

The relationship between religion, science and technology

September 24, 2019

ASU center receives \$1.7M grant to explore how we make sense of spirituality in an age of technoscience advancements

The Pew Research Center [has reported](#) that more and more people identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” How can this be explained in our highly technoscientific age? Since technoscience is taken to be “secular,” how can we make sense of the relationship between our radical technoscientific advances and our search for “spirituality”?

A group of Arizona State University researchers will explore these and other questions through a project titled “Beyond Secularization: A New Approach to Religion, Science and Technology,” which has received a \$1.7M grant from the Templeton Religion Trust.

The Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict will serve as the lead unit for this major interdisciplinary initiative that seeks to explore the underlying assumptions about science and technology research, exploring whether religious ideas shape scientific research directions and revealing new models for understanding ideas of progress.

Conflicts at the borders of religion, science and technology have been a major research area of the center’s since its inception in 2003. Partnering with [Hava Tirosh-Samuels](#), now a Regents Professor and director of Jewish studies, the center launched a faculty seminar in 2004 that met for almost 15 years. Several externally funded projects that grew out of the seminar supported a major lecture series, international research conferences and numerous publications.

All of this work positioned the center for this latest project, which has the potential to have a major impact in how we understand not only the interplay between religion, science and technology in public life, but also how we understand ideas and meanings of progress.

“Beyond Secularization” builds on a small pilot project that produced over 20 articles, including a cover story in the January issue of *Sojourners* magazine. It will establish a collaboratory that will include graduate students, postdocs and faculty who will develop and advance new research methods and understandings over the next three to four years.

To learn more about the subject, ASU Now sat down with Tirosh-Samuels, [Ben Hurlbut](#), School of Life Sciences associate professor, and [Gaymon Bennett](#), School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies associate director of research and associate professor, who will serve as co-principal investigators.

Question: What does the title of this project refer to?

Hurlbut: The project looks at the relationships between religion, science and technology in

several important domains of public life: in environmental movements, in shifting ideas of the spiritual self that draw upon science, in arenas of high-technology innovation that are reshaping how we live and in the ways societies debate and govern the ethical implications of biotechnological transformation of life, including human life. We want to understand how science, technology and religion are related in those domains, including how lines are drawn between them. There is a pretty widespread assumption that as scientific knowledge and technological capacity increase, religion retreats into the background. And yet, if you look at how people think and talk, things are a lot messier. Go to Silicon Valley and you will encounter a lot of people who are imagining a technological future in terms of its potential to bring a kind of redemption and transcendence, a kind of eschatology. In other domains, like in public debate about biotechnologies, like human genome editing, there is a lot of drawing of lines between scientifically-grounded ethical views versus religious ones. But in all these areas, the boundaries are less clear than we tend to assume. They are a lot more mixed, a lot more hybrid, a lot fuzzier. And understanding that is important for how we think about the relationships between science, technology and religion in contemporary public life.

Q: How is this project unique?

Tirosh-Samuelson: The core work of this project will be done by a collaborative lab (co-lab, for short), which will include the three principal investigators, invited faculty, postdoctoral fellows and graduate students. This group will be studying together and will host visiting scholars from other universities around the world who will help enrich the discussion about big picture questions. The work of the co-lab will be distinctly interdisciplinary, crossing boundaries between history, science and technology studies, religious studies, sociology and anthropology. Our basic conviction is that to understand the interplay between religion, science and technology, we need to pose new questions and engage new methods. The artificial dichotomy between “science” and “religion” is no longer valid and even talking about a “dialogue” between religion and science is insufficient. We need to develop deeper ways to understand how these domains operate in our public life, and to do so, we must engage new disciplines that previously have not been applied to this field of inquiry. Since the project engages religion, science and technology in public life, it will have a public component, including public lectures that will involve the entire ASU community as well as an outreach program to people outside the ASU community, such as high-tech innovators in various innovations enclaves (e.g. Silicon Valley). The public aspect of the project exemplifies ASU’s commitment to social embeddedness and to breaking the boundaries between the academy and the community.

