Contemporary Technology
as Religious Substitute

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Introduction

Religious substitutes[1] constitute modern social forms; they appeared after the critical questioning of traditional religion and the simultaneous admission that the religious phenomenon, despite its undergoing crisis, is indelible. Postmodern society idolizes persons, ideologies and systems, attributing to them a deep metaphysical background; by making it easier to have absolute domination over individual consciences, it can satisfy its aspirations –apparent or implicit– for an extended domination over individuals and institutions[2].

The relationship of technology to religion has been recorded in history in various ways: a) technology as a divine gift, b) as a tool and means of meeting religious needs, c) as anti-religion, in the sense of opposition to any religious attempt to incapacitate it, and d) as a particular Religion.

Although the main subject of this paper is the last variation, i.e. technology as religion, let me briefly mention the other three ones:

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1. See more details in: Ap. V. Nikolaidis, *«Κριτικὴ Θεωρία» καὶ κοινωνικὴ λειτουργία τῆς θρησκείας*, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2005, p. 135 ff. and *Κοινωνιολογία τῆς θρησκείας*, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2008, p. 262 ff.
2. For more details see Ap. V. Nikolaidis, *Ἡ διαλεκτικὴ ἱερότητας καὶ κοινωνικότητας στὸ ἔργο τοῦ Emile Durkheim*, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2002, p. 105 ff.

1. Technology as a Divine Gift

Here, technology is understood in relation to the doctrine of man's creation *in the image of God* and his place in the natural environment. Man as a rational, social and sovereign being over the natural world is instructed by God to toil and produce work, especially after the Fall, when the natural world does not behave as a self-evident companion and partner but as an adversary. In any case, man assumes the role of the Creator's partner, examining and investigating the "how", i.e. the secrets of Creation, believing unquestioningly in the "what", i.e. what is related to the Creator and His creative actions. In this context, his works are neither directed against the Creator, nor against other people, or against the natural world itself.

Things change when man is forced to invent ways of overcoming the problems created by the opposition of the natural world due to the Fall. As it happens in other areas of human life, he activates the possibilities given to him by the Creator by using reason and taking care of not to repeat the mistake of his first fall, the transgression of natural limits, a transgression with negative results for himself and the natural environment – a possibility he did not eventually avoid, as he turned the divine tool of technology into a destructive threat.

2. The Technology in the Service of the Religion

Technology in itself is assessed as morally neutral. It is neither good nor, of course, bad. It is a tool in the hands of individuals and institutions; the evaluation is related with its use, not technology itself. It is a means, not an end. It is glorified or demonized, depending on whether it serves or threatens humanity, as was the case, for example, with the nuclear disasters in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The fact that it has not always been used positively does not prohibit its use over time by religion. Believers and religious officials are nowadays using the most sophisticated technological means to preach, communicate, lecture, travel more easily have immediate access to sacred digitized texts,

and exercise unhindered pastoral ministry. More generally, we would say that religion enlists technology to carry out its work more effectively, believing that God the creator acts through man, His co-creator.

The fact that many believers in God specialize in technology and use it for better approaching and transmitting religious messages proves that technology and religion are not by definition opponents but may well coexist and cooperate. The difference lies in the fact that technology is perceived as a means and not as an end.

The same goes for the societies where the technology rush does not prohibit elevated religious feelings. A typical example is the USA, the biggest technological hub, but with a strong Protestant religious feeling[3]. It is no coincidence that the first astronauts were fanatical Protestants; that is why they linked their first leap into space to the will of God.

It is, however, true that long hours of surfing, engagement and attachment to the internet are likely for someone to distancing himself or herself from religious issues, a reduction of engagement with religious duties, and experimentation with other religions and sects. The relativization of the religious identity might possibly lead to religious syncretism.

3. Technology as Anti-Religion

Technology was set against God and religion at the same time when man and his society opposed religion. The Tower of Babel represents an illustrative and striking example of this situation.

