

Religion Reloaded: Scenarios for Spirituality in the 21st Century

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Conventional wisdom notwithstanding, the past thirty to forty years have been a period of surprisingly slow change throughout America – slow relative to the century that came before, slow relative to changes in the less developed or formerly communist countries, and slow, I suspect, relative to the decades to come.

Religious change has been especially slow. Christianity remains the dominant American faith, Catholics remain the largest denomination, and surveyed rates of church attendance, church membership, belief in God, and self-reported religiosity remain largely unchanged since the 1960s. Established trends have continued – including growth in the share of people identifying with new religions, non-Christian religions, and no religion – but the magnitude of change has been less than expected in the 1960s and far less than predicted by proponents of “secularization” theory or “Dead of God” theology.

The religious stability of recent decades has been mirrored, and at least partly caused, by corresponding stability in other aspects of our lives. Despite continued technological progress, we still live in homes similar or identical to those of our parents. We also use similar appliances, recline on similar furniture, speak the same language, employ similar grooming products and standards of hygiene, are educated at the same institutions, wear similar clothing, eat similar foods, work similar jobs for similar hours each day, drive at similar speeds, listen to similar music and watch similar TV shows, sleep the same hours, and die of the same diseases. Even the themes of social and political debate remain those inherited from the 1960s: racism, sexism, and affirmative action, diversity, inequality, sexual freedom, the size of government, the scope of market regulation, entitlement programs, income redistribution, taxation, deficits, “free markets” versus “social justice”, free-trade versus protectionism, immigration, the environment, and so forth.

But what of the decades to come? It takes no leap of faith, to imagine near-term developments that might radically alter everyday life. Nearly every generation of Americans from 1776 through 1976 lived through immensely rapid change – political, social, economic, and technological.¹ And even if today’s trends merely continue at today’s rates, the social consequences may prove substantial. For all these reasons, and more, American rates of *religious* change may soon shift into high gear.

Let us therefore consider some scenarios for religious change over the next few decades. None requires a flight of fancy, and none strikes me as “far out,” either in time or probability. To the contrary, each scenario extrapolates from a well-established trend or

likely innovation, none of which overshadows the trends and innovations actually experienced by Americans in the early- or mid- 20th century.

Health and Longevity: Advances in medicine and biotechnology may well increase the “normal” human lifespan by twenty to fifty years or more within the next two generations. The same advances promise to radically reduce our susceptibility to a wide range of common health problems – from arthritis, allergy, and Alzheimer’s, to cancer, stroke, and heart disease. Religions will almost certainly respond by reducing their traditional emphasis on coping with pain, sickness, and death. Indeed, the woes of this life and joys of the next have already lost their salience in mainstream Christian groups, and they scarcely surface in most new religious movements.

Prosperity and Equality: Barring some unlikely calamity, material prosperity will continue to grow exponentially in the decades ahead, and modern technologies will continue driving the marginal costs of production toward zero. The resulting democratization of *material* prosperity will radically increase average *levels* of consumption while reducing substantive *differences* in material consumption across economic strata. Already the gap between America’s “poor” and “rich” has greatly narrowed when it comes to leisure, life-expectancy, diet, and access to clothing, plumbing, vaccines, antibiotics, routine and emergency health care, heat and cooling, major appliances, automobiles, TVs, telephones, sound and video technology, and even personal computers and the internet. Inevitably, religious institutions will devote less attention to explanations and compensations for poverty, inequality, and material deprivation.

The Welfare State: The past forty years have witnessed a vast increase in legally-mandated insurance, entitlements, protections, benefits, and rights. Growth in the welfare state has been especially great during periods of rapid economic growth, and neither the collapse of socialism nor the triumph of market economics has reversed the trend. From cradle to grave, people now receive public goods, services, help, and protection that they formerly received – if at all – from relatives, neighbors, co-workers, or congregations. As these trends continue, and perhaps accelerate, governmental institutions increasingly “crowd out” churches as direct suppliers of charity, education, social control, and mutual aid. Moreover, public demand for religious indoctrination and supervision diminishes when one’s well being is less closely tied to the loyalty of one’s children, the fidelity of one’s spouse, the generosity of one’s friends, or the control of one’s own impulses. Hell’s disappearance as a salient theme and common threat is just one example of this trend.

Entertainment and Education: Since the 1960’s, America’s artistic, academic, and legal establishments have grown increasingly hostile toward conventional religion. The teachings, institutions, and moral traditions of Christianity have come under repeated attack in schools, the media, and the court. For good or ill, prayer and many other religious activities in schools have been declared unconstitutional, while at the same time many forms of (previously illegal and religiously condemned) sexual expression and sexual conduct have been redefined as constitutional rights. College professors rarely

have anything good to say about religion, and Christianity is routinely decried as racist, sexist, imperialistic, and anti-environmental, especially in courses on psychology, sociology, anthropology, ethnic studies, women's studies, history, and literature. Contemporary movies, television, and literature largely ignore conventional religion – the most common exceptions being stereotyped depictions of intolerant, hypocritical, or sexually repressed (white) Christians.

