

NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE RELIGIONS

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The World Exposition EXPO 2000 in Hanover adopted as its theme the relationships of humanity to nature and technology. This suggested making “nature and technology” a central theme of the inter-religious and “inter-philosophical” dialogue of the project Discourse of the World Religions before and during the World Exposition. The reasons for the occasion of the World Exposition and the systematic reasons for the centrality of the theme coincided. For the relationship of humans to nature is a central object of religious doctrine and ethics in all world religions. Since the religions respond to the neediness of human life, they cannot ignore the cause of this neediness, the tense relationship between the needs of our lives and the scope of the means in nature at our disposal. They cannot avoid addressing the relationship of the human person to nature and to technology as a means of increasing the yield from nature.

Technology and the economy are, as Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld has shown, a means of liberating human beings from their predicament, from the predicaments of external nature and the predicaments of social dependence.¹ Both aim at the productive resolution of the predicament and thus at order: “According to their idea, consequently, the economy is order in the actions of meeting needs and technology is order in the carrying out of these actions.”² The order in the economy and the order in technology are part of the order of life and thus of the order of the religions and cannot possibly stand outside the life orders conceived and determined by the religions.

In addition to the practical, religiously-influenced, even if not religiously-determined relationship of the human race to nature in the economy and technology, there is also the relationship of humankind to nature that is religious in the narrower sense. Nature is venerated in the nature mysticism of the religions; it is elevated in cult and rite. The “Last Supper” and the Eucharist of Christianity are examples, as natural nourishment is elevated to the level of spiritual nourishment. Nature is seen in the religions as the mystery through which the higher world shines into the lower. For the world religions, the natural is the beginning

¹ Cf. Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld, *Grundriß der Sozialökonomik, II. Abteilung: Die natürlichen und technischen Beziehungen der Wirtschaft, Teil 2: Wirtschaft und Technik*, 2nd Rev. Ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1923; repr. Frankfurt: Keip, 1985), p. 10.

² Ibid.

of the supernatural – not a beginning that can simply be left behind idealistically in the ascent to spirituality, but one that also has normative meaning in this life. Thus the importance of the body in all religions, in the Western tradition in Judaism and Christianity, but also in the Eastern traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as in Islam, which stands between East and West. The natural can be seen as a bridge to the spiritual in the significance of the garden and of bodily concentration exercises in Buddhism.

Paradoxically, the world religions, which attach special significance to eternal life or life after death, also place great value upon careful treatment of the physical nature of human persons and the natural environment that surrounds them in the life before death, whereas the secular Western world, which denies life after death, attaches less importance to the normativeness of traditional nature and subjects it to being completely at the disposal of human beings and their technology. This development is consistent with Max Weber's thesis that the end of nature mysticism and the veneration of nature, brought about by Protestantism, has brought about the modern domination of nature through technology.

1. Technology as Compensation for the Human Person as a Needy Creature and as Reform of Nature in the Religions

1.1. THE CONTINGENCY OF THE CREATION IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM: GOD AS THE MAKER OF NATURE AND HUMANS AS HIS CO-WORKERS

For Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the dialectic of availability and reverence of nature is characteristic. Nature is, on one hand, given to human rule by the commission to rule over nature in the biblical creation account,³ and it is at the same time withdrawn from humans and not given over completely to their disposal, because it is the creation of a personal being, of the personal God. The human person must instead respect the prerogative of the true creator and owner of nature, according to the religious world view, and prove to be a vassal, a trustee and caretaker in the stewardship of nature. In addition, there is a second idea, which likewise leads to the characteristic dialectic of veneration of nature and distance from nature in Judaism and Christianity: the idea of the difference *and* connectedness of the creator and the creation, the author and the work, which is characteristic of the theological idea of creation. The Jewish, Christian, and also Islamic doctrines of creation are essential poietic and thereby technomorphic.

³ Cf. the contributions by Micha Brumlik and Asghar Ali Engineer to this volume.

Even if the creation contains a technomorphic element through God, this does not imply that God is a technician. God cannot be a technician, because there is no universal technology of the creation of worlds. Because there is no technology of creation, God is not given any technology that existed before him or that he himself created. Since God created only one time, he needs no technology and also creates no technology of creation, because one does not create technology for a creative occurrence that occurs only one time: there is no technology for a singular event.⁴

According to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, God makes the creation and he is the artist who both realizes himself in his work and is different from it in his substance and is not dependent upon it. He does not realize himself in his nature through his work, as Hegelianism and pantheism assume. The relationship of God and the world, creator and creation, is a relationship of subject and object, but neither a relationship of separation⁵ nor one of the identity of subject and object, in which the subject God would be increasingly identical with his object, the world, as the identity-philosophers Hegel and Schelling assume.

