism is used heuristically or ontologically. The use as

a heuristic tool to identify ingredients and consequences of certain phenomena is different from an a priori definition of science as secular knowledge and religion as revealed knowledge only.

I prefer the heuristic or methodological use of the concept of secularism, because such use helps in clarifying processes and dynamics rather than pitting different forms of knowledge against each other. Trying to understand the many dimensions of the interplay between the secular and nonsecular or sacred in the realms of science, religion, culture, and society seems far more fruitful than just assuming an antagonism between secular and nonsecular. The relationship is more complex than that.

This brings me to my second question inspired by Caiazza's essay: Is there "a roaring reality of rampant secularism" with "technological application as its chief agent" (2005, 15)?

The theoretical concept of "scientific secularism" is questionable, because it cannot account for the complexity of reality. The same deficiency can be observed when the principle of secularism is applied to the phenomenological level. Some Western European countries, such as Sweden, are often cited as examples of the triumph of secularism over religion. Is that true? Yes, if you count regular worship attendance and other active religious practices. No, if you look to the fact that education about religion is compulsory in public schools. No also, if you look to what happens in times of major crises and realize how people in the street as well as government officials count on the church. It is respectfully expected to serve the victims of a tragedy and their families and to give a voice to what needs to be said in situations of national trauma. In the U.K., another country that usually is cited in the league of the most secularized ones, secularists feel the need to fight against growing religious influence in politics (National Secular Society 2005). In Sweden, the Secretary of Public Health and Social Services went public with a fervent appeal to scientists to go in the front line of a new enlightenment, because "we can establish the fact that the increasing political significance of religion is a trend rather than an isolated phenomenon" (Johansson 2005).

The case can be made that, at least in certain aspects, the public role of religion during the last two decades has increased in some of the most secularized countries. This does not mean that public attention automatically leads to an increase in positive attitudes toward religious worldviews and practices. It does not even mean that the attention given to religion is a favorable one. It shows nevertheless that the declaration of the disappearance of religion from the public square is premature.

It is therefore uncritical to believe in a secularization thesis that takes scientific secularism as a *fait accompli*. The secularism we can observe is not solely the result of science or technology, and secularism is not the only game in town. The least we can say is that secularism is not a one-dimensional phenomenon. It has a dialectic relationship to religion. The

assumption that secularism is an aggressive reality that draws its power from technology seems to be at best a part of a much larger picture. It certainly does not convey the whole truth.

There is evidence that secularism is not always as rampant as Caiazza believes and that technology is not as antireligious as his thesis implies. It is not as simple as religion being displaced from civic life due to technological ubiquity (Caiazza 2005, 19). A closer look reveals a yet more complex picture. I look at that picture from two angles—namely, how religion relates to and uses technology, or the technological dimensions of religion, and how technology relates to and implies religion, or the religious dimensions of technology.

TECHNOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF RELIGION: THE ARRIVAL OF TECHNO-RELIGION?

These days, the relationship between religion and technology surfaces primarily as a subject for ethical discourse, asking what the different stances are that religions take on such issues as stem cell research and genetic enhancement and why different religions would reach different conclusions. This important perspective easily diverts attention from another aspect of the relationship between religion and technology, namely, the use of technology in and by religions.

Throughout their history, religions always have made use of technology in the widest sense. Meditation, fasting, dancing, and the application of hallucinogens are all examples of the use of technology in order to reach various states of religious experience. This is not to say that religion and technology always go well together, but it makes it more difficult to claim that technology has an inherent tendency to displace religion. Technology has been and continues to be used to promote religion and religious experience in both wholesome and unwholesome ways.

Caiazza believes in the arrival of techno-secularism. He claims that technology, and not science, has displaced religion from the public square. We have seen that the displacement of religion from the public square can be disputed. A look at the relationship between religion and technology suggests that technology wears more than one hat in this alleged displacement.

Techno-secularism can be described as the climax of the animosity perceived in scientific secularism. Empowered by its alliance with technology, the secular gets potentially more aggressive. Thus perceived, techno-secularism surpasses classical secularism.

In reality, once again things appear to be more complicated. Suicide bombers remind us of the powerful and destructive potential of a synthesis between religion and technology. Televangelists who make extensive use of the latest information technology tellingly disprove the prejudice that religion is hostile to technological progress. Traditionalism and the (selective) use of advanced technology by no means exclude each other. In fact,

we may want to consider whether there is such a thing as techno-religion as a complement or even a counterforce to techno-secularism. We may be witnessing the arrival of both techno-secularism and techno-religion, which calls for a study of these phenomena in connection with each other rather than as isolated or contrary phenomena.