Because patterns of religious belief and identity are set early in life and heavily influenced by family, the full effect of these secularizing trends has yet to be felt. The likely consequence, however, is a growing segment of Americans who reject traditional religions, are openly critical of Christianity, and support further constraints on visible manifestations of traditional religious beliefs and behavior. For the moment, stability is sustained by political balance – one that pits the (increasingly anti-Christian) Democratic Party against the (increasingly pro-Christian) Republican Party – but as I shall explain this could change quite quickly.

Evangelicalism: Evangelicals are the core supporters of conservative Christianity in America. Their continued vitality and growing political influence after decades of supposed secularization greatly shocked scholars in the late-1970s and early-1980s. Subsequently, researchers came to understand how “tension” with the surrounding society can actually *enhance* the strength of a religious group. From the 1920s through the 1960s, this tension flowed directly from the strict, distinctive, separatist life-styles demanded by most fundamentalist and evangelical denominations. But by the 1980s, many of these beliefs and behavior (concerning divorce, religious intermarriage, and sex roles; dancing, gambling, and drinking; doctrinal purity and denominational separatism) had disappeared or diminished. How was tension maintained? I would argue that it came from without, from the constellation of left-leaning secular groups who have become increasingly strong critics of “the religious right”, increasingly influential constituents within the Democratic Party, and increasingly vocal members of the academic, legal, and media/artistic establishment.² Evangelical Christians have thus been able to maintain high levels of commitment and a strong sense of identity while casting off their most distinctive beliefs and costly practices. Conservative Protestants of many denominations – whether Baptist, Methodist, Nazarene, Presbyterian, or Charismatic – have adopted a shared identity, vocabulary, and style of worship. But this strength and apparent unity is likely to collapse if the secular left becomes more accepting of Christians, or if either Democrats or Republicans attain political dominance, or if many evangelicals drift toward liberalism.³

Established Values and Popular Culture: Despite the antipathy noted above, America's secular-liberal establishment is in some respects the world's most forceful advocate of traditional Christian values. Liberalism exalts “equality,” “diversity,” and “social justice,” and it confers political power and moral legitimacy upon those who “advocate” for the “victims” of poverty, prejudice, illness, injustice, and exploitation. In movies and on TV, the stereotypical villain is a middle-aged man of power – the greedy, white, male, corporate executive or the conservative, white, male politician. The stereotypical hero is victim-class member who fights and sacrifices on behalf of other victims, be they

women, children, the sick or elderly, minorities, immigrants, petty criminals, the urban poor, the homeless, or prostitutes and homosexuals. But kindness, compassion, self-sacrifice, and egalitarian love are distinctly *Christian* values, and the triumph of human weakness and godly faith over worldly status, strength, and wealth is a uniquely *Christian* message – largely absent from paganism and most other religious traditions. Liberal-secularism may thus manage to “de-Christianize” America while actually deepening the world’s popular and institutional attachments to core Christian *values*.

Science and Superstition: For more than a century, scholars mistakenly forecast religious decline based upon flawed views of both religion and science. In particular, they predicted the “disenchantment” of mankind, as the growth of science, spread of technology, and mastery over nature, displaced ignorance, faith, and superstition. They underestimated religion’s intrinsic appeal, but entirely overlooked the ways in which progress itself promotes non-scientific beliefs. Farmers of the 19th century were never far from hardship and hunger or sickness and death, but they could readily understand the tools, technologies, and products they used, bought, or saw. There was nothing particularly mysterious about livestock and plants, water and fertilizer, plows and harvesting equipment, candles and kerosene lamps, or houses and horse-drawn carriages – and they probably had a better grasp of their social, economic, and political environment than most college students have today. Factory workers were surrounded by more machinery, larger populations, and more sophisticated markets, but they too could understand most of what they saw and experienced.

Flash forward to the present, and notice that today’s farmers, factory workers, and office employees have not the slightest clue how their world works. They know next to nothing about telephones and radios, refrigerators and microwaves, automobiles and airplanes, polymers and metal alloys, laser lights and TV tubes, medicines and cosmetics, modern agriculture and automated factories – to say nothing of computing, telecommunications, nuclear power, space exploration, and genetic engineering (Dixon 198x). This overwhelming ignorance is not proof of poor education, low intelligence, or deficient curiosity. It is the inevitable consequence of systems that *aggregate and coordinate* the knowledge, skills, and efforts of millions upon millions of people. Technological progress and market economics thus permit a normal population to produce mountains of goods and services, even the simplest of which outstrips the capabilities of a towering genius.