The distinction, but not separation, of creator and creation anticipates the distinction of human producer and product, of the subjectivity of the human person and the objectivity of that which is produced, which is characteristic of every act of technological production. The producer does not first become conscious of himself and his spirit through his work on the object, as the elevation of the subject-object relationship in Hegel's logic assumes, but is instead already previously conscious and can create only because he is already conscious.⁶

The poietic analogy or analogy of poiesis, which considers the creation of nature to be something made and produced by a person, leads to a distancing of the human person from nature, because it is interpreted as a produced object and as a work that could also not exist, if its creator had chosen not to produce it. The idea of nature as creation means that nature possesses the mark of the contingent, of the non-necessary and non-eternal. Nature as creation is non-necessary and non-eternal, because it is not rooted in necessity, but in the freedom of the creative will of God, and it is not eternal and beginningless, but has its beginning in the six-day work of God, the *opus six dierum*, even if it is also created for eternity as the creation of God. The contingency of the creation in the will of the creator relativizes the holiness of nature in Judaism and Christianity: Nature could also not exist.

⁴ Cf. D. P. Chattopadhyaya in this volume, p. 91.

⁵ Cf. below Francis X. D'Sa, who brings out that the world is not an external object for God as its Creator.

⁶ On the theory of creation, see Peter Koslowski, *Philosophien der Offenbarung: Antiker Gnostizismus, Franz von Baader, Schelling* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001), pp. 329-52 and 772-86.

The contingency of the creation is strengthened by its original state of being created for human beings. Already before the fall, nature is completed only by the collaboration of the human person in God's work of creation: God brought, as the creation account of Genesis 2,19 reads "every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens" to the man, so that he could name them: "And whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name." With this sentence in the Yahwist creation account, the central, original collaboration of the human in the creation is expressed, which Judaism, Christianity, and also Islam accept already before the fall. The three ideas, the separation of creation and creature, the idea that the human person was created in the image of God and, therefore, according to his purpose, as likewise a creative being, and the idea that the human person is to participate in the work of creation bring about the distinction of man and nature and the dominant position of the human person relative to nature. This dominant position is not directed against nature. It implies, however, power and rule over nature.

Power can in turn be either good or bad rule. It does not necessarily decay into exploitation. Power is in danger of corrupting, great power is in great danger of corrupting. This is also true of human power over nature. The human person was corrupted by his power over nature and did not comply with his dominant position, thus read the theosophical interpretations of the biblical fall. The human person did not fall because of haughtiness and arrogance, but because of malice and laziness. He wanted to be like nature and, therefore, not to comply with his position as ruler over nature.

The biblical religions advocate the dominant position of the human person and his rule over nature. The relationship to nature determined by them is, therefore, subject to the ambivalence of the rule of nature and the danger of the non-respect of nature – perhaps to a greater degree than the nature relationship of Hinduism and Buddhism, which do not recognize the idea of the distinction of creator and nature and the idea of the contingency of creation to the same extent. There are, to be sure, traditions of Hinduism that also include a doctrine of creation.

Why is the idea of the collaboration of man in the creation so central to Judaism and Christianity? Why does the creator grant his creature, humanity, so much collaboration in the creation already before the fall? Man cannot make the creation better than the Creator himself; and it also reads that God saw that what he had made was good. Thus, the original collaboration of man in the creation must belong to that which was good in it. One cannot say more about the reasons that may have induced the Creator to will the collaboration of the creature.

1.2. TECHNOLOGY AS CONSEQUENCE OF AND COMPENSATION FOR THE FALL IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

The doctrine of the fall, which occurred because man did not comply with his position, further strengthens the element of the collaboration of human persons in the creation – both by the idea that nature was changed for the worse by the fall of man and by the idea that the human person became through the fall a creature of deficiencies, who must himself remedy the deficits that he brought about in the world and himself by the effort of work and technology, as well as by the collaborative help of God: The human person has damaged nature and must now improve it with God's and his own help. Thus, the fall and the origin of technology move closely together. Technology became the prosthesis of fallen man, and he seeks with its help to compensate the deficiencies that he has caused for himself and nature by his fall. The fall is the *felix culpa* of technology. It has produced the deficient being man and the deficits of nature, which man will now heal by technology itself. Technology becomes, therefore, a component of the realization of the common good of the human race and the welfare of the human individual.

One can say with Friedrich Dessauer that God as it were continues the creation by means of technology.⁷ Technology stands at the service of the realization of the creation and "the idea of technology is the idea of service" according to Dessauer.⁸ At the same time, technology receives a dimension of historicity through the idea that it is compensation for deficiencies that have entered into the creation: It is a consequence of an historical fall and it should contribute to the realization of the common good in history in the historicity that entered through the fall.

This emphasis on historicity, the emphasis on historical revelation and the related thesis that divine revelation completes itself despite and through the fall, original sin, and historicity, as well as through the progress of humanity and technology, distinguishes Judaism and Christianity, so it appears, from the other religion that also recognizes its origin in the Bible: Islam. In Islam the verbal revelation of Allah in the Quran is more important than the historical revelation of God in and through history. This difference between Judaism and Christianity, on one hand, and Islam, on the other, can perhaps also explain the different degrees of the realization of technology in Islam and in Judaism and Christianity. In the culture of the West shaped by Christianity and Judaism, technology is an historical force of the compensation of deficiency and an element of the realization of the common good.

⁷ Friedrich Dessauer, *Philosophie der Technik: Das Problem der Realisierung* (Bonn: Cohen, 1927), p. 86. The 5th Edition is entitled *Streit um die Technik* (Frankfurt: Knecht, 1956).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 131ff.



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