

# The secularization of death in a technological age

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Reading Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, we learn that the inhabitants of that negative utopia have no fear of death due to their continuous psychological conditioning from the earliest stages of development. No one is old, no one suffers physically or emotionally. How is it possible that members of a society are always young, beautiful, happy and healthy? The reader of Huxley's minor masterpiece quickly learns the ghastly truth: When people begin to show signs of aging, they offer to incinerate themselves. Their remains then are recycled as  $P_2O_5$  gas for the benefit of society. Suffering and death, in contemporary lingo, are "non-issues" in this new world order<sup>1</sup>.

The world of reality, however, cannot ignore the eschatological questions on human destiny and the meaning of existence. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes, «Any account of morality which does not allow for the fact that my death may be required of me at any moment is an inadequate account»<sup>2</sup> The debate surrounding euthanasia, assisted suicide and withholding food and water from the comatose indicates how important these issues are to our time.

This paper presents two competing views on these essential questions, one of them religiously-inspired, the other secular. At first glance, the controversy seems to arise from the inability of the different sides to establish a dialogue. At a deeper level, however, it is an indication of our society's misplaced emphasis on technological solutions, rather than on salvation in a personal God. This paper examines the historical roots of the secularization of death's meaning in a te-

chnological age. It ends examining the role of theology in the proper attitude toward end of life.

## *The Christian Vision of Death—Eschatology*

Western culture and its understanding of health, suffering and death have been shaped largely by the Judeo-Christian worldview. Even a superficial review of the history of medical ethics would show that religion in general—and the sacraments in particular—have played a key role in this tradition. For example, in the Letter of James we have an elucidation of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick: «Any one of you who is ill should send for the elders of the church, and they must anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save [FfF, 4] the sick person and the Lord will raise him up again... pray for one another to be cured; the heartfelt prayer of someone upright works very powerfully» (James 5:14-15). Observe that the root of the word "health" (*salus* in Latin and *FTJOD\*" in Greek) makes no distinction between physical wellness and soteriological salvation<sup>3</sup>.

This extraordinary understanding led monks of the Middle Ages to care for the physical and spiritual health of the sick. By today's standards, we might consider their care rudimentary yet remains unsurpassed in its concern and compassion for the sick. Thus, priest-doctors working in monastery hospitals sought after the integral *salus* of patients under their care. During the Middle Ages, the members of new religious orders, for example, the Knights Templar or Hospi-

talers of St. John, took a vow to serve «our lords, the sick»<sup>4</sup>. Even at a later date when the direct intervention of the cleric was separated from “professionalized” medicine, it never forgot the religious implications of health.

This biblically-based vision seeks meaning in the reality of death as a part of God’s loving plan of creation and redemption. The believer prepares for his death and its prelude as a means of purification and sanctification. In the Christian vision, suffering takes on a new meaning; it is no longer solitary and purposeless, but a sharing in Christ’s passion. «In my flesh

I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church» (Col. 1:24)<sup>5</sup>. Christians then should not fear suffering but embrace it. Suicide is contrary to this acceptance of God’s providence; Christianity

safeguards life as a fundamental good, since dignity is inherent to every person.

Indeed, the believer doesn’t suffer alone. The word “com-*passion*” betrays its religious root as sharing suffering with the patient (from Latin *cum*: with; *pati*: to suffer; *passio*: sufferings). The dying patient becomes part of a loving community of family, friends and fellow Christians. This is why the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick when given with communion and confession, which is called the *viaticum*, is a source of spiritual strength for the end of the Christian’s life. St. Augustine understood the need to prepare for his final encounter with God when he asked for solitude a week before his death. The image St. Francis of Assisi meditating with a human skull in his hand exemplifies the meaning of death for the Christian. The contemplation of Francis’ «Sister Death» is not a morbid practice. Instead, its purpose is to bring focus to the truths of the Christian faith—finite human nature, the gift of life, redemption from eter-

nal death and the goal of eternal happiness with God.

That vision is diametrically opposed to the pagan one. Among the Greek philosophers, the Stoics in particular sought to control death by glorifying suicide. In a similar way, harakiri, the ritual suicide of Japanese samurai, exalts the honor of a planned death. With Christianity’s rise in the fourth century, the religious vision assumed prominence until the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when secular ideas once again became predominant. The Protestant theologian Stanley Hauerwas notes the contrast

between how medieval man and modern man prefer to die: The medievals, in battle or from a protracted illness so that they could have adequate time to prepare for death... while moderns prefer not even to think about death, except to prefer sudden death, without

suffering<sup>6</sup>.

