Technology and religion: A metaphysical challenge

Theodore John Rivers*

115-31 Union Turnpike, Forest Hills, NY 11375, USA

Abstract

This paper describes how technology threatens conventional religions, but it also proposes that technology itself may become a religion. Although technology does not challenge religion with deliberate intent, nevertheless it is a challenge because it contains several inherent characteristics that collectively strengthen technology as a likely candidate for a religion. The importance of religion in past and present societies is discussed as well as its role in future societies. In addition to technology's inherent characteristics, technology is also aided by historical events that concern the weakening of Christianity and the Christian conception of the universe since the 16th century. This weakening or dissolution of Christianity has secularized the modern age, which conflicts with the religious premise of Western civilization. In addition to secularization, the modern age is characterized by nihilism, which has filled the void caused by this dissolution and which concerns the negation of traditional values (religious and non-religious), or at least the sublimation of higher values to lower ones. Technology has become religiously important because of the development of all these factors.
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1. Introduction: religion and metaphysics

Religion serves many purposes and addresses many needs. It proposes a code of conduct, and helps to bind people to a particular culture. It deals with a system of rituals through which one must be initiated, and offers an understanding of the meaning of life. It reflects upon the human condition, and confers a sense of immortality. Religion is built upon a view of an objective order to the world beyond human experience, an assumption

*Tel.: +1 718 897 0918.

E-mail address: riversphd@netzero.net.

that may fulfill a need, regardless of reality. In whatever form religion takes, it attempts to answer some basic questions: Who am I? What is my purpose in this life? What made everything that exists? But an evaluation of religion shows that other questions are asked: How much is religion a part of culture? How much can religion be changed and yet retain its culture? How much does religion accurately describe the world and its relationship to being?

It is evident that religion is an essential characteristic of human culture and lies at its foundation, but how it originates is not the result of critical thinking. Religion may be defined as belief in supernatural forces, which may be variously interpreted. This belief may be tied to some supersensory place where one's soul will reside after death in the absence of any god (as in Buddhism), or a supersensory place with the addition of a supreme "being" thought to be all-powerful and all-knowing (as in Christianity or Islam). Religion may also be defined as a belief that addresses the ultimate questions of life, but this belief has little to do with philosophy, which itself addresses the same questions. A philosophical analysis of reality should not be confused with religion. Religion may also be defined as the result of its function, i.e., defined in relationship to its role in binding society to its people, since "religion" is derived from Latin *religare*, which means to tie, or to bind back.

Although its origins are attributed to a foundation based upon reason, religion remains uncritical because it contains no provable propositions. It offers no plausible explanation for the world [1]. Rather, religion is thought to be the result of some sort of "revelation" which presumably demonstrates a causal connection between the world and the manner in which it might have come into being or why it functions the way it does [2,3]. It is based upon preconceptions that the world can only be understood when supernatural forces are introduced, even though there may be no actual causality between them. As a result, religion depicts a world different from the world we live in, and after depicting this other world, it then attempts to explain the world we do live in. Since all religions offer their own interpretation of the world, each religion is different, despite minor similarities. And yet religions are bound to culture because they draw upon a common human experience, which uses rites, rituals, myths and taboos in order to be understood.

There are many historical examples in which different religions have proposed explanations of this alleged causality, a few of which are described below. For example, the Nile River was vital to the survival of the ancient Egyptians, and if the water level of the Nile was low, the Egyptians believed the god Osiris, whom they associated with the Nile, was angry with them, and thereby used the water level of the Nile to show his displeasure. Or it is said by Christians and Jews that unless one abandons an adulterous life, God will punish the adulterer, and this despite other Old Testament references to the contrary. Or when the city of Rome was sacked by Alaric and the Visigoths in the early 5th century, Romans believed this event occurred because the Christian Roman emperor Theodosius I closed the pagan temples and prohibited the worship of their gods, who would have offered protection from invasion. In these examples, there is an assumed causal connection between the level of the Nile River and Orisis' approval, between adultery and God's threat of punishment as well as a connection between the sack of Rome and the closing of pagan temples.

Although there is much in common between the goals of theologians and metaphysicians, we need to ask if religion is a substitute for metaphysics. Is a religious belief a distortion of metaphysics, i.e., is it a perversion of the analysis of being? When we