Technology through its representatives took on the role of anti-religion, initially trying to free itself from the shackles of Western religious totalitarianism, when the Western Church sought to attain absolute control of human activity, even scientific one, fearing the overthrow of its own fundamentalist establishment, and then, in the name of universal emancipation, to avenge it by developing a total frontal struggle for its

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3. For the coexistence between religion and technique, see, among others, P. Fleissner, „Technik als Religionsersatz?", http://members.chello.at/gre/fleissner/documents/technikreligion.html.

degradation and, if possible, its disappearance. In this case, we would be talking about a technological coup.

The technologists' anti-religious rage was developed in the period of criticism of religion, when almost everywhere both its transcendence and its usefulness have been scrutinized. The reason for this was provided by religion itself, which was undergoing an internal and external crisis. The internal crisis began with its social isolation and culminated in its self-negation, which even led to the death of God[4], whether theoretically or practically. The external crisis includes all the problems caused by its factorization, when religion tried to substitute social institutions, creating enormous problems for social cohesion, using the Bible and the resulting theology either as a right-wing or as a left-wing manifesto. Thus, the notion of technology as metaphysics presupposes a finite conception of religion[5].

In our postmodern era, technologists and scientists, despite the proclamations and the occasional proscriptions, do not seek the disappearance of religion; they do not manifest themselves as anti-religious, since they are well aware of the past, when, despite the general critical rejection of the religious phenomenon, not only did it not disappear, but continues to have a significant influence on the whole of social life. Therefore, technology therefore has adopted the Marxist approach. Since it didn't manage to contain and eliminate religion, it instrumentalized it, securing for it a new clientele.

4. Technology as Religion

According to the French sociologists Henry de Saint-Simon and August Conde, both enemies of clericalism, technology replaced religion for the first time during the third stage of the social evolution. The former attributes religious characteristics to the industrial society, which is identified with

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4. For a detailed presentation, see Ap. V. Nikolaidis, *Κριτικὴ Θεολογία*, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2002, p. 9 ff.
5. See Sabine Maasen, D. Atwood (Hrsg.), *Immanente Religion – Transzendente Technologie*, Verlag Barbara Budrich, Opladen, u.a. 2022. See also Silke Guelker, *Tranzendenz in der Wissenschaft*, Ergon, Baden-Baden 2019.

the third stage of the evolution of science and society (the positive one, preceded by the theological and metaphysical). Using early Christian love as a tool, it will lead humanity to a global fraternity and solidarity[6]. He was followed by August Comte, his pupil, who describes the third-stage society (positive or scientific) as a religion of humanity, which has nothing to do with the religion of the past, with unifying characteristics, in which the priesthood is replaced by industrialists and technologists[7]. This is a testimony of the Modern age: economists are the masters, scientists are the priesthood, politicians are the investors, while the technicians are the simple priests. The catechists are the education system headed by the university professors, the Media, the called ones are potentially the chosen ones (i.e. the techno-fascist elite, as a modern Greek thinker called it)[8].

Let's see how this image of the new religion is structured, and how it develops in our era:

- Religion has beliefs, worldview, customs, worship and religious practice. At the same time, modern technology possesses almost all the characteristics of a religious substitute, with the aim of replacing the religion; due to its universal prestige, it could be called "popular religion". We should be aware that man has always had the need to believe at something and to worship it; thus, he does his best to make that place the home of his faith and an object of worship.

- It is idolized based on its own atypical doctrinal-ideological background. It seeks to appear as a new and distinctive god, much more useful than any other previous one. To the question: who is more useful today, religion or technology, the answer is obvious: technology. Contemporary man trusts technology more than religion: the former directly satisfies his desires and visions, and solves many of his problems; the latter usually refers their solution to heaven and the future. He prefers immediate and timely solutions –e.g., health, food, clothing, housing, communication,

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6. See on this, Ap. V. Nikolaidis, *Εὐσύνοπτη Κοινωνιολογία*, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2008, p. 46.
7. See *op.cit.*, pp. 48-49, where one can find the relevant literature.
8. G. Kolempas, «Ἡ θρησκεία τῆς "ἀέναης ἀνάπτυξης" καὶ τοῦ "τεχνικοῦ μεσσιανισμοῦ"», *Ἀντίφωνο/Antifono* 7/11/2017.

transportation–, rather than the satisfaction of his spiritual needs. In the case of the pandemic, for example, technology appeared as a modern messiah, ready to face a global threat, while at the same time was forcing religion into taking the position of a problematic introversion.