#### *Secularized Visions of Death*

With the advent of the Enlightenment, several authors began to challenge the Christian monopoly on eschatology. David Hume’s *On Suicide* is the most influential work on the subject, elevating human autonomy in deciding one’s death<sup>7</sup>. Hume begins his essay with a criticism of «superstitions and false religions» that oblige men to prolong their miserable existence in order not to offend their Creator. Arguing against Aquinas’ prohibition of suicide, Hume proposes that where the suffering is unbearable, the wish to die can be a lucid option and a valiant escape. Citing Socrates and Plato, he claims that suicide is a duty to society when life is no longer useful and productive. Even though Hume did not practice what he taught when he was dying, his thinking has had wide influence. It is interesting to note that Kant was critical of

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Hume's view of suicide, believing it an affront to the categorical imperative and the principle of universalization. Kant affirms that belief in the inherent sanctity of human life is a duty toward God's sovereignty over humanity<sup>8</sup>.

Given this preamble, it is not difficult to foresee the ascendance of a secularized vision of death. In the not very distant past, at least in the Christian West, people considered death a predominantly religious question. Since the Enlightenment, religion's traditional control of the social order's vital spheres—politics, science, economy, law, philosophy, education and the culture itself—began to crumble under the secular challenge. Ethics and theology were quite possibly religion's last redoubt until they too succumbed late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the influence of secularized academia. Both Catholic and Protestant theology suffered from the effects of secularization, making it difficult for the churches to explain effectively the significance of death and eschatology to a modern, pluralist world. The timing could not have been worse, with exciting medical discoveries and attendant ethical questions about just distribution, legitimate use of technology and justified manipulation of nature<sup>9</sup>.

As secularization progressed, however, so did a materialistic view of human life devoid of any reference to the transcendent. This is readily apparent in the theories of evolution of Darwin, Spencer, Galton and others. The early evolutionists considered man a highly evolved animal, enjoying neither special place in creation nor in the mind of the Creator, and certainly having no higher spiritual purpose. Not surprisingly, Peter Singer, a professor of bioethics at Princeton and staunch defender of this Darwinian view, is a vocal advocate of voluntary euthanasia<sup>10</sup>. In this contemporary secular mirage, suffering and death are inexplicable, dreadful and to be ignored as long as possible. When suffering or pain becomes intolerable, a quick death is desirable. As the arguments for euthanasia and assisted suicide debate have shown, the important element is self-determination and, with it, the autonomous de-

cision to end one's life, while controlling the timing, method and circumstances. The quality of life becomes the measure of its worth and "dignity." The non-believing sufferer can only hope for the quick technological exit via lethal cocktails or death-dealing machines.

The secular version of a "good death" ( ) is a terribly lonely one. Placing the emphasis on unbearable suffering and the patient's autonomy, or right to "die with dignity," is supremely ironic because the patient is never truly autonomous as he asks the community, in the guise of the physician and with the law's approval, to perform euthanasia. A "good death" eliminates suffering by eliminating the sufferer. Carried to an extreme, this can lead to killing those no longer autonomous or aware of their suffering, out of a utilitarian calculation or misplaced concern for the so-called quality of life<sup>11</sup>.

#### *Secularization, Post-Modernity and the Technological Age*

At this moment, we need to look at the concept itself of secularization. Theologians, churchman, statisticians and sociologists alike have written much about the subject, yet they haven't reached agreement on what it means<sup>12</sup>. In contemporary usage, the word "secularization" normally refers to the writings of sociologists Max Weber (1864–1920), Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), who used it to further their thesis that religion was in decline. They based it on the subjective view that man no longer sought answers in religion, but in science and technology. Weber was the first to propose this «theory of disenchantment» and subsequently was followed by Peter Berger and other sociologists. Weber envisaged modernity as a consequence of the Enlightenment's producing «processes of rationalization of action». These processes, which explain the rise of capitalism, also prompt man to seek answers in this world and no longer outside of himself. According to this interpretative model,

rationalization is invariably coupled with what Weber calls «disenchantment of the world». A more precise translation from the German would be «de-magi-fication» or «de-myster-ization» of the world. In this process, modern man no longer looks for the meaning of life in the “mystery” of faith (regarded as superstition), but in science and technology<sup>13</sup>.

