

Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)

Volume 1
Issue 2 *Syracuse Scholar* Fall 1980

Article 8

1980

Technological Utopianism and the Future of Religion

Gabriel Vahanian

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar>

Recommended Citation

Vahanian, Gabriel (1980) "Technological Utopianism and the Future of Religion," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

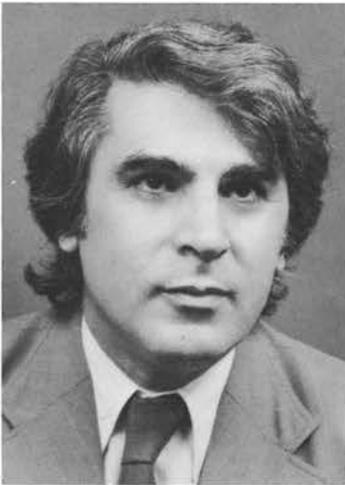
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar/vol1/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)* by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Technological Utopianism and the Future of Religion

Gabriel Vahanian

Towards a New Religiosity



The Jeanette K. Watson Professor of Religion at Syracuse University, Gabriel Vahanian is occasionally visiting professor at the Université des Sciences Humaines of Strasbourg. Dr. Vahanian has authored several books including *The Death of God* (1961) and *God and Utopia* (1977). He has also taught at Princeton and the University of Toronto.

Today faith is admittedly less and less involved with God—or, at least with our traditional God. Yet unfaith cannot remain involved solely with man without a further conclusion emerging: that what lies beyond must still be man; that is, man anticipating man. Perhaps despite himself, man clings to religion, atheism notwithstanding. While a specific religion may succumb to secularism and die of its successful acculturation, nothing is more resilient to secularization than religion as such.

We should not be misled by the spread of atheism in the modern period. In most cases it only marks the end of an era; and, as Feuerbach has pointed out, it is nothing but the harbinger of a new type of religiosity. Atheism is as impotent as traditional religion in confronting the new and conflicting demands of a society whose global vision of man's future exceeds all parochial conceptions of the good life. In short, the traditional theistic symbol system has reached the end of its rope—and so also has traditional atheism, which both goaded and preyed upon that system. What has occurred is a secularization of Christianity. This cultural mutation is what I call the death of God (although the term obviously has other historical implications as well). A new type of religiosity has emerged.

The death of God, as I use the expression here, implies the collapse of both theism and atheism. But this statement can only account for what happens on the surface of reality. A deeper significance of the death of God concerns the transition from a mythological to a technological civilization. The religiosity collapsing with the death of God is mythologically and metaphysically oriented, whereas the religiosity to which it is giving way is informed by technology. This new type of religiosity is not geared to the sacred as an ultimate expression of transcendence; rather it is focused upon the idea of utopia. Thus the

mythological-to-technological shift is from a soteriological to an eschatological understanding of man; that is, from an approach stressing salvation as the effect of divine agency to an emphasis on the ultimate destiny and purpose of mankind.

Although our discussion of the death of God thus far has been as a metaphor for the mythological-to-technological shift within a culture, the death of God can also be understood as a salvation system within a mythological civilization itself. The latter view finds its most vivid expression in the soteriological mythologem of the dying and rising God: God must die in order for man to be fully realized. This idea, which appeared in Hellenistic religion, was subsequently adopted by Christian metaphysics through the doctrine of Patripassianism (i.e., God the Father undergoes the same passion as the Son) and, less reluctantly, by Christian piety in general, chiefly in its liturgy and Good Friday hymnology.

The more fundamental approach to the death of God, even though more recent, is the one we have already examined briefly: The death of God is a cultural phenomenon, expressing the transition from a mythological understanding of reality to a technological utopian consciousness of man and his world. The philosophic underpinnings of this movement were heavily influenced by two apparently opposed nineteenth-century thinkers: Kierkegaard (“Christendom is dead”) and Nietzsche (“God is dead”).

The two approaches to the death of God—as a salvation system and as a cultural phenomenon—are not so clearly distinguished by all contemporary exponents of the idea, whether they are professed atheists like Sartre or theologians like Bonhoeffer advocating the emancipation of Christianity from the shackles of dogma and ecclesiastical bondage. Moreover, the death of God is often misunderstood as signifying the demise of theism and the hegemony of atheism. (Marxist authors are today conceding that the abolition of God also implies the rejection of atheism, a paradox reflected in Ernst Bloch’s statement that only the atheist can be a Christian.)

To clarify further these two approaches, let us first examine the basic characteristics of the soteriological perspective, in which the death of God is understood as a salvation system. (We will be looking at a manifestation of this perspective within Christianity.)

1. It is not *by* God that man is saved but *from* God himself, who dies in Christ.

2. The Incarnation is in effect the death of God. God dissolves himself into man so that man can at last come into his own.

3. God and man are conceived as opposites that must be reconciled or as entities that exchange roles. God either becomes confused with man or annihilates himself in order for man to become all that he can be.

- a. If the stress falls on the *reconciliation of opposites*, and if God is accordingly understood as dying *in* man so as to be born again *of* man, the dialectic will largely depend on whether the primacy of the sacred is retained or restored.

