

NINE GLOBAL TRENDS IN RELIGION

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Religion, like technology and politics, changes with time, and those changes are happening at a faster pace than ever before as we approach the twenty-first century. Many of the same tools used to forecast the future in technology can be applied to religion, but there are some very unique obstacles to overcome in attempting this.

The first problem is that religion is not global. Unlike technology, religion and politics are often national or regional phenomena. Technological changes can transform the entire world – consider how broadcast communications have affected even the most remote areas of the globe. We can talk all we want about a global village, but in the foreseeable future, religion and politics will continue to be shaped by smaller geographic boundaries.

Another obstacle is that most major religions, being founded on tenets and beliefs that are seen as coming from an unchanging deity, don't lead the way to change. Rather, changes in religious practice usually come as a reaction to broader societal changes. When television was developed, religious groups learned to use it as an important means of spreading their faith. New archeological discoveries add to the ability to interpret sacred writings in a more contextually accurate light. Scientists clone a sheep and religious leaders debate the morality of it. Forecasting the future of religion often requires a forecast of religion's reactions to other changes coming to our world.

A final obstacle is that, frankly, religion is a very touchy subject. It is nearly impossible to cover this subject without running the risk of offending someone. While each reader will come to this article with his or her own religious sensibilities, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of such forecasting is not to promote one faith or style of worship over another, but to bring together an examination of current trends affecting religion and see where the logical conclusions lead.

This article examines these major trends on a global scale and then focuses on some key regions of the world.

Trend One: The Continuing Presence of Religion

Science fiction visionaries such as Isaac Asimov and Gene Roddenberry were fond of portraying even the near-term future as a world free of religion. Don't bet on it. The faithful would say religion will continue to exist because it is Truth in its purest form. The skeptical would counter that uneducated humanity will always have a need to depend on something larger than itself. Regardless of your perspective, the end result is still much the same: Religion is here to stay.

Many would argue that the world is becoming an increasingly secular, non-religious society as humanity becomes more educated and advanced. It is true that civilized societies no longer worry whether the gods will lift the sun back into the sky on the morrow, but religion is still firmly entrenched in even the most secular states.

Communism has tried its best for 80 years to rid the world of religion, yet faith survived: Religion is now growing rapidly in former Soviet states, and underground Christianity is burgeoning in China and Cuba, despite the efforts of Communist leaders. America is without question one of the most advanced of nations, and yet six out of 10 adults attend worship services at least once a month; roughly 40% attend in any given week, a figure unchanged for over 50 years, despite all predictions to the contrary. The Middle Eastern states have achieved new heights of wealth, education, and political power, and Islam remains a tremendous influence on the lives of its citizens.

In short, some regions, such as western Europe, will see decreasing religious influence, while others, such as Russia or Afghanistan, experience an increase. Religion on the whole is not close to facing extinction from the human race.

Trend Two: Increasing Clashes between Science and Religion

There is a natural sequence that seems to occur when science and religion meet. First, they are at odds with each other: Science seeks to change the "outmoded superstition" of religion, and religion decries the "godless humanism" of science. The two start as enemies and remain wary adversaries for some time. Gradually, they become mutually tolerant and sometimes accept and aid each other. There are even times when one side changes its stance when faced with strong evidence from the other.

This scene has been played out over and over throughout history: the reaction that the established Roman Church had to Galileo's theories in 1633; the current stance of some extremists (such as Islamic leaders in Afghanistan) toward technological advances; the way medical science is beginning to admit (in the face of substantial documented evidence) that prayer apparently can advance healing in sick people.

Clashes in viewpoint between science and religion will increase in the near future. The applications of technology, and the ethical and moral dilemmas those applications can pose, is a debate that will rage like a forest fire into the next millennium.

The debate will not only be between science and religion, but between factions within those communities as well. The Bible, the Veda, the Talmud, and other sacred writings

don't directly cover issues such as cloning or fetal tissue research. Whether or not the major religions and sects react to new developments in a fairly unified voice will determine which viewpoints have the greatest impact on the increasing debates between science and religion/morality – as will the question of whether science polices itself by asking tough moral questions before rushing headlong into advancement.

Trend Three: Increased Cooperation between Science and Religion

Many people believe that it's just a matter of time before science overcomes religion in these debates. Not so.

Because religion has been so firmly entrenched for so long, and science is generally the "change catalyst," religious practice or belief has usually been the viewpoint that changes when change does occur. However, expect to see increased cooperation between science and religion, even as (and sometimes because) these moral debates rage on.

Religion has come to admit that science isn't always the enemy. In fact, religion now often uses science to back up its claims. Extensive scientific testing has been conducted on the Shroud of Turin, and the Dead Sea Scrolls are undergoing intense scholarly review.

