

The Ongoing Decline of Religion

The inexorably growing impact of science is our most significant tool discrediting religion.

ELIE A. SHNEOUR



The Roman Catholic Church's remarkably concise statement of its core beliefs, the Credo, includes this pivotal article of faith that sustains and justifies most religions: "*Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum et vitam venture seaculi*"—" [I believe] and await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." Surely, life on Earth was truly miserable for nearly everybody until fairly recently. Through the ages the promise of comfort and immortality after earthly demise has been a powerful incentive for religious adhesion. In fact, failure to belong *in toto* to the Church, for example, was harshly punished by the ecclesiastical Roman Inquisition tribunal (1542–1908), which dealt out severe questioning that included torture to coerce the victim to recant and return to the fold. Those judged guilty of heresy incurred harsh penalties including death by fire.

There remain in the world today several other orthodoxies, led by religious fanatics, that torture and kill in the name of religion. Some of them use animal and human sacrificial rituals. On the other hand, to have one's virtual ticket to heaven punched one must pay for the privilege granted religion by exacting a number of conditions in return. They include strict adherence to specific rules of conduct and financial sacrifices by the willing believer. By contrast, the wicked (comprising those born or raised outside the faith, unbelievers, nonbelievers, cheats, murderers, thieves, and the like) are likely to be condemned to eternal damnation, which usually involves a hellish existence in some underground sea of eternal flames ruled by the Devil. The miscreant's fall from grace, however, need not be fatal if he or she recants the behavior in time. He or she may yet be pardoned by taking on burdensome obligations for the remission of sins. This is how religions have dominated mankind since time immemorial. They offer a collective vision of a benevolent eternity for the price of remaining an integral, potent part of human society. But today, life on Earth is more rapidly becoming gratifying while the possibility for a supernatural life after death is becoming increas-

ingly problematic and distant.

The cornerstone of almost all established religions rests on ancient texts claimed to have been divinely inspired, although an argument can be made that all of them qualify as heavenly hearsay. Many have been translated into the

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common spoken and written language. They include the Septuagint, an early translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. Then there is the Complutensian Polyglot, the Old and New Testament of the King James Bible rendered in quintessential English, the Ramayana, the Bhagavad Gita as part of the Mahabarata, the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price, the Koran and the Hadith, the Torah and the wisdoms of the Midrash with the Babylon-

ian and the Jerusalem Talmuds. These texts are usually grounded on a set of archaic dogmas, implausible beliefs, and fallacious precepts, such as the golden tablets as one of the divine sources for the Book of Mormon.

These texts inevitably clash against the coherent, rational, scientific advances that increasingly overwhelm religious histories, dictates, and dogmas. In all seriousness, some advanced religions still dispense such improbable yarns as a naked Eve in the Garden of Eden speaking with a snake. They allege the immaculate conception of Jesus by Mary through the intervention of the Holy Ghost. They assert that the Red Sea parted to allow Jews dry passage from Egypt to the Holy Land. More generally, these religions have been generating miraculous happenstances for which reliable evidence is never likely to be found.

For the rational person, it is increasingly difficult to accept these religious tenets. Indeed, to belong to most religions one must suspend wholesale monumental disbeliefs of the modern world and instead accept supernatural magical explanations. With scientific advances

expanding the human view of the universe, it is understandable why so few major religions have emerged in the past thousand years. Given these wide-ranging impediments, it is not surprising that religions in almost all their forms are neither willing to deal with the modern world nor capable of doing so. This explains, in part, why the attendance at churches, synagogues, and mosques for religious events is slowly but palpably decreasing. Religions over

the longer term seem doomed to eventual irrelevance. They appear to be well on the way to eventually turning into mere historical curiosities, but that will not happen effortlessly or soon because religions still carry considerable sway in the world.

