# TECHNOLOGY AND RELIGION

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE OF THE MASARYK UNIVERSITY JOURNAL OF LAW AND TECHNOLOGY

*by*

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For the past 50 years, interest in the relationship between religion and science has slowly gained significance among academics and the public alike. Controversies over evolution and Intelligent Design, for example, have played out in the American press and in American politics (and increasingly in European and Middle Eastern public life as well)[1] with journalists frequently channeling images of Galileo on his knees, recanting the Copernican hypothesis that the Earth revolves around the Sun. Such struggles for truth and—more importantly—for public authority are the subject of expanding intellectual interest and ever more sophisticated analysis. Progress in the study of religion and science, however, has often neglected the importance of technology. Even in those articles which address technological matters (such as stem cell research, genetic manipulation, or artificial intelligence), the role of technology is routinely subsumed within the broad and seemingly sufficient scope of "science". Certainly, technology should not be severed from science and the social study of technology should never be divorced from the social study of science. Nevertheless, academic progress in the study of technological culture demands that—from time to time—we think about technology as a properly distinct element of modern life. In this edition of the *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, our authors describe and debate the ways in which religion and technology interact in the contemporary world, which allows us to rethink the relationship

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1 See for example Edis, T. 2007, *An Illusion of Harmony: Science and Religion in Islam*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY and Riexinger, M. 2008, 'Propagating Islamic Creationism on the Internet', *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 99-112

between religion and science and, indeed, even the nature of technological culture itself.

The study of religion and science has grown by leaps and bounds over recent decades and, in doing so, has reshaped our understanding of modern culture. Growth in the field, however, demands that we give long and careful thought to the role that technology plays. We require data: fieldwork, ethnographies, textual analysis. We need to know what people think and do and why. Most of all, we need to do this from an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural vantage that takes account of people from all over the world: Europe and America, yes, but also South America, Africa, Asia and Australia. We need researchers willing to ask important questions and begin building a new understanding of technology and culture. In this journal, tentative steps have been taken in these directions.

For most of the 20th century, essentialist definitions of science, religion and the relationship between the two dominated public and academic understanding. Based upon John Draper's *The History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1874) and Andrew White's *The History of the Warfare between Science and Theology in Christendom* (1894), many commentators believed that religion and science were fundamentally at war with one another. Even though such a belief fails to properly account for White's conflict thesis (in which he hopes that theologians will accept the ways in which science allegedly disperses ignorance and eliminates superstition from religion), both authors were widely cited as having proved this essential conflict. For example, Clarence Darrow and Arthur Garfield Hayes, John Scope's most famous lawyers at the 1925 Monkey Trial in Tennessee over the teaching of evolution in public schools, both quoted White approvingly (Larson 1997, 22).

Opposition to the conflict thesis—the belief that science and religion necessarily had to be in a state of war—emerged early in the 20th century (e.g. Merton [1928] 1970) but it was not until the latter half of the century that such opposition gained ground. In the 1950s, a number of popular efforts to mitigate such conflict arose, including films by the popular Frank Capra (Gilbert 1987). These efforts were eventually spearheaded by physicist-turned-theologian Ian Barbour and the Institute for Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS).

Barbour explored different ways in which religion and science could interact, labeling them conflict, independence, dialogue and reconciliation (Barbour 1997). He, along with many of his colleagues at IRAS advocated the reconciliation position as both morally preferable and ontologically correct (e.g. Barbour 1997; Rolston 1998; Russell 2002). Barbour's influence has

been so powerful that this paradigm—the belief that religious and scientific truths must somehow coincide when properly understood—has become deeply ingrained within the academic study of science and religion. The reconciliation agenda has been met with considerable criticism, however, from its assumption that individuals, movements and institutions can be easily classified within Barbour's typology (e.g. Lindberg and Numbers 1986, Brooke and Cantor 1998) to its reliance upon a moral teleology (Cantor and Kenny 2001). Meanwhile, other authors have pointed to the political concerns that frequently motivate conflict or the lack thereof in the relationship between religion and science (e.g. Biagioli 1993; Larson 1997; Geraci forthcoming). Nevertheless, the reconciliation agenda remains an influential part of scholarship in religion and science, as shown by the continuing work of IRAS and the more recently formed Center for Theology and Natural Science in the U.S. While these groups produce produce a considerable variety of work, Barbour's reconciliation agenda remains one of the ruling paradigms for much of the work in the field. While there is nothing wrong with the reconciliation approach and while its proponents provide a great deal of valuable discourse, the study of religion, science and technology should have a wider scope of inquiry than this one approach.

It is difficult to find a place for discussing religion and technology when the latter is subsumed into the larger discourse surrounding religion and science. Although some authors have powerfully argued for the significance of religion in technological progress (e.g. Noble 1999, Nye 2003), most often technology is simply absent from religion-science conversations. Given that so much of the literature on this has revolved around the goal of reconciliation, it is no surprise that technology seems to have no place in our discussions. The contributors to this volume show how problematic that absence has been. Indeed, several of these essays help clarify the broader methodological arguments in religion and science scholarship.

