More than a century ago, Friedrich Nietzsche declared that God is dead. However, in a rather secular place like Silicon Valley, religion seems to be making a comeback. By fusing aspects of technology and traditional religions, these ‘techligions’ might provide the spiritual foundation for new societal and political systems of tomorrow.

Our observations

• Anthony Levandowski, a famous engineer in Silicon Valley, found a new religion called 'Way of the Future'. Its mission is “To develop and promote the realization of a Godhead based on artificial intelligence and through understanding and worship of the Godhead contribute to the betterment of society.”

• Oswald Spengler distinguishes two primary modes of relating to reality: a more intuitive and direct way (Dasein) and a more theoretic and mediated one. Types like the artist, politician and the poet belong to the first mode while the priest, scientist and the engineer belong to the second one.

• In his book ‘Homo Deus’, historian Yuval Harari states that a new belief called ‘dataism’ has been erected upon technological progress. Dataists believe that reality is ultimately strings of data, and that the universe is basically one big data-processing system. Human beings, just like other organisms, are biochemical algorithms, inferior to computerized algorithms that should therefore govern the universe.
Connecting the dots

We have already noted that technology can have magical qualities. Moreover, technology and technological progress can also provide religious inspiration. There is a long philosophical tradition in which thought and consciousness have been addressed as divine qualities, and the different religions and faiths erected upon technology sanctify the intelligent aspect of technology as well, and therefore basically make the basic claim as traditional religions: there exists an intelligence far superior to man. Yet, instead of transcendent deities, these are new cognitive technologies, such as AI or biometric technologies. For example, we no longer have to pray to God for a good harvest or keeping our dear ones healthy and alive, because agricultural technologies like precision farming or gene editing technologies, e.g. CRISPR, do a much better job. However, these ‘techligions’ also have a few distinct characteristics from traditional religions. First of all, these religions comprise a firm utilitarian ethic. Techligions stress that maximizing utility is actually a moral imperative, that people are morally obliged to do the thing that produces the most happiness. By claiming that their technological deities can solve problems in a much more efficient way, they conclude that they are morally superior to human beings. Furthermore, techligions have a strong theoretic appeal and presentation, and promote efficiency above ethical or esthetic values. Traditional religions prescribe ethical guidelines and esthetic principles, that don’t serve the goal to organize and order things as efficient as possible. Techligions’ authority is based on the that technological deities are most efficient problem-solvers, hence proclaiming efficiency as their ‘summum bonum’. What priests and imams are to Christianity and Islam, is what engineers, like Levandowski, will become for techligions.

When the promises of exponential technologies, like machine learning or quantum computing, will be realized, adoption of techligions might have far-reaching consequences. For example, ideologies like capitalism, democracy, or liberalism are founded upon the assumption that human beings must make their own choices because no one knows better what they want. But with the rise of AI and the advent of Big Data, large tech companies will know you better than yourself, hence they can make better decisions for you. In a society founded upon a belief that problems should be solved efficiently, people will be willing to hand over their decision-making autonomy to algorithms. That will make a technical approach to reality the dominant world view, at the cost of other ideologies. Just like people put their faith and soul into the hands of Gods, we will now put our lives into algorithms.

Furthermore, techligions can lead to new post-human philosophies. For several centuries, human intelligence gave man a precious place in evolution. One the one hand, one can argue that as technology becomes autonomous and superior to human functioning, humankind falls from his cosmic pedestal to the same level as other biological organisms; instead of transcending nature and animals, human beings are thrown back into the natural domain. In the movie Her, we already see that AI operating systems will reach far higher states of intelligence, and therefore lose their interest in mankind. Another reaction is that human beings should adapt to this new state of technology and fuse with these new technologies. ‘Transhumanism’ will not reject the humanist ideal, but transcend and overcome its limitations: we will no longer be a homo sapiens, but become homo deus in the words of Hariri.

Implications

- The development of technological innovations with superior computational power to human beings, like smart algorithms, brain-computer interfaces, and biometric sensors, will spur religious belief in technology. Societies with strong theocratic traditions and vested religious interests need to perform a balancing act between technological progress and their religious traditions.

- If we understand religions as artificial artefacts that are kept alive by rituals, roles, and traditions so that they create fictive and interpersonal realities, techligions will bring their own religious rituals. Just as the Catholic or Muslim can ‘earn’ a place in Heaven or Jannah by fulfilling the seven sacraments or the five pillars of Islam (among other things), believers in technology can earn their ‘points’ in videogames or VR-experiences.

- Companies that embody a strong utilitarian ethic and have a technical, a-political approach to problems might become the next churches, mosques, and holy places of ‘techligions’.