Science is reciprocating. For example, there is evidence not only that people praying for themselves may aid in their own health care (which could have purely psychosomatic origins), but that others praying for a sick individual may advance healing. Moreover, there are enough documented cases of the seemingly miraculous – ranging from religious snake handlers in the American South, who drink strychnine without injury, to documented physical healings occurring at some religious events – that medical scientists increasingly are willing to re-evaluate their purely scientific world view.

Medicine is not the only discipline in which this re-evaluation is happening. Other fields are beginning to realize that science and religion are not mutually exclusive. Social science, for instance, is sometimes willing to admit that religion has positive input and perspectives (witness the "Dan Quayle was right" admissions about single-parent households). A Canadian study showed that churchgoers tend to contribute more time and money to societal good than do the unchurched. A study by the National Institute for Health Care Research in Maryland determined that prison recidivism is substantially lower for prisoners when they attend Bible studies while incarcerated. Researchers at Columbia University found that children whose mothers give them a religious identity and heritage have a much lower risk of depression than those whose children were not given a religious identity. On the flip side, there are now many counselors who practice the "secular" fields of marketing, economics, psychology, family counseling, and even physical fitness from a religious perspective. The debates between the secular and the religious may increase, but so will the cooperation.

Trend Four: Religious Mixture and Conflicts on a Micro Level

Throughout the future, religion will continue to play a major part in international politics. Many of the political moves of the Islamic world are based in religious beliefs, and the

Hindu caste system has a substantial effect on India. Much of the positive social service that goes on throughout the world is motivated by religion (such as the late Mother Theresa, The Salvation Army, and the work of countless non-profit organizations and religious groups). Factional strife such as in Lebanon, Ireland, Indonesia, Bosnia, the Sudan, and Israel is often motivated by clashing religious viewpoints as much as by ethnicity or politics. There is little reason to think that this will change in the near future.

In fact, expect religious conflicts to increase on a more local, and thankfully much less severe, scale. One reason for this is the ability of major faith groups to propagate their beliefs through the Internet, radio, television, and personal travel. Another factor is the increased immigration common in so many countries, which mixes faith groups with regularity.

A recent report from London's Christian Research Association projected that Muslims in England will actually outnumber practicing Anglicans by the year 2002. Mosques and Buddhist temples are springing up next to synagogues and Baptist churches throughout North America. Traditionally Catholic Latin America is seeing a sweeping Evangelical movement. In Panama, for instance, over 15% of the nation's population is Protestant, with much of that led by Evangelical churches that are growing by 9% a year. In fact, the Evangelical movement has become truly worldwide – 70% of Evangelical churches are in non-Western nations today, compared to 30% in 1960, according to the World Evangelical Fellowship.

In essence, a mixture of faiths is coming together in many nations of the world. Faith groups have always been mixed (witness Coptic Christians in Egypt and Jews in Russia), but never to the extent we are seeing now and will see in the future. Foreign-born residents make up more than 15% of the population in Australia, Israel, Canada, Luxembourg, Hong Kong, and Switzerland. From 1820 to 1991, the top 10 countries of last residence for U.S. immigrants were all traditionally Christian (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant). In 1992, four of the top 10 countries of origin were largely non-Christian. Of newly-naturalized U.S. citizens in 1992, six of the top 10 countries of origin were not traditionally Christian.

Sometimes this mixture promotes understanding and cooperation among faith groups. More often, it causes strife and separation. Immigrants are often willing to learn a new language and a new culture, but abandoning their faith is a much more serious sacrifice. As we become a global village, look for our own local villages to separate themselves along religious lines.

Trend Five: Increasing Governmental Intervention

Fragmentation will make it increasingly difficult for societies to operate in a manner that allows full freedom of expression, yet takes the sensibilities of all residents into consideration. Look for intense debates about issues such as religious meetings on government property, efforts by religious groups to spread their faith, and freedom of religious expression.

Due largely to this on-going struggle, expect governments to get more and more involved in religious issues in the coming decades. Russia and Israel are among the many countries trying to decide just how much religious freedom will be allowed for "external" faith groups (i.e., non-indigenous faiths and missionaries from other countries). The United States has considered legislation to limit the freedom of religious expressions in prisons. China and Saudi Arabia are attempting to gain complete control of religion. Expect governing bodies to step up attempts to reconcile conflicting religious beliefs or practices by limiting personal freedoms in this area in the coming decades.

