

Technics and IT

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL OF SECULARIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY?

Agnieszka Bógdał-Brzezińska

Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw, ul. Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927, Warsaw, Poland,
ORCID: 0000-0003-0247-1941

Abstract. The subject of the article is to show the manifestations of the relationship between digital technologies and social changes in technologically developed countries in terms of the functioning of religion. The issues of using digital tools by religious institutions and the faithful were discussed. Selected examples of biotechnological solutions in relation to the concept of transhumanism were discussed. Examples of robotization of religious rituals were also considered.

Keywords: ICT, secularization, information society, transhumanism

Introduction. We now live in a global society that has been defined as a global collective form that produces culture, institutions, patterns of behavior, and norms of action. According to the classics of reflection on the digital revolution, there is a direct link between globalization and the emergence of a new social formation, the so-called information society, Alvin Toffler writes about a society in which information and the knowledge derived from it play a fundamental role, which should be treated as a basic resource (Toeffler 1995) Daniel Bell - about a society with advanced means of information processing and communication, producing digital products, which are both the basis for creating a national income and the source of income for the majority of its members (Bell 1975). Researchers emphasize that the IT revolution is also a catalyst for the crisis of the modern state, and at the same time - a keystone of globalization processes. There are diagnoses that globalization - the phenomenon of shrinking space-time - is as real for a new type of society as the Internet (Dembiński 2001).

Contemporary global society exhibits features of both a traditional society and a knowledge society. For the purposes of this study, we will apply the term "society of trust" to the former, which means that its members accept the existing state of reality, both material and social, and are ready to maintain it in the sense of the rightness of consolidating the status quo. In relation to the information society, we will use the substitute "society of uncertainty", referring indirectly to the terminology used by Ulrich Beck to describe the functioning of society in the conditions of the declining industrial era (Beck 2004) and to the diagnosis of the "world of uncertainty" by Father Janusz Mariański (Mariański 2010: 39).

The following considerations were inspired by the publications of two Catholic researchers and thinkers considered important figures in the Catholic discourse on social development and technological progress. The first is a series of works by the Jesuit palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the second is the work of the American carthusian and philosopher Thomas Merton. Both were Catholic clergymen, born in the nineteenth century, had the opportunity to experience intense social changes from traditional society to the first forms of the knowledge society. They both experienced the effects of two world wars and could observe the influence of totalitarian regimes on changes in collective consciousness, culture and political systems. Each of them adopted a different attitude in the face of the ongoing changes: de Chardin saw in them the next stage of human evolution in accordance with the divine project of creation, Merton saw in many manifestations of modernity the lack of caution and human responsibility for the changes caused by economic progress and technological development. The main idea behind the views of Teilhard de Chardin is the concept of

the noosphere - the "thinking shell of the Earth" (Karas, 2011: 64, 68, 71, 80; Rogacz, 2013: 155-156). Teilhard puts forward the thesis that "the sphere of reflection, conscious invention, and the tangible unity of souls (noosphere, as it can be called) arises above the biosphere" (Pacewicz 2002: 39; Pacewicz 2010). On the other hand, Thomas Merton in the collection of observations entitled "Guesses of an complicit spectator" analyzed the dilemma of the individual's freedom from responsibility for the changes in the world around him, which can be subjectively defined and differentiated depending on the sense of influence on reality. This apparent truism leads Merton to a conclusion that fits well with the concepts of virtual digital identities or the basis of transhumanism. "Man is ready to become a god, and instead he often turns out to be an idol" (Merton 1972: 69). Using the terms used in Christian narratives about the nature of the universe, it is worth noting that the modern digital age seems to compete with the idea of creating the earth - the place of human life and heaven, i.e. the cosmos as a symbolic area of God's presence. If, in favor of creationism, we assume that these two areas are the work of a divine demiurge, it is worth noting that the Earth - real space - is material, measurable and defined, and Heaven - outer space - material, measurable and undefined. In this context, cyberspace - immaterial, immeasurable, undefined is a kind of proof of human demiurgical predispositions, it was created by man and is constantly transformed by him. It is a reflection of the real world - in it you can find continuations and contradictions of the overwhelming majority of forms of human activity.

Aim and methods. Technological changes are conducive to the intensification of the discourse on the relationship between religion and science. Further arguments are made that science does not secularize the life of societies, or that this influence is weaker than one might think (Harrison 2017). The areas in which we can talk about partial secularization are also shown, pointing to medicine and biotechnology (Turner 2017). There is also a clear fascination with the influence of technology on religious practice and the message from religion to the exact and social sciences. In this context, secularization appears as a dynamic process, revealing the interdependence of religion and science (Bainbridge 2017).