Technology trivializes true religion, concludes Caiazza (2005, 20). This can be contested. The role that religion has had on the public scene throughout the last two decades has been shaped in symbiosis with technology rather than in conflict with it. The part that religion has played in such diverse contexts as the Solidarity movement in Poland, the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua, the Monday movement that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the shaping of recent policies in the United States cannot be envisioned without the role of information technology. Without technology, the impact of the life and death of Pope John Paul II, symbolized by aircraft and by television, would be unthinkable. Even if from an American perspective "Vatican City is 109 acres of faith in a European sea of unbelief" (Will 2005), the media event of what is held to have been the most attended death and funeral in history remains a fact that does not harmonize easily with naive assumptions about techno-secularism.

In a technological age, religion is changing rather than being displaced. Three aspects of these changes seem relevant to a discussion about techno-secularism. First, there is an increase of private religion. While in many places participation in established religion is decreasing, spiritual engagement on an individual level appears to be increasing. Serving as pastor of a congregation in a secularized context in the early 1980s, I often felt obliged to tell people: "There is more to life than you can touch and measure. There is more than matter and more than reason." Some fifteen years later, I often heard myself say, "Don't believe everything. There is more rationality to faith than you may think." Private religiosity usually does not perceive itself as being in conflict with science and technology. Often it is either indifferent to science and technology, or it uses what seems useful and leaves the rest. It tends to be eudemonistic and focused on individual well-being and self-fulfillment. Communal aspects tend to rank low.

Second, within Christianity, new types of churches keep growing. So-called megachurches emerge that depend heavily on media technology. Evangelical and Pentecostal free churches note the fastest growth in world Christianity. The latter happens especially in countries and contexts that are not known to experience the most beneficial and generous consequences of technology. They may be the recipients of technological debris and find themselves involuntarily coping with double-edged effects of an economic globalization that rides on the shoulders of technological development.

Third, information technology has made the emergence of cyber-spirituality possible. Virtual religious communities exist, but they can hardly be covered by comprehensive statistics about religious activity.

As preliminary as these observations are, they call into question the thesis that religion is being displaced by “a roaring reality of rampant secularism” with “technological application as its chief agent.” In addition to the conclusion above that secularism is far from being a well-defined state, there are even signs that suggest that secularism may be in greater jeopardy than religion. The thesis that secularism should be regarded as a companion rather than an enemy appears to be more fruitful.

Religion relates to technology in various ways. But does technology in itself also have religious depth and significance?

RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF TECHNOLOGY

Rather than opposing technology to religion, we may attempt to locate our spiritual journey in technology, as Philip Hefner has done. He claims, “If we speak about technology at its deepest levels, we are at the same time speaking about its religious dimensions, even if we do not use conventional religious terminology” (2003, 73). Technology is no longer adequately understood as the negative other of religion, and it probably never was simply the negative other of religion. It may have been a provocative other, a supporting other, or an apparently indifferent other. According to Hefner, this is not enough. He compels us to see technology as a constructive other of religion. Religion takes shape in technology. How can that be? If we, with Paul Tillich, understand human existence as being marked by the poles of finitude and freedom (Tillich 1963, 30–110, esp. 86f.), we can see how technology is properly understood as an attempt to deal with these two poles in the context of being and nonbeing, that is, in the context of religion.

On the one hand, technology represents an attempt to come to terms with our finitude. It extends our life options both in space and time. It brings what is distant close, allowing us to influence for better or worse that which is very remote. It extends our lifetimes, and it extends the influence of our generation over a multitude of future generations. Without technology the average lifespan would be dramatically shorter. For thousands of years to come, people will have to watch the waste that the use of nuclear technology in our time has generated. The use of technology transcends the limits of natural finitude in ways that affect the being and nonbeing of human life and of all life as we know it. On the other hand, technology uses the highest power of imagination, creativity, and freedom humans are capable of. It is where mortality and creativity meet. It is where the limit of death touches the freedom of imagination. The myth of Daedalus and Icarus is a poignant expression of this dramatic relationship. Technology is about the taste for supercreativity, as Hefner says together with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Hefner 2003, 44). There is a religious depth to technology that cannot be brushed aside easily by pitting secular technology and religion against each other.