Scientific positivism further supported this view by suggesting that only empirical science can offer the answers to man’s needs. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) identified three progressive stages of human knowledge: theological, metaphysical and positivist. Belief in gods and the spirit world marked the theological era, which was replaced by the scientific revolution’s metaphysics that attempt to explain causes in terms

of invisible forces. In the positivist stage, where we now find ourselves, the purest form of attainable human knowledge are the measurable and verifiable data of science. At its most evolved stage, logical positivism makes the claim, «only that which is observable is true». From this view, it follows that we cannot scientifically demonstrate metaphysical and religious truths, which are to the logical positivist, dubious at best. Comte saw the evolution of knowledge in science and in society (hence sociology) as being based on evolutionary theories in vogue at the time. As a corollary position, positivism views all scientific and technological advances and discoveries as necessarily positive and constructive<sup>14</sup>.

One consequence of positivism is that secularization, modernity and the technological imperative often go hand in hand. Thomas Woolston, Voltaire, Auguste Comte, Thomas Jefferson, Karl Marx, Frederich Engels and Sigmund Freud all prophesized the death of religion in their life times. In the early 20<sup>th</sup>

century, secularization became coterminous with this Enlightenment view—rationalistic, positivist and evolutionary—that religion, being a man-made invention, would inevitably give way to science. By the late 1950s, secularization became a catchphrase that enjoyed the enthusiastic support of anthropologists and social scientists<sup>15</sup>.

Recently, we have witnessed a challenge to the secularist thesis in many parts of the world, including the United States, where

religious faith not only hasn’t disappeared but retains a certain vitality. As some of its initial devotees began to abandon the secularist thesis, others opted to pursue further elaboration and refinement of its terminologies<sup>16</sup>. Although the word is still ambiguous and ideologically tendentious, “secularization” is the loss of religious in-

fluence and authority at the different levels of life—societal, organizational and institutional levels—as well as at the level of individual religiosity.

The past century’s great advances in medicine seemed at first to validate the thesis that science may finally replace religion. For the first time in history, man had the skill to conquer most fatal diseases, extend the average lifespan and postpone death by means of organ transplants, life-saving surgical procedures, chemotherapy, life support and, more recently, the possibilities of regeneration with stem cells and genetic engineering. There was an air of optimism that technological solutions would banish suffering and delay death<sup>17</sup>.

That optimism notwithstanding, secularism has its discontents. Man’s inhumanity to man is all too evident, as the world is painfully aware of war, terrorism, slavery, famine, drugs, tyranny and other forms of injustice. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the godless communist and Nazi regimes contributed spectacularly

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to these crimes. Religion hasn't vanished as secularization's seers predicted, and fundamentalism seems to be on the rise in some parts of the world. The German intellectual Jürgen Habermas notes this paradox and the coexistence of faith and knowledge in the current cultural debates on ethics and technology<sup>18</sup>.

In fact, the post-modern critique of secularization is a result of science's failure to "save" humanity. The atomic destruction of Japanese cities in World War II was a body blow to the optimism of scientific positivists and their utopian dreams. At the same time, medical technology, instead of alleviating all pain, created new suffering, while extending the life span has led to undesirable side effects. Lifesaving technologies make it possible to resuscitate biological life but at the expense of the unconscious patient whose existence depends on his being connected to inhuman machines. Euthanasia is a response to the fear of this unnecessary suffering because technology, despite its obvious strengths, cannot deliver immortality or eliminate all suffering<sup>19</sup>.

The irony of the post-modern era is that the technological solution seems to be the only possible answer. According to Martin Heidegger, humanity has become the prisoner of technology, incapable of escaping because technology has become so all embracing that *any* solution we seek would *necessarily* be technological. This context led the German philosopher to utter his now famous, «Only a God can save us». It should be noted that Heidegger's god is not the God of revelation and his somewhat ambiguous solution consists in «thinking, poetizing or contemplating», rather than engaging in technological pursuits<sup>20</sup>. We may disagree with this pessimistic position but his analysis of the tendency to technologize every aspect of our lives (including our death) certainly provokes thought.

Western civilization's lingering secularization makes it difficult to bring theology into the public debate on end-of-life issues, since religion has long been relegated to the private sphere<sup>21</sup>. At the same time, secular bioethics

seems unequipped to deal with the meanings of suffering and death, which traditionally belonged to the sphere of religion. Fortunately, there are encouraging signs religion and theology are making a comeback.

### *How can theology make a difference?*

Nicholas Wolterstorff reminds us, «When we have overcome absence with phone calls, winglessness with airplanes, summer heat with air-conditioning—when we have overcome all these and much more besides, then there will abide two things with which we must cope: the evil in our hearts and death»<sup>22</sup>. The enigma of suffering all mortal creatures experience touches our profoundest sensibilities and provokes in us a yearning for answers about our origin, purpose and end.