Among the active religions of today, Judaism is one of the oldest and is conspicuous for its remarkable survival in the face of brutal existential assaults. Judaism covers a gamut of conflicting factions, many of which are based on fierce resistance to change. The scholars of old wrote many religious texts by borrowing liberally from other mythological traditions. For example, the four-thousand-year-old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh originated the story of a heavily animal-laden ark enduring a torrential rainfall

conduct that he introduced 2,500 years ago. Jainism was also introduced in the sixth century BCE, as yet another religion that taught nonviolence in revolt against Hinduism. Shinto in Japan was once a sect with reverence for *Kami*, a polytheist sacred power that eventually became distorted in order to sustain the brutal militarism of the 1930s and early 1940s—but its origins are lost in the early folklore of the country.

The central conclusion about religion has to be that it has not made any lasting impact on human ethics, the primary engine for its existence. In this respect alone, religion has failed dismally, as the world remains today at the uneasy threshold of a worldwide nuclear threat, looking helplessly at the hecatomb that was the twentieth century.

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and then ending up stuck on a mountain top. The Roman Catholic Church was eventually divided as a result of the sixteenth-century Reformation into Protestant denominations, which in turn were still further divided. Islam emerged from the dictates of the prophet Muhammad, who preached an uncompromising form of monotheism in the seventh century. Although there is a theoretical Islamic underpinning of belonging to a single community, Islam also fragmented early into a number of sects, some of which continue to fight each other in a murderous frenzy to this day. Hinduism emerged from bloody sacrificial cults brought in by Arian invaders in India around 1500 BCE. Buddhism began as a revolt in the sixth century BCE against orthodox Hinduism through the influence of Siddhartha Gautama, universally known as Buddha. Confucius in China did not preach the existence of a deity but of a mandatory system of good

The single most significant element discrediting religion is the inexorably growing impact of science. That process began in earnest in sixteenth-century Europe and received a dramatic boost that had far-reaching implications not only for science but for the Roman Catholic Church as well. It was Copernicus (1473–1543) who mathematically dethroned Earth as the center of the Ptolemaic universe and postulated a heliostatic solar system, degrading the Earth to a much lesser position in the firmament. His work was confirmed by Galileo (1564–1642), who not only experimentally confirmed and supported the heliocentric theory developed by Copernicus but is actually considered the pioneer of the experimental method. This did not sit well with the Roman Catholic Church of the time, and stern opposition to Galileo's heliocentric system by the Church did not fully end until 1922. Now the Church

has issued restrictions to human reproduction and stem cell research. Many other religions also have concerns about where scientific research is going and the risk it is posing to their beliefs. In the long run these restrictions are not likely to be effective. There can be no doubt that science will eventually triumph.

What makes the advance of scientific work possible is that there is an easy and fruitful give and take between science and technology; neither of these can possibly have an intrinsic fruitful relationship with religion. There is a major difference between science and technology: science is a way of thinking while technology is a way of doing. Technology provides no clear contribution to the eventual doom of religion because it dwells on an entirely different logical platform from science. That difference between them is important. Technology is an altogether distinct concept from science, although these two terms are almost always used interchangeably and indiscriminately. The extraordinary example is China, which was a veritable fountainhead of major technological inventions. These included the compass in the third century BCE and the development of medicine—the use of the pulse for diagnosis was recorded in the remarkable *Book of Titles*, dating back to the eleventh century BCE. Gunpowder was first used for fireworks in the second century BCE; writing paper was available from 105 CE onward, and printing with movable type was developed in the seventh century CE.

These were truly remarkable technological fruits of the human mind that Europeans didn't recognize and adopt until much later. Not surprisingly, there is no whiff of religious chicanery in them because religion is blinded by "having the word" that transcends scientific thoughts and technological pursuits, intentionally resisting change to protect its wobbly edifice of dogma. This is what makes every attempt to reconcile religion with science and/or technology a virtually unattainable goal.

One of my sometime mentors was paleontologist and Jesuit priest Pierre

Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955). We encountered each other in France, where I lived, and later on in New York, where he died. He tried but failed to convince me to consider a Jesuit framework for my life, but I learned the catechism in the interim and sang until fairly recently exquisite masses and requiems by a variety of composers—from Gregorian chants and early music to contemporaries—in a number of churches and secular venues. Much of that music is awesomely beautiful in the main, but it neither subverted me nor provided me with a coherent convergence between religion, science, and technology, just as Pierre was unable to do so. This discouragingly futile effort to achieve consistency between science and religion is broadly ongoing today. A dominant factor is individuals' repeated but failed attempts to seek at least a rational link between religion and ethics. Ethics is a major factor in science but plays no discernible role in technology. Ethics consists of wise guides for human behavior that are vitally important to civilizing pursuits. They ensure the survival and prosperity of the human society. By contrast, religious precepts and prohibitions usually impose a hostile burden on outsiders and infidels who reject adherence to traditional and ancient norms, most of which long ago reached obsolescence.