Following the scientific discourse around the impact of technology on the sacred sphere, several working research questions can be asked. Which of the Catholic researchers: Merton or de Chardin, was closer to an accurate diagnosis of the future How did the development of digital technologies affect the implementation of the idea of the "thinking shell of the earth", and to what extent are humanity's demiurgical aspirations reflected in attempts to create virtual identities (self-creationism) , striving for immortality (transhumanism). At the same time, the question will be asked how the perception of religion and religious practices is changing in the age of digital technologies, and the last question is whether we are dealing with deepened secularization, with a new form of it, or with a real autonomization of religion and science? It will be assumed that the point of reference will be the situation in highly developed and technologically advanced countries. This text focuses on the religious tradition of the West, as it was assumed that technological development began in Western countries and from the very beginning had to take into account the ethical factor related to the dilemma of secular state control over research processes (bioethics), or a component of social consent for medical interference in human life and health (Turner 2017).

The author's long-term interest in the influence of ICT on the sphere of international relations allows us to trace the evolution of the depth of the impact of technology in the surrounding social reality. In addition to the use of participant observation with elements of historical analysis, the analysis of Polish-language sources created in the scientific community ideologically or institutionally linked with the Catholic Church (e.g. priest J. Mariański) as well as studies created by researchers with a clearly atheistic worldview (e.g. S. Gawkowski) was used. In this study, the subject of reflection is a change in the perception of religion by Internet users, transhumanism as a trend that competes with traditionally perceived religions, or the robotization of religious rituals.

The digital face of religiosity. Researchers and representatives of opinion-forming circles pay attention to new religious phenomena, the development of which is facilitated and deepened by digital technologies. "More and more contemporary people, confronted with the alternative <ecclesiastical> or <irreligious>, decide to take the third way, namely non-religious religiosity, which is <pluralistic and discontinuous biography trajectory>" (Mariański 2009: 35). At the same time, new religious phenomena and changes in postmodern society affect the obsolescence of traditional secularization theories (Mariański 2010), because the institution of religion loses its direct impact on social life, including the political sphere in technologically highly developed countries, loses its former credibility 'as the only source of meaning in life. Internet users young adults and teens do not take faith on faith, but test it. Quick and easy access to information and greater possibilities of verifying it were to turn out to be the greatest enemies of religion as such. The demand for information results in an increase in social awareness, and at the same time all institutions are obliged to provide information immediately. If they do not deliver them - recipients will find another source. Information consistent with the expectations and (emotional) needs of the recipient. Religious issues are present on the Internet on a mass scale, although exceptionally atomized, with religious websites and services having a different degree of interactivity, which "depends on whether they are official or more informal" (Płukarska 2011).

There is a difference between the activity of internet users interested in this subject in countries with a clear secular tradition (USA, France) and the profiles of internet users in countries with a strong position of religion in public life, such as Poland. In the former case, websites and services are used to exchange ideas, in the latter - they are more often used for information and interpretation of the official position of religious institutions. In 2010, 1,846 religious websites were classified in Polish. Looking at the English-language websites, Christianity is the most numerous with around 80,000 websites, with the largest number of websites classified as Catholic. The research conducted for the Public Opinion Research Center in 2015 showed that young adults declared the use of these websites in the range from 10 to 12%, it should be noted that in no age group of the surveyed group this ratio did not exceed 18%. It was clearly correlated with the subjective sense of religiosity, and the websites themselves were treated as an additional source of religious knowledge and advice, but also as "a supplement to religious activity outside the Internet, such as prayer, participation in a service" (CBOS 2015: 3). At the same time, a minority were the respondents seeking doctrinal interpretation or spiritual advice.

The Internet highlights the process of weakening religious authority and "creates a specific environment - extremely pluralistic and open to new social movements" (Siuda 2010: 63). Since religious websites are set up by amateurs and laymen, the network, due to its democracy, favors the undermining of the position of religious dignitaries and confusion as to the origin of the sites on religious issues. The dichotomy of originality and credibility of the message becomes a problem for the user who expects a new form, but may turn out to be incompetent in assessing the content inconsistent with his own religious formation

Biotechnology, transhumanism - dehumanization? The universal application of digital technologies results in attempts to use them in the sphere of worship and in the sphere of biomedical experiments. Both of these uses remain controversial in a moral sense and test traditionally perceived principles of faith not only in the case of Christian denominations (Turner 2017; Hurlbut, Tirosh-Samuelson 2016).

