

The Changing Religions

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According to Richard S. Kirby and Jay E. Gary from World Network of Religious Futurists, “*We understand that religion is a tradition of change, then we can see that there is no particular reason to think that change has stopped.*” Therefore, this article is an attempt to explore the “changing religions” based on the point of change in future studies.

The concept of *change* is the philosophical foundation of futures studies. Futurists regard changes as the nature of human society. We can easily find many “facts on changes” from the human history, and religions are no exception. There are external influences on the development of the situations, these has caused the contents, ideals, interpretation and rituals of the religions to change.

The Acceleration and Impacts of Changes

Crises will still exist in future human societies, but they will be resolved by the intelligence and potentials of human beings, especially that it requires the cooperation of all human beings to create a bright future. Indeed, religions will have to face the impacts from the accelerated changes of society. These impacts will bring opportunities, but may also bring crises.

Technological revolution: After World War II, mankind faced another significant impact since the Industrial Revolution, resulted from the computerization and automation. In many cases, computers have transcended human’s capabilities and have improved the quality of our livings. This situation makes people think that we have the ability and intelligence almost next to God. In that case, the belief that “Nothing is greater than God” will be challenged significantly. Religions face a great challenge and people will have doubts

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about the existence of the power of God. We are actually in what futurist called a "future shock."

After we solve or recognize some problems that we were not able to solve or recognize in the past, we will have to face new unsolvable or "unknown" problems. For example, how gigantic is the universe? Are we the only species in the universe? We cannot get away from death, but is there a life after death? And what is that kind of life like? Does the appearance of artificial intelligence mean that human will be eventually controller by computers? The biotechnology can result in the production of thousands of human lives overnight, but will the technology-selected gender cause the imbalance of male and female? These fears will make today's human beings more anxious about what we should do. Since we are not able to know everything about the mysteries of the universe, religions will still have their foundation of existence.

Communications revolutions: The rapid development of communications has brought human society into a community based on telecommunications. In the next couple of centuries, this telecommunications revolution will cause dramatic impact on the livings of human beings. This will be integrated and enhanced by newspapers, magazines, books, radios, televisions, VCRs, satellites, video-conferencing, computer terminals, Internet and many other forms of electronic communications systems to rapidly produce and provide colossal amount of information. The popularity and the variety of communication media allow people acquire knowledge through various channels and thus the "diversification values" has formed. Therefore, the homogeneity of religious values is now facing the most difficult challenges. It is no longer easy to set norms for the followers' lives and behaviours, and the followers will even suspect what the "prophets" have proposed based on their experiences, in which prophecy is one of the fundamental factors for the existence of religions. In addition, the communications revolution has made the views of humans about their cognition of "world" expand from local regions to the whole globe, all human beings, and even to the universe known and unknown to human beings. Therefore, those religions that only concern local regions and particular races or that are overly exclusive, and the limited religious teachings will have to face unprecedented pressures. These types of religions cannot isolated themselves from the influences that other religions or sects propagate through the communications systems, these religions also have to accept the challenges on the values from other knowledge systems and religious sects.

From another point of view, communications media are also used by religions and have become one of the tools for the propagation of their religious principles. Religions nowadays use communications media extensively, and

when compared to the past, which people have to visit churches or temples to listen to the teachings, the situations are completely different. There are a number of cable and satellite television programs dedicated to religious propagation, and audio cassettes, video tapes and books are even more popular.

Social revolutions: Since the technological revolution came suddenly out of blue, the society is now facing uncertainty and non-continuity. Also due to the influences of communications media, the pressure of information explosion are making us feel the terrible lack of knowledge, the speed of absorbing the knowledge is far slower than the speed the knowledge is produced, this has forced people to justify their abilities and positions in their careers. These phenomena are a result of longer life spans combined with the relation between the knowledge and job quality. In the future society, people will no longer survive through physical labour, but through their intelligence, the wages can help younger people to live independently from their families earlier and the female and live independently, so the diversified transitions can make many individuals have the difficulty to adapt and feel anxious. In addition, city lives involve anonymity and secondary interpersonal relationship, it is easy to feel the frustration. Therefore, people feel lonely and helpless and thus more social problems appear, including all kinds of crimes, mental health problems, problems about citizens' rights, residential safety, and so on.

This society also brings uncertainty to religions, it is more and more difficult for religious organizations to control their followers, and the discrepancy of followers' belief becomes apparent. However, due to uncertainty, more and more people start to look for places where they can find comfort of mind in their lives, and religions serve this purpose.

