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Standing at the Precipice: Faith in the Age of Science and Technology

Azizah Y. al-Hibri

We discussed earlier that strand of European liberalism that reached our shores and influenced our constitutional views on the separation of church and state. This tradition was based on several assumptions. As pointed out, among them is the assumption that individuals could seal themselves off into compartments to be believers one moment, good citizens the next. Another is the assumption that religion is retrograde, that it will be overtaken by reason. These assumptions fit well with certain secular assumptions of modern science, especially when combined with the mech-

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anistic model of reality on which the Industrial Revolution was based.¹

The mechanistic model of the Industrial Revolution has thoroughly permeated not only our technological world, but more importantly, our very consciousness, even subconsciousness. It has structured our worldview and cast its shadow over every aspect of our lives. It has also shaped our fundamental assumptions. Our view of scientific thought, professional behavior, medicine, business, education, even religion has been influenced by it. Divisions on the Supreme Court in the debates over the separation of church and state clearly reflect it. The consequences, both positive and negative, have been immense. Dehumanization, fragmentation, and conflict are among the most troubling. For people of faith in particular, it has meant a schizophrenic existence. It has legitimated a separation of faith from public life, causing an unfortunate rupture that marginalized faith as it privatized one's deepest-held beliefs and values.

At the cusp of the second millennium, however, a new age has dawned upon us. It is the Age of Information that emphasizes interconnectedness, decentralization, and innovation. This new age tends to promote an organic as opposed to a mechanistic reality. It abandons a hierarchical mechanistic logic in favor of "flattened" networks of relationships. It replaces the ideology of conflict that characterized the Industrial Age with a new ideology of cooperation. It replaces homogeneity with diversity, and centralization with increased participation and democracy. Properly understood and managed, this age can usher in better political, social, and economic relations in our society and in the world.² Left in chaos, it could result in the disarray of our various institutions.

Our generation is in the unique position of being able to either birth this new age or suppress its development by forcing it into outmoded First Industrial molds. We have been raised in the Old World, but history demands from us that we define the contours of the New World. In some sense, our task is no less critical than that of our Founding Fathers who ushered in a new era of liberation and democracy into a world burdened with oppression and tyranny. Thus we must engage in serious deliberations, taking into account our true state of affairs, before we reach our conclusions.

In launching his extensive critique of our mechanical technological culture, Marshall McLuhan, the oracle of this new age, noted in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that "[h]itherto most people have accepted their cultures as fate . . . ; but our emphatic awareness of the exact modes of many cultures is itself a liberation from them as prisons." We need not be prisoners of our old mechanistic culture, and in fact have been slowly liberating ourselves from it. But to properly plan for and accelerate the future, we need to understand the past. We need to uncover the impact certain unwarranted assumptions underlying the mechanistic models have had on us, not only in industry but also socially, politically, and legally. Indeed, these assumptions have so permeated our lives that they have become practically invisible.

The Story of Modern Science and Technology

Faith and reason have been juxtaposed in theological and philosophical discussions for centuries, sometimes with reason portrayed as the handmaiden of religion but at others, as polar opposites. These discussions have not always been cordial. They flourished and took new forms during the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. Finally, they reached the shores of this land during and after the American Enlightenment.

Today, the issues raised by these discussions have shifted in great part to areas related to science and technology, but the discussions remain as vibrant as ever.³ The issues permeate all aspects of our American life from educational and artistic arenas to constitutional and political ones. Often, however, people of faith have been disadvantaged in these discussions precisely because the image of science and technology in the public square is one of "secularity," "objectivity," and "provability," while religious belief continues to be commonly cast as "superstitious," "irrational," and "private."

This situation is not conducive to a dialogue based on equality and mutual respect, and has alienated important segments of our society from each other. In part, this state of affairs is the result of the great successes of modern science and the notable excesses of some groups and individuals in the name of faith. Unfortunately, however, our great admiration for science has led to its mystifica-