With progress, the boundaries separating knowledge from faith, science from superstition, and technology from magic become ever more elusive – for who can know how or why almost *anything* works? In the decades to come, we will almost never get beyond the interfaces mediating our interactions with the incredibly complex products that will dominate our daily activities. We will know which buttons to press and which commands to speak, but the results will be determined by “black boxes” of technology – hidden from view, microscopically small, remotely located, spread over networks, or floating in orbit. In such a world, the “miracles” of technology may support a thriving market for pseudo-scientific magic, supernatural speculation, and bona fide religion. Indeed, science may fuel faith even among the educated elite, for the “real” world of

relativity, quantum physics, and contemporary cosmology is more strange and wondrous than any conceived by prophets or priests.

Movies and Magic: Faith may receive yet another boost from entertainment technology. Much of what we see and hear (and much of what we think and believe) already comes from movies and television. As the trend from direct to virtual experience continues, we become increasingly inured to concepts and capabilities that are both fantastic and false. We regularly visit the worlds of Star Trek, Star Wars, ET, Terminator, X-Men, and the Matrix with scant ability to distinguish the probable from the nonsensical. This “re-enchantment” of (virtual) reality informs today’s new age and neo-pagan movements and it will probably inspire tomorrow’s traditional religions. From Star Wars to the Matrix, popular science fiction films already bristle with Christian values, Christian dualism, and Christian archetypes.

Concluding Observations – Stability and Change: I will not add my name to the long list of scholars who have rashly predicted the demise of Christianity or secularization of society. As we have seen, even simple innovations seem likely to affect religious beliefs, behavior, and institutions in myriad ways. The net effect on overall levels of religiosity, and even the overall level of conventional *Christian* religiosity, is by no means clear.

Most assuredly, there is no simple path from scientific discovery and technological progress to faith-free skepticism. Indeed, for many members of society the dominant path may run to increasing wonder, credulity, superstition, or spirituality. Moreover, if current trends hold, today’s “secular” critics of conservative Christianity may prove to have been tomorrow’s evangelists for Christian values. At the same time, however, religious institutions will drift farther and father from many traditional teachings, particularly those emphasizing suffering in this life and rewards or punishment in a life to come. The emphasis will continue shifting toward positive experience, non-judgmental acceptance, and therapeutic social support. Religions will change in many ways – some of which seem highly predictable – but the “death” of religion strikes me as ever less likely.

Ultimately, religion feeds off the same forces that sustain secular markets – the needs of religious “demanders,” the entrepreneurship of religious “suppliers,” and the perceived benefits of religious “products.” In this last respect, religion has one great advantage over its secular counterparts: it is by definition a *supernatural* technology capable of delivering otherwise unobtainable rewards. There is no *logical* limit to the range of goods and services accessible through supernatural means and hence no logical limit to the realm of religion. Perhaps therefore no amount of progress will ever render humans so content that they lose all interest in supernatural supplies of that which they cannot otherwise obtain.

NOTES

¹ Consider the changes that would have greeted a Rip Van Winkle who slept from 1935 through 1975, or from 1895 through 1935. These lucky but thoroughly bemused souls would awaken to electrical lights, radios, telephones, movies, cars, airplanes, hot water, indoor plumbing, electrical appliances, modern heating, refrigeration, vaccines, antibiotics, modern dentistry, birth control, and virtually all effective forms of medicine, plastics, synthetics, and modern chemistry, the agricultural revolution, television, automation and computing, modern physics, astronomy, and space exploration, atomic power, radically increased health, wealth, education, leisure, and life expectancy; major changes in the rights of women and minorities, new sexual norms, American military, economic, and cultural dominance, radically changed forms of art, music, visual entertainment. The list is virtually endless, altering every aspect of life and encompassing everything we do, say, own, or experience. By contrast, a Van Winkle who slept from 1973 through 2003 could immediately understand our conversation, dress, diet, housing, appliances, entertainment, economy, government, energy sources, transportation methods, work activities, and even our policy debates. And a reasonably intelligent Rip would require just days or weeks to master the basics of CDs, DVDs, TV remotes, cell phones, faxes, answering machines, ATMs, and email.

² See Bolce and De Maio (Bolce and De Maio 2002) for extensive empirical evidence of steadily growing Democratic-party antagonism toward traditional religion after 1972.

³ One of America's best-known sociologists of religion, Robert Wuthnow (Wuthnow 1993) draws a similar conclusion, noting that "If early Christians needed Satan, liberal Christians today need fundamentalists. ... The more they protest, the healthier their intimate enemy remains. Only the death of liberal Christianity would do in the fundamentalists for good."

REFERENCES

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