Transhumanism is a collective term for a conglomerate of various philosophical ideas and views related to the search for immortality. Generally speaking, we can define the concept of transhumanism as the idea that uses science and technology to improve the mental and physical condition of a person (Adamski 2012: 106). The modern concept of transhumanism is the work of Max More, who in his essay "Transhumanism: Towards a Futurist Philosophy" described it as a branch of philosophy that seeks to direct us towards the posthuman condition. The posthuman concept is based on the assumption that the process of human evolution has not been completed, continues

accelerated by the development of technology, and they are tools to achieve a variant of a human biologically and mentally adapted to scientific and technical progress (Pawlak 2018: 7). Transhumanism takes over many threads of Renaissance humanism: respect for reason and science, emphasis on progress and focusing on humanity (transhumans), and not on supernatural faith in the future life "(Banasik 2018). The role of digital technologies remains to create the foundations for biotechnological innovations, while the latter are credited with correcting imperfections, disabilities and physical mortality of humans as a living organism. In the dispute between evolutionists and creationists, transhumanists go the middle. They try to reconcile both styles of thinking, pointing out that the creator of man in the digital age is he himself, armed with the tools of technological progress (self-creationism). It is also worth mentioning that the core of humanity for transhumanists is not the elusive soul or the material body, but the human mind in the effects of its immaterial activity, i.e. memory and will. The biomedical experiments we will contribute below are not interpreted in ethical but utilitarian terms. Thus, in trying to balance the religious and atheistic approaches, transhumanists are closer to pragmatic evolutionists. The idea of morphological freedom is nothing but an emanation of the tendency to rejuvenate present in aesthetic medicine and plastic surgery. This is the effect of defining mortality as the main problem of humanity, and in the role of a panacea - an indication of the extension of life. The cryogenic laboratory is an offer for people who want to wait for the time when science overcomes death.

It is worth noting that the historically and geographically universal striving for immortality in the digital age gained a new accelerator in the form of borrowed identities. Digital avatars are excellent and combined with the persistence of data on the Internet - in their own way immortal. As demand also defines the supply of digital services, we should not be surprised that there are offers to create avatars composed in the most faithful way possible from digital traces left on the Internet, so that after the Internet user dies, he can continue his virtual activity based on the use of machine learning (Pawlak 2018: 9). An additional factor of approval of such initiatives is the entry into adulthood of generation C, with its fundamental needs: metamorphosis, agency and celebrating life.

Apart from the ethical determinants of transhumanism, it should be noted the growing influence of digital technologies on the development of biotechnology and medical technologies. Attention should also be paid to the impact of ICT on space medicine and military applications. From the perspective of robotic medicine, it is worth paying attention to the presence of machines in microsurgery and neurosurgery, replacing doctors in procedures requiring high precision of movement. In addition, the combination of robotic surgery with online teleoperations should be considered. In both cases, a failure of the systems or the takeover of control by computer criminals would bring potentially incomparable damage (Kołodziejczyk 2016).

Robotization of religious rites. Advanced digital techniques have found application not only in biotechnology and telemedicine, but were originally used in functional robotics. It resulted in humanoid robots, the scale of prototyping and production of which has increased rapidly in recent years. No wonder that the wave of the search for applications has led to the sphere of religious rites. In 2017, a social interaction robot called Sophia (Saudi Arabia's investment and promotional product) was presented to the media, whose ability to display a sense of humor and mimic emotional responses raised questions about whether robots could be religious in the future (Lesley 2017). The question is not abstract, because for several years there have been innovations in the sphere of robotics related to a varying degree with the sphere of cult. Japan and China are countries where robots function as substitutes for clergymen celebrating weddings and celebrating funerals (low price, short term). A special place is occupied by the Longuan Buddhist monastery in Beijing, famous for the fact that many of the monks are former ICT workers, innovators and inventors. In 2016, the monastery was equipped with a robot called Xian'er, equipped two years later with elements of artificial intelligence (Lewis 2018). Japanese companies specializing in commercial robotics have consulted with the heads of the Catholic Church on the production of humanoid robots for Western markets. The subject was ethical issues, i.e. the dilemma whether, from the point of view of the principles of faith, we are not