Salvation will consist in giving back to the world its sacral dimension and in restoring man to his sacral vocation.

b. If the stress falls on the *permutation of roles*, then the dialectic will appeal to the primacy of the secular and may even succumb to the claims of secularism—for instance, to the claim that man and the world are self-sufficient and that all transcendence is excluded absolutely. God the One is one too many; Jesus standing as the symbol of man is a man realizing in his own flesh and blood the death of such a God. (This, roughly stated, is the position held by Altizer and Hamilton.)

The main characteristics of the cultural approach to the death of God (represented by Bultmann, Van Buren, and Cox) are as follows:

1. Whatever else God may be, he is conceived by man. All concepts of God reflect various cultural presuppositions.
2. When the underlying culture collapses and life goes through radical changes, the traditional God turns into a God of the past. Superfluous, he dies. Thus when Jesus speaks of rebuilding the Temple, he is accused of blasphemy (for God is dead). When the successful spread of Christianity threatens the religious foundations of the Empire, the Romans accuse the Christians of being atheists. Surely to anyone for whom God is dead, all the gods are dead. From Israel to the church, and from a deified emperor to the Trinity, there is more at stake than a mere concept of God.
3. As a cultural phenomenon the death of God signifies that our estrangement from the Christian tradition is not only religious (hence can be overcome by a new conception of salvation) but also cultural. The very matrix of man's self-understanding, in the light of which salvation can be defined and formulated, is itself undergoing a cultural revolution.
4. The cultural approach opposes the traditional view of man and the world. The latter depicts reality in terms of supernatural causes and mythological, theistic presuppositions: God is the cause of all that is; the universe exhibits a definite purpose; existence displays the eternal pattern of an objective moral order. In contrast, the cultural approach assumes that God can no longer be taken for granted. Nor can the world be claimed as necessarily meaningful; meaning is not a datum but a mandate. Nor can ethical values, once conceived as corroborating a fixed, given human nature, remain normative unless they permit man to surpass himself beyond what nature or history have determined.

Moreover, if God can no longer be taken for granted, then what disappears with the death of God is not only theism but also atheism. The believer need only believe in God rather than take him for granted. God and man are thus liberated from the absolutism of both theism and atheism. The God beyond the worshipped God gives way to the God on this side of man's idols.

In this light, and in contrast with the soteriological approach, the Incarnation signifies that God need not die in order for man to be. In Christ, God and Man are iconoclastic languages about one another. Finally, God is no longer viewed as a cosmic force; He is the Coming One.

In short, the experience of the human reality is an experience of the *otherness* of God. Theism rests on the experience of the presence of God, atheism on the absence. However, the twin demise of theism and atheism does not result in the obliteration of the entire question of God; it leads, in fact, to a restatement of that question—but in such a way that man is viewed as future—rather than past-oriented. He becomes a new creature and thus an anticipation of God.

Substitution of a Technique for the Myth of Man

The death of God ultimately leads to the substitution of a technique for the myth of man (a myth under which we have so far lived and half lived). What I call *technique*, and ipso facto technology itself, consists in humanizing that which is alien to man. (Let us recall that what we term the art of living was known to the Greeks as *technè*.) Whether or not we distinguish technology from technique, we are basically dealing with the same reality—the cultural system that today governs man's self-understanding. Man's definition within a technological civilization is ultimately no less religious a question than was his definition within a mythological civilization.

It has become customary to distinguish technology as a tool from technology as a method. Indeed there seems to be a good case for this kind of distinction. Technology that extends man is certainly different from technology that alters man. Somehow man has lost his soul in moving beyond tools that extended him, that enhanced his existence, toward cybernetics and other electronic programmings.

However, I prefer to take another view: A man with a hammer is as much altered as he is extended. Existentially speaking, he is no longer the same. He cannot be understood as "raw" man to which may be added now this, now that; nor can he be viewed as the sum total of the alternations and extensions generated by technology. Man exists in the adding process itself. He is therefore that which he has not yet become; he cannot be defined by what he is at any given moment. In this sense man is a technique.

Technology begins where the notion of man is challenged. This does not imply that the whole issue of technology, which is perennial, is consistent in character regardless of what alienates man and must therefore be humanized. In a mythological civilization it was logical for considerations of technology to be clothed in supernatural terms and, consequently, for the good life to be construed in terms of existence after death. By contrast, in a technological civilization there may be no other world than

this one in which the good life is worth living. In the past, only that which was necessary was deemed possible; today, that which is possible is also deemed necessary. The reign of the possible has replaced that of the necessary, and necessity has given way to the possibility of a new start. Herein lies the root of technological utopianism.

This is not to say that mythological civilization had no utopian elements. It did; but its utopianism was often relegated to the past, back to the primordial moment of time. Utopia was a return to nature. Somewhat contemptuous of the world, it meant the quest for a lost paradise to be recovered through the soul and its capacity for recollection. At other times paradise was projected into the future; utopia became an apocalypse, to appear at the end of the world, at the end of time.

If the utopianism of mythological civilization was geared to a changing world, today's utopianism is bent on changing the world. This is precisely why technological considerations are religious. Utopianism accounts for the emergence of the new type of religiosity.

Today's utopianism is geared neither to the apocalyptic end of time nor to the asceticism of the soul but rather to the fulfillment of the future and of the body. In this we have the basic elements of the new type of religiosity; a religiosity groping for the kind of civilization that, despite its technological orientation, honors man enough so that he can say: "I believe; help Thou mine unbelief."