In his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI speaks of hope as the theological answer to the disquieting questions of suffering and death. The pope observes that people today are no longer interested in eternal life but in living only in the present. Rather than restore a paradise lost, modern man attempts to construct the «kingdom of man» (n. 17) by placing his faith in technological and scientific progress. This faith in progress is not without ambiguities, as the post-modern critique has shown. History reminds us that political utopias often became totalitarian regimes bringing in their wake mass destruction. Meanwhile, libertarian scientific progressivism and technological imperialism have to contend with the atomic bomb. The evidence is overwhelming that progress without ethical guidance and reason without faith can turn perverse. Here, the German pope gives a profound insight on the relationship between progress and ethics. Ethical progress is essentially different from material progress. Ethics must include human freedom, and because of this, can never reach a static perfection here on earth. «The moral treasury of humanity is not readily at hand like tools that we use; it is present as an appeal to freedom and a possibility for it» (n. 24). Freedom requires

each generation to decide for itself on accepting good and rejecting evil. This means that all human structures are transitory—they cannot reach a final stage of perfection—because its attainment implies the negation of freedom.

In *Brave New World*, society has reached perfection at the expense of freedom. A utopia that exchanges freedom for perfection suppresses any hint of human passion and creativity and eliminates literature, religion and the arts. There is no Shakespeare or bible in this world. The pope's words ring truer than ever: «If there were structures which could irrevocably guarantee a determined—good—state of the world, man's freedom would be denied, and hence they would not be good structures at all... Man can never be redeemed simply from outside. Francis Bacon and those who followed in the intellectual current of modernity that he inspired were wrong to believe that man would be redeemed through science. Such an expectation asks too much of science; this kind of hope is deceptive. Science can contribute greatly to making the world and mankind more human. Yet it can also destroy mankind and the world unless it is steered by forces that lie outside it»<sup>23</sup>.

Echoing Heidegger, the professor pope acknowledges not only the insufficiency of technology to redeem mankind but the need for its dependence on external forces. While Heidegger recognized the problem, he was unable to resolve it. Only a God can save us! Indeed, the pope rejoins, «It is not science than redeems man: man is redeemed by love». Christianity offers a response that existentialist philosophy could not. Salvation comes from God, the unconditional love of God manifested in the person of Jesus Christ who has come from beyond. Only love can instill hope in spite of disappointments, suffering and death. *Spe Salvi* continues, «If this absolute love exists, with its absolute certainty, then—only then—is man redeemed». (n. 26)

Theology therefore can provide an eschatological alternative to the secular view of death. The mystery of death has absorbed

and confounded man from the beginning of history. Theology confronts it head-on, realizing that you, I and every other mortal being one day will die. We are terrified and alienated by death. It causes a crisis in us—a crisis of the flesh in the loss of control, taste and of self; a crisis of community in the abandonment and loss of communication; and a crisis of separation from God<sup>24</sup>. For those who believe in God, however, death is not the last word.

This unadorned truth should prompt us to ask the only truly relevant question, “How should I live?” Accepting our creaturely and mortal condition can encourage us to live in such a way as to prepare for a good and holy death. The theological account relocates the *telos* of humanity in terms of salvation, where physical health is only a part of this reality. Here, the *telos* of health and medicine comes into focus. The question shifts from mustering every life-prolonging technology to delaying death or deciding to end a life to fulfilling a wholesome, virtuous and faithful life, no matter how long or short its span. It means compassionate care when a cure is no longer feasible, even if this implies great sacrifices by the caregivers and the community of friends and family. This implies a prophetic witness of *mercy* and *charity*<sup>25</sup>. It means bluntly naming it for what it is, when the worship of technology and well-being verges on *idolatry*.

Seen in this light, the challenges of the secularization of death can be positive. They have revived the perennial interrogatives that call for a reengagement of bioethics and theology: pastoral care, spirituality, liturgy, the sacraments, soteriology and, above all, eschatology.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See A. HUXLEY, *Brave New World*, Perennial Classic, New York 1998.

<sup>2</sup> A. C. MACINTYRE, «Can Medicine Dispense with a Theological Perspective on Human Nature?», in H. T. ENGELHARDT JR. and D. CALLAHAN (eds.), *Knowledge, Value, and Belief*, Hastings-on-Hudson, The Hastings Center, New York 1977, 26–27.

<sup>3</sup> See E. D. PELLEGRINO and D. C. THOMASMA, *Helping and Healing: Religious Commitment in Health Care*,

Georgetown University, Washington DC 1997, 39–53.