dealing with sacrilege. The response was encouraging, church authorities recognized humanoid robots as evidence of using the divine gift of creativity. Japan, as a leader in world robotics, allowed the use of humanoids in the sphere of worship. The robot - an interactive Buddha statue was purchased for ceremonial purposes in one of the Japanese temples, and despite the controversy and high costs, it is treated by the originators as the first step towards using artificial intelligence to compose sermons and teachings independently. It was also in Japan that the Waseda University created a social robot dedicated as a religious assistant for the elderly (Heilweil 2019). The originator, Italian researcher G. Trovato called it SanTO, the acronym comes from the words Sanctified Theomorphic Operator, and in the presentations in Italy and Germany in 2018 he indicated that the robot is to act as a spiritual advisor or "materialized guardian angel". Public demonstrations of the capabilities of robots were made in countries with an established tradition of religion, where technological innovations could gain understanding also due to the relatively high wealth and level of development of the digital society. To celebrate the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's 2017 speech, the German Protestant Church of Hesse and Nassau developed a robot with a blessing function in seven languages. "The machine, called the BlessU-2, was constructed from the body of an ATM and equipped with a touchscreen, arms and face" (Heilweil 2019). Assessing the idea of robots functioning as clergy substitutes, German pastor S. Krebs emphasized that the originators did not intend to replace clergymen with robots. "Our goal is to provoke the faithful to a debate and consider whether they can be blessed by a machine, or whether a man is necessary for this" (Gawkowski 2018a: 265).

Conclusions. The analysis of the above-mentioned phenomena and events leads to the conclusion that digital technologies deepen the separation between the spheres of science and religion. Biotechnological experiments and inventions do not violate religious feelings among believers, and the societies of technologically advanced countries accept further scientific progress not controlled by religious norms and values. This contributes to the need to revise the concept of secularization, which does not reflect the contemporary dynamics of technological progress.

At the same time, it can be seen that religious institutions and believers actively use technological facilities, both in the form of access to data and in the form of substitutes for direct human presence in rituals. The perception of religion and religious practice in the age of digital technologies is changing towards their greater utilitarianism and less ideologicality.

Following the dream of the immortality of the body, humanity seems to be opposed to the tradition of non-interference in creation, which is present in most religions. This confirms T. Merton's diagnosis that modern man plays the role of a demiurge. Applying the imagery of the book of Genesis, science plays the role of humanity's tempter in this situation, and technologies are a temptation that is attractive and gives possibilities that are difficult to imagine.

References

1. Adamski K. (2012). Transhumanizm – między utopią, biotechnologią a gnozą (en. Transhumanism - between utopia, biotechnology and gnosis). *Roczniki Teologii Moralnej*, 4(59), pp. 105-129.
2. Banasik M. (2018). Znaczenie nowoczesnych technologii dla bezpieczeństwa (en. The importance of modern technologies for security). *Rocznik Bezpieczeństwa Międzynarodowego*, 12 (2), pp. 125-137.
3. Bainbridge W.S. (2017). *Dynamic Secularization: Information Technology and the Tension Between Religion and Science*. New York: Springer
4. Beck U. (2004). *Spółczesność ryzyka. W drodze do innej nowoczesności* (en. Risk society. On the way to a different modernity). Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
5. Bell D. (1975). *Nadejście społeczeństwa postindustrialnego. Próba prognozowania społecznego* (en. The Coming of Post-Industrial Society). Warszawa: Instytut Badania Współczesnych Problemów Kapitalizmu.