Trend Six: Overcoming Government Limitations through the Internet

One area of expression that will prove very difficult to control is electronic communication, particularly the Internet. While the United States is debating Internet free speech on issues such as pornography, in other countries this debate will also include religion. Religious groups don't tend to be on the cutting edge of technology, but as the Internet spreads internationally, look for them to try to use this tool to evade these governmental controls, just as underground printing presses in the Soviet Union illegally produced Bibles.

Trend Seven: Blending Faiths

Along with this worldwide mixture of peoples and faiths, and the ability to communicate across geographic lines, another noteworthy religious trend is *faith syncretism*, in which a person will combine bits and pieces from other faiths into a blend of his own. This doesn't happen just with religious practices, but also with theology itself.

It is fairly common today – particularly in North America – for people who are not intensely loyal to a denomination to build their own religion. A person might like Buddhist respect for all life forms, Catholic beliefs about angels, Mormon ideas about the importance of family, and the rituals and traditions of the Lutheran church. This melding of different faith perspectives is particularly evident in many of the New Age faithful. These people often consider themselves to be very "spiritual," but not very "religious."

Part of this syncretism is due to the mixture of different faiths and cultures into traditionally Judeo-Christian societies, and part is due to declining religious loyalties. Denominations – e.g., Episcopalian, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian – are declining in importance for many people. Studies by the Barna Research Group estimate that 9% of all Americans are regularly involved in more than one local church (with another 30% making less regular forays to multiple churches), and that the vast majority of all church growth is from people moving from one congregation to another. People today are less concerned with whether their family has always attended a Southern Baptist church, for example, than with how a particular worship center can meet their needs of the moment.

Syncretism is also happening at denominational leadership levels. Some mainline Protestant groups have incorporated Native American practices and viewpoints into some of their celebrations, for instance. This trend leads to a highly individualized view of religion, rather than traditional corporate practice of faith.

Trend Eight: Religious Individualism and Its Effects

Society in the developed world is becoming more fragmented, individualistic, and cut off from traditional forms of community. People used to have long-term church membership, extended careers in large workplaces, and neighborhood block parties. Now, we move every few years, computers and video games replace hanging out with friends, and we work at home, work flextime, or change companies frequently. It is difficult to maintain community amid these changes, so people in developed nations have begun to focus on the individual. This is a long-term trend that has been growing for some time, but it will continue to increase in the foreseeable future.

The emphasis on the individual is one reason for the increase in Evangelical Christian denominations, often at the expense of mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic churches. The Evangelical mindset focuses on personal change, personal spirituality, personal salvation. Mainline Protestant groups often tend to focus more on societal change, and an emphasis in Catholicism is the Church itself. While mainline Methodists and Presbyterians were trying to ban the bomb and fight for the homeless, and the Catholic church was busy with internal church matters such as women in the priesthood and Vatican II, Evangelicals were telling people they could have a personal relationship and experience with God – and people were listening.

A greater focus on the individual could cause significant realignment of Christian denominations in the near future. The Evangelical versus mainline contrast is often one of liberal versus conservative, both socially and theologically. Stronger loyalties are growing between mainline, liberal groups that have similar viewpoints, even though they are of different denominations. At the same time, conservative viewpoints are creating strange bedfellows, such as conservative Catholics and Evangelicals working closely together to oppose abortion.

Given these shifts, it would not be surprising to see denominations gradually realign according to their conservative/liberal or mainline/Evangelical focus, rather than along traditional denominational lines. While exact predictions are impossible, the scenarios include: a split between conservative and moderate sides of the Southern Baptist Convention; splinter conservative "renewal" groups separating from mainline Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations; and limited or full mergers among the United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church USA, and other similar mainline bodies. In the United States, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and other mainline bodies are moving toward "full communion." Catholics and Protestants at the Second European Ecumenical Assembly in Austria have discussed joint communion services in the early part of the next century.

With its wide variety of theological and social viewpoints among adherents and leaders, the Roman Catholic Church would have separated into disparate bodies long ago if not for its strong emphasis on ultimate Papal authority. With contention growing over issues such as women in the priesthood, celibacy of priests, the acceptability of birth control,

and acceptance of homosexuality, it is possible that more Catholic groups could break with the authority of Rome.

Individualism will continue to have other effects. Expect interfaith marriages to increase. Expect the megachurch movement (churches with thousands of people, frequently offering services as diverse as auto repair, home Bible studies, and coffee shops) to grow even stronger. There are more tangible benefits to the individual in attending a church with 5,000 members than a struggling congregation with fewer than 100 every week (along with greater anonymity and less pressure to conform to the church's tenets). Individualism will continue to be a major focus, bringing change to religion throughout the coming decades.