The Changing Religious Views of Worlds

The views of worlds have been changed by the industrial revolution. The base framework in agricultural society was "nature and universe," people believed in eternity and the phenomena of nature and universe, the nature was controlled by God, and people had to behave according to the nature, and they would worked as one through following and depending on the nature. In the industrial society, the relation of men and labourers became obvious, people found that many things were not necessarily obtained or solved through God, so they valued the abilities and knowledge of human beings, and then that was the world of mankind. And in the 1950s, the invention of computers resulted in technological revolution and knowledge revolution, in a very short period of time, our cognition to our environment has increased hundreds times, or even thousands of times, compared to the past few thousands of years. What

we could not do in agricultural and industrial societies are now achievable, for example, landing on the moon, space station and the control of genders before birth, etc. If we ratiocinate based on the trend of religions in industrial society, we could have said that there would be no future for religions, and we could even take the step further to announce the death of religions. In fact, however, this did not happen, and religions even expand instead. This is because the development and rapid expansion of knowledge make people discover that we will face more and more crises that are difficult to solve, such as population, environment, food, employment and so on, and they also find that, outside the expanding views of worlds, there are even larger domains of the unknown. The religions then pull the symbols of God and Buddha into the minds of people, the minds of individuals become the sacred places to worship God or Buddha.

Therefore, the reason why religions continually exist is that there are different cognitions of the universe in different stages of civilizations, from the complete ignorance to the nature and universe, to the limited knowledge about the limited environment and space, and today, we have more “unknowns” based on the knowledge of “the knowns.” Since we have not known everything completely about the universe, and the religions will still exist and even more desired.

The Religions in the Twenty-first Century

At the prospect of the new century, religious societies should work together to help the world to create a global society for the 21st century.

It has been a long time that the religions handles crises using the following strategies:

1. Religious leaders attempt to interpret the crises in theologized and dogmatized ways according to the religious tradition.
2. Activities to improve the situation of crises, such as the charity services to the poor, to provide food for the starvelings to ease their misery, and to give temperate and emblematic help.
3. Directly respond to specific problem, this kind of reactions can be seen in the black human rights progress in the United States, anti-nuclear groups, Muslim Fundamentalists, revolution activities of the Marxist, religious wars.
4. Inactivity, that is to escape from the crises. This kind of reactions can often be found in the forms of religious societies, dioceses and cloisters. When facing the critical crises of the earth, this religious inactivity can be expected to increase over time.

Traditionally, religious societies have been the source of spirituality and moral power of the human society. They appreciate positive values and con-

demn the negative values. However, the diversification of religions is worse than that of nations, religions have been divided into thousands of various sects with different sizes, groups with different forms. Most of them claim that their own sect is the only approach to spiritual actualization. Competition, religious wars and destructions are often part of the relations between religions. The cultural values most religions believe, however, are commonly outlined as philanthropy, peace, hope, cultivation, sympathy, sharing and so on.

Can the religions today be reformed to enhance these common values and to reduce negative beliefs and activities? Homogenisation, unity and co-operation will help to achieve this common goal, and to have more significant contribution to the global society. If most religious groups in the world can have some kind of co-operation and contribute their efforts to help human beings to work towards a global society, then the era of united religions will come. Its goal is to provide the vision of future and moral power to the world through other global organizations around the world. Such dialogs between main religions will help the purification of the world and the propagation of the teachings.

Commercialisation of Religious Activities

When human civilization evolves into the post-industrial society, the consumer goods and services already flooded in the society can result in the commercialization of religious activities. Nowadays, it is a trend to regard the moral and spiritual parts of livings as goods which would be shown in religious market, and consumers can choose from them according to their tastes and inspirations. This trend will continue. Are religions nothing but commercial goods?

The economic system has created too much wealth, this allows us to select and consume freely. However, there is a limit for materialistic consumption. Once the materialistic goods can no longer satisfy our consumption, we will start pursuing new personal experiences in order to create a climax of satisfaction in consumption. That will be the consumption of spiritual experiences. Whether it is a personality cult or a meditation, you can always have the satisfaction. Once this trend is realized, the clergy will try to pander to consumers in order to promote their "products" and show you how much spiritual satisfaction they can create for you. Therefore, the trend to see religions as commercial goods will continue.