"There's been this sort of assumption that as technology progresses, as knowledge progresses, we get less religious, we become more secular."

— Ben Hurlbut, School of Life Sciences associate professor

Q: Why do we see such pronounced boundaries between the religious and the secular in academia?

Hurlbut: There's been this sort of assumption that as technology progresses, as knowledge progresses, we get less religious, we become more secular. That assumption has also been built into the way some fields study modern life, whether or not that actually corresponds with people's lived experience. So one of the things that we want to do is ask, "What are the things that we're overlooking?" Because we have operated in the social sciences, to a very significant degree, under the assumption that secularization is an inevitable result of modernization and

progress, religion is either left behind or pushed to the side. It drops out of public life and becomes privatized. So, the disciplines have sort of carved themselves up in ways that are mapped onto assumptions about the world and knowledge that may not actually be correct.

Q: How have the boundaries between the religious and the secular changed over time?

Bennett: There's this widespread belief today that if you want to transform the world, you don't really need religion. You just need science and technology. And yet if you go someplace like Silicon Valley and you walk down Sand Hill Road and walk into a coffee shop and you sit and listen to innovators talk about what they're doing, they're all talking about transforming the most fundamental aspects of what it means to be human. And if you tune in closely, all sorts of kinds of topics that we used to associate with "religion" or "spirituality" are being talked about in relation to technology. Questions like what does it mean to be a being with a finite body? Can we overcome our own frailty and even "cure" aging? What does it mean to be connected to other people and to our environments? What does it mean for us to be able to build infrastructures in the world that promised to united us together but have become the engine for so much division?

"When we study religious environmentalism, we have to think anew about terms such as 'secular,' 'religious,' 'worldliness' and 'otherworldliness.'"

— Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, Regents Professor and director of Jewish studies

Q: What are some other areas where we see this happening?

Tirosh-Samuelson: The area that I work on is religious environmentalism. This movement emerged in the U.S. in the 1960s when people began to be aware of the ecological crisis. Interestingly, some of the scientists who were first to note the crisis were religious practitioners who considered the environmental crisis an assault on God's created world. The interreligious movement of religious environmentalism and the academic discourse on religion and ecology illustrate the porous boundaries between "science" and "religion" or between the "religious" and "secular" aspects of life. For religious environmentalists, the natural world, or the environment, is not simply inert matter that can be known only through science, but rather the expression of divine creativity. When we study religious environmentalism, we have to think anew about terms such as "secular," "religious," "worldliness" and "otherworldliness." Our analysis of religious environmentalism is not only historically grounded, it is also attentive to religious diversity and religious differences. The way we think about the relationship between "religion" and "science" reflects the legacy of Christianity. But other world religions, for example — Judaism, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism — approach these issues quite differently. In addition to religious diversity, we are going to interrogate the category of "spirituality" as a hybrid category that fuses the secular and the religious. We can see it in regard to environmentalism but also in other domains such as medicine and the wellness industry. But what does it mean to be "spiritual but not religious" and how does "spirituality" express itself? We will seek to address these questions.

"What does it mean to alter a world our children will inherit?"

— Gaymon Bennett, School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies associate director of research

Q: How are these questions relevant to people's everyday lives?

Bennett: It's not incidental that the three research areas for this project are three areas that are some of the major areas of collective crisis in the world today. On one level, these areas seem so timely, so current — the question of bioengineering will transform our bodies, or how digital innovation will change our sense of ourselves. But on another level, these are really old, really fundamental questions: What does it mean to alter a world our children will inherit? How do our religious and spiritual views of reality shape what gets to count as important, or desirable or dangerous? Our lives are saturated with science and technology. It's fundamentally changing how we relate to ourselves — our bodies, our planet, our food, our lovers, our sense of a higher reality. And then of course there's the environmental crisis and the question of what we modern people have done to our relationship with nature, whether it has intrinsic meaning and what that might be. All of these areas cut across time, place, culture and tradition, and are some of the most pressing issues that humanity is facing today.

