Dynamic Secularization
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Information Technology and the Tension Between Religion and Science

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Preface

Many pundits hoped that the Internet and the World Wide Web would unify humanity, yet they seem to be causing fragmentation. It is far too early to know if we have entered a dangerous new period of cultural, political, and military conflict such as that which poisoned the first half of the previous century, because the new information and communication technologies may be magnifying the images of real problems, rather than contributing to a growing global disaster. Many questions need to be asked, but they cannot be answered definitively until many paths toward answers have been explored. A great transition has begun, but we cannot yet predict the result. Are we headed toward the best or worst of times?

Googling “the best of times” with “the worst of times” reminds us they come from the 1859 novel *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, a novel that compared Paris with London during the French Revolution at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. This book compares two realms of culture, religion, and science, early in the information revolution. Both Paris and London survived the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even the more dangerous twentieth, so our null hypothesis is that both religion and science will survive the twenty-first century. Yet each may be transformed, and the desperate survival of Athens and Rome during the fall of classical civilization was hardly a triumph of wisdom. Perhaps, we have entered a period of dynamic secularization, in which both religion and science might disintegrate or evolve into entirely new forms.

The form of wisdom expressed through the world’s great religions has come into question, gradually and haltingly, over the centuries. But today, many nations experience rapid secularization, as churches fade into the background of social life, and increasing fractions of the population tell pollsters they lack faith. Partisans for science may privately believe that their very different form of wisdom has triumphed and that gods will soon be of interest only to archaeologists or even paleontologists. Yet somehow science has not yet answered the great questions human beings ask about the meaning of their lives and the fundamental nature of the universe. Given how little most people seem to understand about any of the sciences, it may be that they primarily experience them through technologies and their apparent enthusiasm for science may just be optimism that invention will continue to advance.
Yet the last human voyage to the Moon took place in 1972 when three quarters of the current human population had not yet been born, and the value of nuclear power remains controversial, even before the dangers of nuclear weapons are factored into the equation. At present, hope remains that genetic sequencing will vastly improve medicine even as the effectiveness of antibiotics declines, and some visionaries imagine that nanotechnology will somehow facilitate immortality. The most obvious transformations in daily life of the past two decades are the results of information technology, so it makes sense to look at the dynamics of current secularization through the lens of a computer.

This book will explore a tangle of questions about the dynamics of dual secularization, affecting both religion and science but often in different ways, by examining many forms of computer-assisted communication, primarily online but also within an ordinary user’s personal computer. Web sites, Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, and massively multiplayer online role-playing games all offer data, ideas, and emotional experiences specifically categorized as religious, even while the same media promote and critique the sciences. Perhaps ironically, or reflecting a fundamental poetic truth, social sciences are central to this quest in two contradictory ways. First, they offer theories and methodologies necessary for conducting research, even containing specific subfields like the sociology of religion and the sociology of science. Second, among the sciences, they seem to be the least rigorous, perhaps being nothing more than rhetorical replacements for the religions whose malaise they document. Thus, no work of social science can claim to offer salvation from the growing chaos, yet perhaps it takes an anarchist to know the dark heart of anarchy.

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” So wrote William Butler Yeats in 1919, contemplating the bloody disaster of the First World War. His title, “The Second Coming,” hinted that Christ would soon return to bestow upon humanity the gift of salvation. Yet the poem ends with a question: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” Questioning faith may not be a bad thing, and what looks at first glance like a rough beast may turn out to be a lamb or a phoenix.

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