Technology seems indeed to be magic, as Caiazza points out. The sense in which I use the word *magic* is different from Caiazza's, however. He defines magic over against the mechanic. The mechanic is symbolized by the steam engine, whereas the personal computer is the symbol of the magic. These symbols express the shift from the Victorian explicit, competent, and muscular to the postmodern mysterious, astonishing, magical effects whose causes cannot be explained (Caiazza 2005, 18). As thought-provoking as this definition is, it has the disadvantage of placing the identification of what is magic more or less in the eyes of the beholder. What is explicit and visible to the expert may well be hidden and mysterious to the average user. That applies to steam engines and airplanes as well as to computers. The expert may even say that the binary system that lies at the bottom of computing is simpler and more obvious than the mechanics of a steam engine. The magic does not lie in the experience of the hidden and mysterious over against the overt and explicit. Neither the idea of hiddenness nor the idea of fakery is enough to describe the magic dimension of technology. The magic dimension of technology resides instead with the expression of the tension between finitude and creativity.

In his attempt to analyze the religious depth of technology, Hefner goes so far as to claim that "Technology is now a phase of evolution, and it is now creation, a vessel for the image of God" (2003, 77). The self-transcending creativity that is expressed in the synthesis and symbiosis of nature and technology is creativity and activity *coram Deo* (before God). "Technology is one of the major places today where religion happens. Technology is the shape of religion," Hefner says (2003, 88).

If this is correct, technology shares in divine creativity but is also calling out for divine grace. In this light, technology appears to share in the marks of spirituality rather than being wholly secular in character.

CONCLUSION

We can and need to go beyond descriptions of science, technology, and religion as antagonistic. Their interrelations have been and continue to be multifaceted. This, of course, does not mean that there are no tensions or conflicts. Rather, it means that various kinds of relationship are part of the web of communications between Jerusalem and Athens.

At this point in the development of the dialogue between religion and science it seems important to pay more attention to the role of technology and its impact on various areas of personal, public, and social life. Where science continues to be perceived as a process of discovery in the first place, technology makes clear that knowledge is not gained by *mimesis* (mimicry) only, but that, in a very radical sense, it is also *poiesis* (doing, creation of an artifact). Where both *mimesis* and *poiesis* are taken seriously, religious questions about the ground of creativity and the place and role of human beings

in nature cannot be avoided. Who are we—creators of reality or products of nature's laws? In what ways can we be both?

The lines of demarcation do not run neatly between the secular and the religious. They take messy turns. They go, to return to Nietzsche's lingo, between those who are nutcrackers of the soul and those who are dancers. The nutcrackers are, as Weber puts it, specialists without spirits and sensualists without heart; together these two represent a "nullity" that "imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved" (Weber 1930, 182). Where scientists and religionists become specialists without spirits and sensualists without heart, there is neither art nor dance; there is no life. Science, technology, and religion can be life-enhancing as well as life-destroying. Whenever religion, science, technology and those who engage in them become self-absorbed— "*in se incurvatus*," as a theological definition of sin has it—they have the potential of being detrimental. Theocracy is as problematic as technocracy. Fundamentalism and dogmatism may after all represent a greater risk than secularism.

Paraphrasing Nietzsche once more, we need to look at science and technology in the perspective of the artist and at art in the perspective of life (Nietzsche 1967, 19). This is about dance rather than exclusively intellectual discourse. What Nietzsche was not clear about is that this perspective is genuinely religious. As such, it calls for the critical and self-critical reflection we call theology.

There has always been a web of communication between Athens and Jerusalem. Some of the lines of communication have been strong and visible. Others have been more clandestine and subterranean. The recent decades of intensified dialogue between science and religion have added new and strong threads to this web of communication. The field is far from threadbare in intellectual terms, as Caiazza fears. Rather, it is another web that is becoming increasingly threadbare in our time. It is the web whose wear and tear we have learned to call the environmental crisis. In the biosphere there are no walls we can hit that prevent us from doing irreparable damage. The biosphere is more like a web that gets increasingly threadbare until the hole is a fact. This threadbareness is more alarming than any concern about how threadbare the discussion about religion and science might be in intellectual terms. Technology plays and can play a significant role in the care for the environmental web. It can do so both as a destructive demon and as a saving angel. This challenge adds another thread to the web that connects religion, science, and technology. In fact, it adds not just any thread but a thread woven through every part of the fabric of life in this world.

As the journal *Zygon* enters into the second forty years of its project of yoking, it has more on its plate rather than less. According to its statement of perspective, this journal "provides a forum for exploring ways to unite what . . . has been disconnected—values from knowledge, goodness from

truth, religion from science.” In light of the Fortieth Anniversary Symposium it could be added: “spirituality from technology.”

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