It was Voltaire (1694–1778) who exclaimed in disgust as he left one of many interminable religious disputations of his time, "There are no sects in geometry!" By contrast, here is one shining example among many that illuminates how science and technology complement each other to advance both: In 1928 Karl Jansky, a newly minted MIT graduate engineer, was hired by the then-prestigious Bell Telephone Laboratories. He was assigned the difficult task of tracking down all sources of noise that interfered with telephone communications. By 1931 Jansky had systematically detected and identified all sources of telephonic noise, with one glaring exception. It took him many additional months to finally pinpoint that finicky last source of noisy interference.

It originates in deep space from the direction of Sagittarius, located at the center of our own galaxy. Although Jansky published the results of his seminal work, he perplexingly didn't follow through on it but went on to do other things. It fell to an amateur astronomer, Grote Beber, to pursue this spatial mystery further; thus was born the science of radio astronomy, emerging as it did from technology rather than from science. Such fortuities are the bread and butter of science and technology, where no quarter is ever taken or given to claims that are beyond the realm of rational inquiry.

The one central position that distinguishes science and technology from religion is the tradition of unrelenting attempts to falsify the observations before they are accepted by the community of scientists and engineers, a demanding standard that religion could never accomplish or even consider. Religion is incapable of granting believers the thought that there may perhaps be errors in its tenets that might contradict any part of the platform on which they stand.

Nonetheless, religion has to rationalize its usually convoluted dogmas by giving them ethical dimensions—as already noted, an ultimately futile exercise. For example, the "Right to Life" has long been a dead letter in the Roman Catholic Church. Even Vatican scholars of the Scriptures no longer uphold the erroneous reading of Genesis 38:9. Among the Ten Commandments "Thou shalt not kill" does not even begin to encompass all human life-forms, and the human construct is open to wide interpretation; consider the resulting dogma that "life begins at conception." That is an utterly false assertion on its face because spermatozoa and ova cells are vibrantly alive long before they meet. Life most assuredly does not begin at conception. There are no discontinuities here as life just persists and inexorably continues and matures. Thus the inevitable conclusion embraced by religion is that the sacred status of an individual and his society is dependent on properties possessed by human cellular tissues.

This has a startling consequence that is rarely if ever invoked by religion. Indeed, if all forms of human life were truly recognized as sacred down to the unicellular form, religious authorities would be compelled to insist on the ceremonial burial of every human cell, every strand of hair, every bit of skin, and every tissue removed from surgery. From the formal religious assertion of the sublime value of a single fertilized human cell, we are, alas, left with a preposterous notion that is not enforceable in the real world. Sooner rather than later these concepts will determine at some point in the future that all human life is sacred in fact as it is in theory. The quoted Roman Catholic Credo dogma that begins this essay is based on the proposition that life on Earth is assumed to be unlikely to improve and will remain irretrievably miserable. Only in life after death can one be granted perpetual solace in one of several forms. This precept has no place in science or technology, but it still finds a declining refuge in religion. The ultimate contradiction is the pro-lifer who supports the death penalty. H. L. Mencken witheringly summarized how science could overcome the limitations of theology and autocracy: "Every time the scientists take another fort from the theologians and the politicians there is genuine human progress." ■

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Elie A. Shneour, a neurochemist and biophysicist, is president and research director of Biosystems Research Institute in La Jolla, California, and a longtime

Committee for Skeptical Inquiry fellow. He has served on many national and international science advisory bodies and is a member of the American Chemical Society, the American Society of Biological Chemists, the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, the International Society for Neurochemistry, Sigma Xi, and several other scientific organizations.