 - It claims for itself the irreplaceable, the unique and the absolute, advertising its omniscience.

 - It has its own moral code, techno-ethics, adhering mainly to the utilitarian ethics, making sure that it is above ideologies and religions for obvious reasons.

 - It manages to monopolize interest with its irrepressible charm, ensuring dedicated and fully dependent believers, who are none other than its followers-clients. They all stand in front of technology, e.g. mobile phones, as if they were holy icons with the greatest possible devotion and dedication. See with how much eagerness young people, as if on holy pilgrimages, flood the sales outlets to be the first to secure the new gadgets.

 - It establishes new forms of attending services through social networks. The Internet companies (Google, Apple, Facebook) are the new Church. They function as new religious communities with the largest number of believers, bearing in mind that believers of all religions are also believers in technology[9].

 - It is ubiquitous: There is no aspect of private and public life in which it is not actively present, not even in religious systems, to the point of giving the impression that even God is insufficient without its help. Anyone who wants to know something doesn't turn to heaven and metaphysics, but to the internet. Thus, the omniscience is no longer sought in God but in technology. It is no longer God who is omnipresent; it's technology.

 - It behaves as a multi-factor, especially an economic one.

 - It acts as having power, since it is no longer used as a means to an end but as an end in itself. It has at its disposal mechanisms to control public and private life.

 - It appears as omnipotent and seeks world domination, over man and the natural world. Technology is not content to serve man but seeks to subjugate him, leading to the dilemma of whether it exists for man's sake

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9. See Chr. Hoffmeister, *Google Unser*, DCI Institute, Hamburg 2019, p. 101 ff.

or the situation is exactly the opposite. To the extent that technology displays totalitarian tendencies[10], the threats that humanity is facing are obvious. Technology contributes significantly to replacing, and not to supplementing the natural with the artificial, with all that this may mean for human relations.

- It is a wonder maker. If we bring a 19th century man into the present day, he will indeed be crossing himself, dazzled and amazed at the wonders of technology in all areas of civilization: transportation, space, communication, medical applications, music and much more.

- It manages men's life and death.

- It creates utopias, luring individuals into virtual reality.

- It boasts of its eschatological perspective. It formulates eschatological discourse in the name of a new one, believing in a better future.

With these religious prerequisites in place, technology, as a new religion, takes on the task of carrying out a new religious work:

- It wishes to create new people in the image of modern society, especially in the field of genetics by technically interfering with the human genome, or people alienated from their body.

- It suggests a new form of faith that forbids critical thinking and reflection.

- It cultivates a background of human self-redemption.

- It evangelizes a new humanity in the form of a new and prosperous kingdom of man, the techno-kingdom.

- It gives its own answers to the question about the meaning of life.

- It appears as a messiah, especially in times of crisis, offering solutions, even claiming the role of consoler.

- It seeks to meet all needs, material and spiritual, providing facilities in all areas of individual and social life.

- It even associates itself with the three cardinal theological virtues: faith, hope and love. It claims absolute faith in its potential to offer salvation, it fully endorses humanity's hopes for an improvement in living conditions;

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10. See Ap. V. Nikolaidis, *«Κριτικὴ Θεωρία» καὶ κοινωνικὴ λειτουργία τῆς Θρησκείας*, *op.cit.*, p. 164.

at the same time, it facilitates, at least mechanically, a qualitative change in behavior and human morals, as well as the establishment of bonds of solidarity and cooperation.

However, by claiming the role of religion, technology cannot avoid the criticism common to all religions, and it is forced to apologize for the same weaknesses, on which it bases its existence.

- We have characterized technology as a religious substitute; obviously, it cannot be a true religion; it cannot effectively meet the contemporary man's religious needs.