6. Dembiński P.H. (2001). Globalizacja - wyzwanie i szansa (en. Globalization - a challenge and an opportunity) <<http://porozumienie.kik.opoka.org.pl/tekst/gl/dembinski.html>>, [access 20.09.2020].
7. Gawkowski K. (2018a). Cyberkolonializm. Poznaj świat cyfrowych przyjaciół i wrogów (en. Cybercolonialism. Explore a world of digital friends and enemies). Gliwice: Wydawnictwo Helion.
8. Gawkowski K. (2018b), Wpływ nowoczesnych technologii informatycznych na zdrowie i jakość życia człowieka (en. Influence of modern information technologies on human health and quality of life). Technika, Informatyka, Inżynieria Bezpieczeństwa, VI, pp. 185–197.
9. Heilweil R. (2019). Deus Ex Machina: Religions Use Robots to Connect With the Public, *The Wall Street Journal*, 28.03, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/deus-ex-machina-religions-use-robots-to-connect-with-the-public-11553782825>, [access 02.09.2020]
10. Harrison P. (2017). Science and secularization. *Intellectual History Review*, 27(1), pp. 47-70.
11. Hurlbut, J.B. Tirosh-Samuelson, H., (eds.) (2016). *Perfecting Human Futures: Technology, Secularization, and Eschatology: Transhuman Visions and Technological Imaginations*, New York: Springer.
12. Kołodziejczyk A.(2016). Medycyna kosmiczna na Ziemi (Space medicine on Earth), *Menedżer zdrowia*, 9, pp. 50-54.
13. Jabłońska M.R. (2018). Człowiek w cyberprzestrzeni. Wprowadzenie do psychologii Internetu, Łódź, Wydawnictwo UŁ.
14. Karas M. (2011). Przyszłość ludzkości w filozofii Teilharda de Chardin (en. The future of humanity in the philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin). *Kwartalnik Filozoficzny*, 39(1), pp. 51–82.
15. Kałdon B. (2016), Cyberprzestrzeń jako zagrożenie dla człowieka xxi wieku, *Seminare*, 37(2), pp. 87-101.
16. Korzystanie z religijnych stron i portali internetowych (en. Use of religious sites and websites) (2015). Komunikat z Badań CBOS, nr 80, <https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2015/K_080_15.PDF>, [access 20.09.2020].
17. Lesley A. (2017). Can a Robot be Religious?, *World Religion News*, 17.11, <<https://www.worldreligionnews.com/religion-news/can-robot-religious>>, [access 20.09.2020].
18. Lewis C. (2018). China’s Robot Monk to Receive an AI Upgrade, 15.05, <<https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/chinas-robot-monk-to-receive-an-ai-upgrade>>, [access 23.09.2020].
19. Mariański J. (2001). Sekularyzacja jako fakt społeczny (en. Secularization as a social fact). *Studia Płockie*, XXIX, pp. 185-200.
20. Mariański J.(2009). Sekularyzacja a nowe formy religijności (en. Secularization and new forms of religiosity). *Roczniki Nauk Społecznych*, 1(37), pp. 33-68.
21. Mariański J. (2013). Sekularyzacja. Desekularyzacja. Nowa duchowość. Studium socjologiczne (en. Secularization. Desecularization. New spirituality. A sociological study) Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS.
22. Mariański J. (2010). Religia w społeczeństwie ponowoczesnym. Studium socjologiczne (en. Religion in postmodern society. A sociological study). Warszawa: Oficyna Naukowa.
23. Merton T. (1972). Domysły współwinnego widza (en. Conjectures of a guilty bystander). Warszawa: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy.
24. Pacewicz G. (2010). Koncepcja noosfery w myśli Pierre'a Teilharda de Chardin. (en. The concept of the noosphere in the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin). Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo UW-M.
25. Pacewicz G. (2002). Ludzkość uplanetyzowana. Pojęcie noosfery Pierre’a Teilharda de Chardin. (en. Humanistyka i Przyrodoznawstwo, 8, pp. 33-47.
26. Pawlak A.F. (2018) Cyberimmortalizm. Cyfrowy postczłowiek jako transhumanistyczny projekt XXI wieku (en. Cyberimmortalism. The digital post-human as a transhumanist project of the

21st century) [in:] Szymczyk P., Maciąg K. (eds.) Człowiek a technologia cyfrowa – przegląd aktualnych doniesień (en. Man and digital technology - review of current reports). Lublin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Tygiel, pp. 7-26.

27. Płukarska P. (2011). Religijny Internet w Polsce – hierarchiczny i interaktywny? (en. Religious Internet in Poland - hierarchical and interactive ?) *Miesięcznik Znak*, 676, <https://www miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/6762011paula-plukarska/> [access 22.09.2020].

28. Rogacz D. (2013), Osoba i wolność w myśli Pierre'a Teilharda de Chardina, *Filozofia Chrześcijańska*, t. 10 : *Osoba i wola*, s. 149-160.

29. Siuda P. (2010). Religia a internet. O przenoszeniu religijnych granic do cyberprzestrzeni (en. Religion and the Internet. About moving religious borders to cyberspace). Warszawa: WAiP.

30. Toeffler, A. & H. (1995). *Creating A New Civilization: The Politics Of The Third Wave*, Nashville: Turner Publishing.

31. Turner, B. S. (2017). Secularization, Biomedical Technology, and Life Extension, [in:] Zuckerman, P. and Shook J.R. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press USA.