The primary concern with typologies for religion and science, is that they assume we can classify any given individual, institution or enterprise into one category when in fact reality is far messier than our typologies. In this volume, we see just how true this can be. Catholic theologian Alexander Ornella offers a critique of the typological enterprise by exposing the problems inherent in its tendency to polarize religious interpretations of technology as "acceptable" or "unacceptable." This polarization, he argues, impoverishes our public conversations about technology. Elsewhere in this issue, Marek Čejka explodes the idea that any technology might fit within a static relationship of conflict, independence, dialogue or integration. He

shows that Haredi Israeli Jews take a pragmatic approach to the Internet, both fearing its influence upon their identity and values while simultaneously recognizing its necessity for their economic and social lives. Instead of fleeing from modern technology, Čejka shows, orthodox Israeli Jews tend to symbolically normalize these "dangerous" innovations within new religious narratives even when rabbis officially ban their use. Such an effort cannot be clearly placed into any of Barbour's categories; instead it inverts the entire enterprise of the typology because the appropriation of digital technology into Orthodox Judaism shows aspects of conflict, independence, and dialogue (perhaps even integration when we consider religious businesses) all at the same time.

There is no vacuum within which religion, science and technology might interact and display the essential characteristics that would allow for an easy typological classification of them. Instead, the reality of religion, science and technology is a messy world of politics, personalities, and even nationalist identities. Historian Greg Whitesides, in his essay about U.S. bioethical debates, shows the difficulties inherent in establishing government policies for technology. While we may wish to find purely secular justifications for our regulatory decisions, we inevitably find that religious interests refuse to go away and that these interests gain strength through electoral politics that take biotechnologies as centerpiece concerns. Bioethical debates, Whitesides concludes, reflect the religious politics of U.S. culture and will in all likelihood continue to do so; biotechnology, therefore, is a site for comprehending the relationship between technology and modern culture. Ornella's desire to see fruitful public dialogue based upon "methodological atheism" is a clear attempt to work beyond these kinds of religious politics while simultaneously recognizing their present strength.

Complicated politics of religion and technology are not limited to Euro-American culture. Although too few scholars have focused upon the interactions of religion and modern technology outside of the West, three papers in this issue consider how these forces collide in Islam and China, respectively. Jens Kutscher and Vít Šisler argue that the Internet has become a zone for contesting interpretive authority within Muslim communities. Juridical decisions/recommendations (*fatwas*) from different—and frequently private—scholars offer competing ways of establishing authority and defining the appropriately Muslim ways of living in the contemporary global world. Such decisions engage in compromise and play with ideals that often contradict the premises of their authors.

The "democratic" nature of technology, its dispersion throughout ruling and non-ruling parties, creates a space for cultural dialogue and public debate. This is not to say that the Internet is necessarily a technology of sociocultural revolution or even that it is more powerful for the ruled than the ruling classes. Thanks, however, to the easy distribution of online technologies and the power of publication disseminated amongst the masses, the Internet does provide a zone within which public authority is open to question. Within this framework, Pavel Šindelář argues that the Internet is redefining Chinese political life. While Islamic fatwas often address the reality of living outside of nations with Muslim majorities and in concert with people of other religious and political identities, Chinese techno-religious political struggles are fundamentally localized in Chinese politics while internationalized in their religious implications. The Internet allowed the dispersion of Falun Gong while also promoting political causes central to Chinese cultural life. Falun Gong's Internet presence reshaped Chinese state control while also establishing new ways of thinking about authority within a religious tradition. Yet as Kutscher's and Šisler's essays demonstrate, this is not necessarily the case within the transnational Muslim communities, where traditional and established authorities lay claim to digital media and the messages thereby conveyed, thus effectively competing with new groups on the Internet.

The confusing ways in which religion and technology mix in our political life may even enable new ways of producing religious culture. Šindelář believes that Falun Gong's Internet success indicates that religious identity will become more fluid in coming years: not only will religious practices be deterritorialized by the Internet but beliefs and practices will likewise become shared activities that develop through the interaction of many different groups. Alongside the publication of traditional religious ideas, the very act of creating the Internet, argues Stef Aupers, has enabled religious production. The Internet has changed modern culture—it has circumvented the disenchanting logic of early modern technoscience and reinstituted a magical perspective in elite technical circles. The severance between our understanding and the results of computer programming (which are often unpredictable) has re-enchanted the world, leading to the creation of a religious system—which he labels "technopaganism"—founded upon and within elite computer circles. No doubt Andrew White—were he alive today—would be shocked to see technoscientific researchers producing their own "superstitions."

This special issue of *The Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology* offers snapshots of the contemporary world, in which globalization and rapid technological progress by no means suggest the regress of religiosity. Each essay explores elements in the study of religion and technology. Taken individually, the articles shed light on particular cultures, religions, technologies and practices. Taken as a whole, the journal recasts our inherited understanding of religion and science (and thus of culture) in a new light. As secularism theories fade away before the present resurgence of religion—thanks to the renewal of traditional religious forms (Kepel 1994), the rise of new age religiosity (Hanegraaff 1996), and the hybridization of religion and technology in new religious movements (Geraci 2008)—we have no choice but to take serious account of the interaction between technology and religious practice. These institutions, which dominate so much of daily life for people around the globe, thoroughly penetrate one another. The authors in this journal provide us with new ethnographic data and new theoretical constructs, in the process deconstructing the too simplistic paradigms of the past and helping us to understand the groups and individuals they investigate.