Electronic Churches

Today, religious preaching through mass media can give us a hint of what the consumerism of religions will be like tomorrow. Basically, the audience have the freedom to turn the power switch on and off and they can switch channels to choose what they want to watch, so the priests on television will have to "sell" their "products" very fast.

In the 1980s, bi-directional cable televisions brought the development of television broadcasting into a new era. Regardless of the type of religions, main religions, individual sects or other consortiums of religious groups all use this new technology. The production techniques of electronic churches shown on television will keep improving in the future.

The day will come very soon that the audience and stay at home and receive whatever religious messages they like, or use the remote control to order a new book or make a donation. Religious activities of this type will no longer need the consideration of the distance, no face-to-face contacts, lack of interpersonal interactions, and friendship will no longer exist, all religious activities will be dominated by the consumers themselves.

Anyhow, it is obvious that there will be two directions for us to choose from. If autism keeps leading us from the industrial society into the post-industrial society, a religious belief will become one of the consumption items. Although this will not bring any problem to the post-industrial society itself, the lack of either resistance or monitoring to the accelerated consumption of the developed world, then we will only be going to the finale of cultural collapse and global disorder.

Another direction will be the situation where, by a real religious belief, we can reach a state that things of all kinds will be in harmony, and there will be enough people willing to sacrifice themselves for the other human beings. Our civilization can then find a brand new core, we will have a new goal and the vitality. Also, we will find people working closely together will every effort towards the goal of creating a unprecedented life of affluence.

Where will the religions go in the future?

Religions Adapting to Changes

Religions will not disappeared in the future society, but one sure thing is that every sect will accept the concept of the changing society and to justify their interpretation to the dogma and their rituals. The best way to adapt the changes without conflicting with the mission and objectives of the religions are as follows,

1. Religious organizations will accept large amount of mass media, and they

can acquire the contents of other religions and the overall society as the references for the self-adaptation. Furthermore, they will keep using mass media to “promote” their religions. These include books and journals, movies, videotapes, television channels, computer disks, audiocassettes, satellites and the Internet and these products will be distributed more rapidly and produced with more sophistication and using the languages and interpretation that are easier to be understood.

2.The clergy will recognize that science and religions can co-exist and they will apply the scientific explanation. The followers will be accustomed to this kind of recognition.

3.Various sects can co-exist. Overly exclusive religions and the sects that are seriously opposed to the spiritual culture and norms of the society they belong to will be restrained or restricted and they will have to be reformed into “compatible” sects. Even the appearance of civil religions or popular religions are the result of continuing the theological differences, and the religions with ambiguous but divergent theological concepts, dogma and practices will be developed. This type of religions show the effort of seeking for the homogeneity of religions.

4.Diversification of religions: the differences in the interpretation and the variety of social needs, along with new recognition and respect of religions from governments, these will make the sects more diversified and the number will also be increased.

5.Common custom of religions:

(1)The sacred regime is scaled down, functionality is vaporized, limitations are reduced, the popular parts grow dramatically and mysteries are replaced by questions. As we can see today, the economy, political and education systems have escaped from the control of “God.”

(2)Religions will be propagated through dialogs and popular benedictions.

(3)Religions become recreational activities.

(4)Churches become places where knowledge will be provided, and become the centers of communities.

(5)Churches appear in mass media. Electronic churches can provide the opportunity of propagation and conversation of interactive communication.

(6)Functional integration of religions: the appeal of global collaboration will be the trend. For example, main religions have worked together to persuade the warheads to cease fire during religious holidays. They have also worked together to supplicate for the peace of society, to help refugees, to care about social problems and to perform social services.

7.Commercialisation of religious activities: Since the religious preference is individuals’ businesses, people can switch religions because of the process of

pursuing spirituality or incidents. The nature of religious activities will be similar to a competitive market. Therefore religious leaders everywhere will regard the people in their parish as customers and religions become commercial goods. These leaders will be manufacturer or merchants and they will provide periodical services. The followers can acquire religions via various channels.

Conclusion

The value in religions is to search for the harmony between human and universe, and the development of interpersonal interactions. In short, it is to pursue a better tomorrow for human beings. Because of the impacts of the technology and knowledge, religious organizations must have the strategy of "changes for the changes" in order to justify the structure of religions.

At the edge where people are facing destructive crises because of the rapid growth of technology, there is a need for the compatible and cooperative coalition of religions. Human society can steer away from the crises of technological development because people use their intelligence and potential, but we can not allow the conflicts of religions destroy human beings.

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