<sup>4</sup> A. R. JONSEN, *The New Medicine and the Old Ethics*, Harvard University, Cambridge 1990, 61–79.

<sup>5</sup> Beginning with this quote, the apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* written by John Paul II offers the Christian such a program — a trajectory that has been lived out eloquently by the same pope during the last days of his life. (JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, (11 February 1984), AAS 76).

<sup>6</sup> S. HAUERWAS, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church*, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame 1986, 96.

<sup>7</sup> D. HUME, *On Suicide. In Hume on Religion*, Collins, London 1963.

<sup>8</sup> I. KANT, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785.

<sup>9</sup> See J. THAM, *The Secularization of Bioethics: A critical history*, UPR, Rome 2006.

<sup>10</sup> P. SINGER, *Rethinking Life and Death. The collapse of our traditional Ethics*, Oxford University, New York 1994, 176.

<sup>11</sup> G. C. MEILAENDER, *Body Soul, and Bioethics*, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame 1995, 37–59.

<sup>12</sup> See K. DOBBELAERE, «Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization», in *Sociology of Religion* 60/3 (1999), 229–47.

<sup>13</sup> See W. H. SWATOS JR. – K. J. CHRISTIANO, «Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept», in *Sociology of Religion* 60/3 (1999), 211–12; M. WEBER, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, 1904/5. Translated by Talcott Parsons as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Scribner, New York 1930.

<sup>14</sup> See I. NIINILUOTO, «Scientific Progress», *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, October 1, 2002, in <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-progress/> (Accessed May 18, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> See P. L. BERGER, *The sacred canopy: Elements of a sociological theory of religion*, Doubleday Garden City, 1967; H. G. COX, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, Macmillan, New York 1966; K. DOBBELAERE, «Secularization: A multi-dimensional concept», in *Current Sociology*, 29/2 (1981), 1–213.

<sup>16</sup> See P. ZUCKERMAN, «Secularization: Europe—yes, United States—no: why has secularization occurred in Western Europe but not in the United States? An examination of the theories and research», in *Skeptical*

*Inquirer*, 63/2 (2004), 49–52; B. C. ANDERSON, «Secular Europe, religious America», in *Public Interest*, 155 (Spring, 2004), 143–159; R. STARK, «Secularization, R.I.P.», in *Sociology of Religion*, 60/3 (1999), 249–273; D. YAMANE, «Secularization on trial: In defense of a neosecularization paradigm», in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36/1 (1997), 109–122.

<sup>17</sup> Adapted from K. DOBBELAERE, «Secularization: A multi-dimensional concept», op. cit., 1–213.

<sup>18</sup> President Obama exemplified this optimism toward technology in a statement he made as he signed an Executive Order to lift ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research on March 9, 2009. At one point he said, «There is no finish line in the work of science. The race is always with us—the urgent work of giving substance to hope and answering those many bedside prayers, of seeking a day when words like “terminal” and “incurable” are finally retired from our vocabulary».

<sup>19</sup> J. HABERMAS, *The Future of Human Nature*, Polity, Cambridge 2003, 101–15.

<sup>20</sup> See D. CALLAHAN, *The Troubled Dream of Life: Living with Mortality*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1994.

<sup>21</sup> M. HEIDEGGER, «Only a God Can Save Us», in R. WOLIN (ed.), *The Heidegger Controversy*, MIT, Cambridge 1992, 91–116.

<sup>22</sup> A gripping description on how secularization of bioethics took place in the euthanasia debate in Holland is offered by R. HOUTEPEN, «The Social Construction of Euthanasia and Medical Ethics in the Netherlands», in R. DE VRIES and J. SUBEDI (eds.), *Bioethics and Society: Constructing the Ethical Enterprise*, Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998, 117–44.

<sup>23</sup> N. WOLTERSTORFF, *Lament for a Son*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1987, 72–3, cited in S. HAUERWAS, *God, Medicine, and Suffering*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1990, 150.

<sup>24</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, (November 30, 2007), nn. 24–25.

<sup>25</sup> See W. F. MAY, «The Sacral Power of Death in Contemporary Experience», in L. O. MILLS (ed.), *Perspectives on Death*, Abingdon, Nashville 1969, 168–196.

<sup>26</sup> See E. D. PELLEGRINO, «Agape and Ethics: Some Reflections on Medical Morals from a Catholic Christian», in E. D. PELLEGRINO, J. P. LANGAN and J. C. HARVEY (eds), *Catholic Perspectives on Medical Morals: Foundational Issues*. Philosophy and Medicine 34, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Boston 1989, 277–300