- Technology is a worldly construct, created by society. All of its components are conceived and constructed in the image of man and his social needs. It is an extension of the self-deified man, with all the negative effects that self-deification ascribes to him.

- It has all the characteristics of a manufactured religion, but the transcendentally transcendental is absent. This is its great weakness, although it considers it as a great asset: It does not constitute a revelation from above, capable of annihilating or managing all the weaknesses and dead ends that accompany a human construct. Thus, belief in technology has similar characteristics to religion, with the difference that it is oriented towards the now and here.

- The personal God is absent – the God of love, non-discrimination, mercy, and forgiveness.

- Technology fails to express the sacredness, mystery and spirituality that the man –by nature religious– actually needs.

- Despite its miraculous effects, it has not been able to restore lost humanity, while it causes huge psychological gaps, especially when it creates dependencies that lead to the deprivation of freedom, in the name of which the entire anti-religious and post-religious movement was built, especially during Modernity.

- One might expect, after the technology's anti-religious attitude and the assertion on its behalf of religious roles, that contemporary man would believe less than the man of the past. This does not seem to be the case, since one can combine adherence to traditional faith and the beneficial use of technology. Religious sentiment may be receding but it is not disappearing. The so-called secularism, which was used as the most fertile

ground for an all-embracing religious emancipation, proved to be equally ineffective: it failed to eliminate religious roots and spiritual pockets.

- Technology wishes to behave as omnipotent; still, it fails to achieve the desired effect. It does not cover individual and social reality in their entirety but only their technical part. Despite its wonders, it cannot answer effectively and convincingly the question about the real and not the artificial meaning of life.

- It is equally weak and inadequate in the question of the transcendence of death, despite its attempt to transcend or entertain space-time, and to establish the sense of eternity and immortality.

- Technology has not been able to avoid a collision with the natural environment. Instead of leading to man's reconciliation with nature, it led to ecological destruction. The climate crisis is part of the crisis of technological progress.

- It succumbs to the demands of subjective reason, the logic of interests.

- It is based on –and aimed at– the commercialization of technological progress. It serves and is served by economic factors.

- It does not reduce social injustice and related social inequalities; it rather exacerbates them. It is not here for everyone, but only for those who have the social and economic means to access the truly enormous technological achievements. Most are outsiders and excluded, condemned to function as slaves and servants. They are the ones who cannot follow technology. It is another side of social Darwinism, where the strong and the capable will prevail. In this case, "techno-fascism" is the main ideological tool[11].

- In the end, religion continues to maintain a monopoly on the management of the questions "from where?" and "to where?". As it has been pointed out by the neo-Marxist Ernst Bloch, a representative of post-religious anthropology, the answer to these questions remains the prerogative of religious faith[12].

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11. G. Kolempas, op.cit.
12. See Ap. Nikolaidis, *Μεταθρησκευτικὴ Ἀνθρωπολογία*, Grigoris Publications, Athens 2003, p. 218 ff.

Epilogue

The apotheosis of man's works –in our case, technology–, ultimately means the apotheosis of man himself, who, when he does not wish to commune with the God of faith, he transforms himself into a god, attributing to himself as much as many features as possible related to the traditional concept of God. What is most striking is that man's divinity is no longer constructed theoretically or philosophically, as it has previously been happening, but practically, i.e. technologically, in order for it to become more convincing and useful.

In such an era of technological dominance, Orthodox theology does not perceive its role as a competitor but as an interlocutor who, on the one hand, argues critically and without having the intention of disabling technological progress, and, on the other hand, puts forward with a contemporary discourse the need for an anthropological revision of the technological model, based on the human person's dual nature and the consequences of his creation *in the image of God*, and especially on that of freedom. Generally speaking: nowadays, in order to be useful and accepted, the Orthodox theological discourse must, on the one hand, fill the existential gaps left by technology and, on the other hand, relativize its totalitarian tendencies, insisting on the cultivation of strong identities, by creating the necessary conditions for a critical and resistant course against all forms of totalitarianism, including technocracy.