Trend Nine: Increases in Religious Cults and Scams

The increasing isolation in the developed world, and the lack of education in many underdeveloped nations, make many individuals open to groups which promise to fulfill their longing for community. Traditional faith groups have a tremendous opportunity to fill a need by providing this sense of belonging and relationship-building. But people are also drawn to cults that promise family ties or a better tomorrow.

The desire to look up to a leader and experience family-like bonds is present in most humans. Left unfulfilled, these desires can foment to the point that some are willing to surrender everything they have to the will of cults, such as the Branch Davidians or Heaven's Gate, or to religious scams. (Many sociologists say this search for family, belonging, and leadership is a major reason kids join gangs; cults offer the same things.) Hunger for spiritual experience and the lack of education and training have left many in China open to underground pseudo-Christian groups with strange or destructive teachings, such as walking on a raging river to prove your faith. Expect to see more of these odd separatist groups as the new millennium approaches.

Major Regional Trends

The trends in religion discussed so far can be forecast for much of the world, without respect to nationalism or regional differences. There are many other changes in religion that will occur on a more localized level. Here are the more important trends:

The former Soviet bloc is searching to establish its religious identity, just as it tries to establish an economic identity following the collapse of Communism. After over seven decades of being denied religious freedom, many residents are hungry for spiritual involvement. Expect increasing struggles between external faith groups wishing access to the population, and traditional faiths – e.g. Sunni Islam in Uzbekistan, Catholicism in Poland, the Orthodox church in Russia – demanding a return to traditional forms of worship. Also look for this region to be particularly hard-hit by wild fluctuations in the freedom of religion, cults, and religious scams.

Africa will continue to experience instability. The greatest struggle is between Islam and Christianity, with each seeking a dominant position in many African states. Africa will continue to be a rallying point for religions in other areas of the world, especially in

the areas of charity and faith propagation. Should technology find a way to lessen some of the larger social problems (such as feeding the population), there will be a major impact on charitable fundraising throughout the world.

The predominantly Muslim Middle East will be torn between numerous factions within the Islamic world with different agendas. Some will push peaceful propagation of their faith, with more genial relations with the Western world. Others want Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other states pushed closer to the model being set up in Afghanistan: a theocracy with complete control by fundamentalist Islamic leaders. Turkey and Iran are currently facing the brunt of these struggles, but other states will take their turns. It would not be surprising to see these conflicts erupt even more strongly – possibly even to the point of coups or armed insurrection by one or both sides. To many Middle Eastern residents, government and religion are inseparable.

Israel will likely be engaged in armed conflict with its neighbors in the coming decades. The enmity between Arabs and Jews is not just a matter of territory and misunderstanding, as some international leaders naively think. It is a deep-rooted ethnic and religious conflict extending thousands of years, and it will not be quickly resolved at the negotiating table.

China will continue the fight against underground religion. More than 100 "house church" leaders were arrested in the first three months of 1997 alone, and the number of practicing Christians in China is estimated at 50 million, still a tiny part of a nation of 1.2 billion. If China were to go the way of the Soviet Union – unlikely given Chinese leaders' willingness to bend just enough to keep their firm control – the religious chaos would be worse than in the former Soviet Bloc.

Christian growth in many of the emerging Asian nations, such as Thailand, South Korea, and Taiwan, is significant. Over the long term, this growth should continue, as openness to Western ideals also means increased openness to Western religion.

Conflicts will emerge in less-developed nations such as Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, where large numbers of Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims are thrust together. These faiths rarely mix peacefully, especially with an uneducated and sometimes fanatical population. Expect continued violence along religious and ethnic lines, along with government limitations of religious freedoms to try and quell these problems.

Latin America will see a surging Evangelical involvement, particularly in Pentecostal circles. It is expected that this movement will build, especially since the Hispanic influx into the United States has increased awareness of Spanish language and cultures among American religious groups. It will also cause problems between Evangelicals and Catholics in this region, again with the possibility of government intervention to minimize any conflicts.

The United States will find itself at a religious crossroads. There will either be a revival in religious involvement – such as The Great Awakening in the mid-eighteenth century – or the country will continue to slide into the western Europe model: a post-Christian society founded on a Christian worldview, but with religion as more of a tradition than as a part of daily life.

Americans are showing increased interest in spiritual matters (witness the 112% increase in sales for books about spirituality from 1991 to 1996), but often not in traditional religions or in life-changing commitments to their faith. At the same time, religion is becoming very privatized, often due to government and societal hostility and skepticism toward overt displays of faith. This will most likely cause groups that incorporate their faith most fully into their daily lives (e.g., fundamentalist Christians, Mormons, Orthodox Jews) to become disaffected and separated from society as a whole, causing yet another division in American society.



“Religion is meant to be bread for daily use, not cake for special occasions.”
UNKNOWN



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