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Is God a Futurist?

By Michael Lee

After reading the title of this blog, you may well be asking two questions: “Who is God?” and “What is a futurist?”.

For believers in God, they know in whom they believe, while for those who don't have religious beliefs, God is more like the Hypothetical One they don't acknowledge as real. So let's move on to the slightly less speculative question of the two, namely, “What kind of beast is a futurist?”

In the broadest sense, a futurist studies, analyses and forecasts the future in a disciplined, methodically sound way. The futurist's currency is foresight, a systematic anticipation of the shape, structure and character of the emerging world. For many theoretical and historical reasons, the study of the future is still a sleeping giant.

In my view, systematic anticipation of the future, which I prefer to call futurology, is the next great science. But that is another topic covered in other blogs and published work. This blog is about God and the future.

We all remember that Einstein claimed that God does not play dice with the world and most readers will also know that Newton was just as deeply interested in theology as he was in physics and mathematics, possessing over two dozen Bibles at the time of his death. And what all science unquestionably shows is that the universe operates intelligently, following laws of nature and evolution. So one can either conclude that such intelligence of design and lawfulness of behaviour derives from a superior intelligence we call God or has emerged spontaneously from nothing/something. Each person makes his or her own determination.

As a futurist, what's important is the extent to which the way in which science has modelled the universe may have enabled us to make rational predictions about future states. Mathematical genius Pierre Simon de Laplace wrote in his ground-breaking 1814 essay, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*: "Present events are connected with preceding ones by a tie based upon the evident principle that a thing cannot occur without a cause which produces it...We ought then to regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its anterior state and as the cause of the one which is to follow...The regularity which astronomy shows us in the movements of the comets doubtless exists also in all phenomena."¹

Since we are focusing here on God (or the Hypothetical One, if you would prefer) and the future, one might want to carry out a futurological exercise predicting what is likely to happen to religion – and the forces and institutions of religion – throughout the remainder of the 21st century. Using Laplace's logic of probability, we would need to start by looking at the past and present state of religion in the world – it's evolutionary trajectory – and then globally contextualize that pattern over time within the multiple dimensions of our world – social, cultural, demographic, political, environmental, economic, etc. So one would evolutionize and contextualize the data about religion as the basis for futurological conclusions.

In studying the future of religion in this way, we'd get glimpses into the future of God and his role in our world over the next few generations. That would require a major in-depth study well beyond the scope of this blog. But we can certainly provide an appetizer. Then an answer to the question posed in the title will be offered.

The most surprising fact about religion today, especially for those who live in largely secular Western societies from North America to New Zealand, from Europe to Australia, is that religious belief in the world as a whole is growing quite strongly, while the growth of non-religious belief has fallen well behind the average rate of global population growth, that is, the role of secularism is declining, despite the immense impact of Western-style economic and cultural globalization.

First, let's check out the facts about human belief in today's world (as at June 2010).

¹ Pierre Simon de Laplace, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*

Belief system	Percentage of world population	Current annual growth rate in belief system's population size
Christianity	32.29%	1.2%
Islam	22.90%	1.9%
Hinduism	13.88%	1.2%
Non-religious	13.58%	0.7%
Buddhism	6.92%	1.3%
Chinese religions	5.94%	0.0%
Ethnic religions	3.00%	0.6%
Sikh religion	0.35%	1.4%
Judaism	0.21%	0.3%
Other	0.32%	N/A

*Data taken from the Seventh Edition of *Operation World* based calculated at June 2010

Table 1: World population distribution of belief systems, with current annual growth rates

In Table 1, only belief system population groups growing at a rate higher than 1.2% are growing faster than the world's population. Non-religious people make up only 13.58% of the world's population and that slice of the global pie is declining. This means that decades of economic and cultural globalization by a largely secular West have not brought about a concomitant, commensurate spread of non-religious belief.

The four largest religious belief system groups, namely, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, together make up 75.99% of the world's population, clearly a substantial majority.

In a nutshell, then, belief systems of the world are divided up as follows:

Top four religions by size = 75.99%

Non-religious population = 13.58%

Other = 10.43%

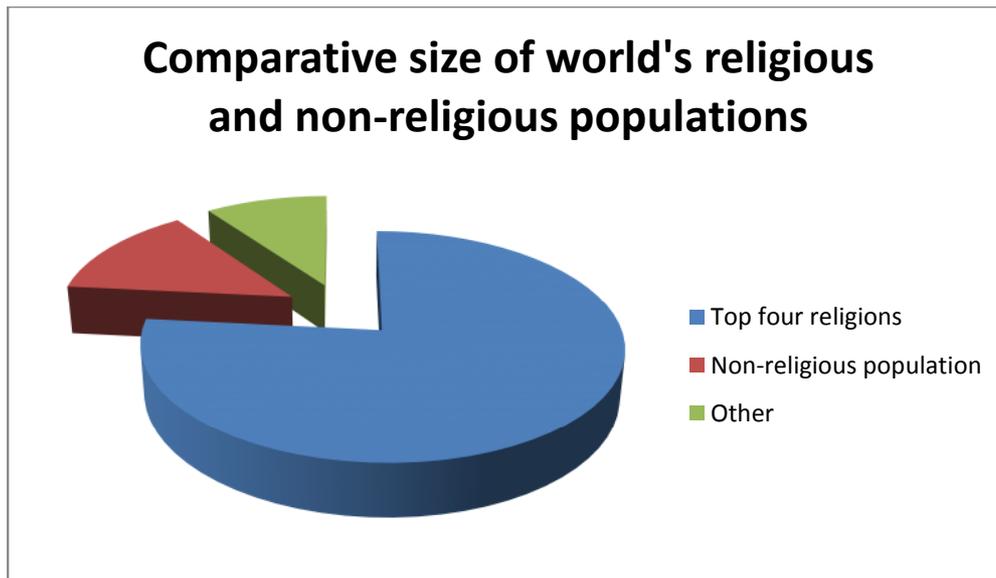


Figure 1: Comparative size of religious and non-religious populations in the world (2010)

Figure 1 shows that the Hypothetical One is not in any danger of being forgotten any time soon.

Furthermore, the future of religion will almost certainly be reinforced by a fundamental and intensifying global demographic trend, namely population decline. Depopulation is now occurring in many nations across the world. Dr. Phillip Longman, demographer and author of *The Empty Cradle* (2004) points out that global fertility rates are half what they were in 1972. It is thought that total human population may peak in 2050 at nine billion and thereafter decline. Bearing in mind that the human replacement fertility rate is 2.1 children per women, it's alarming that 62 countries, making up almost half the world's population, now have fertility rates at, or below, this rate, including most of the industrial world and Asian powers like China, Taiwan and South Korea.² At the start of the 20th century, by contrast, the global fertility rate was higher than five children per woman of child-bearing age! The world's population growth rate has fallen from 2% p.a. in the late 1960s to just over 1% today, and is predicted to slow further to 0.7% by 2030 and then 0.4% by 2050.³ Most European countries are on a path to population ageing and absolute population decline⁴; in fact, no country in Europe is demographically replacing its population.⁵

² Magnus, *The Age of Ageing* (2009) 40.

³ Magnus, *The Age of Ageing* (2009) 33.

⁴ Longman, *The Empty Cradle* (2004) 61.

⁵ Longman, *The Empty Cradle* (2004) 177.

Given this grim demographic picture, the role of pro-natal belief system population groups, including religious communities, is likely to become much more significant in the evolution of the human species. In the coming decades, humanity will be wrestling to avoid the disastrous socio-economic consequences of declining populations.

To halt population decline, radical change in values and lifestyle practices will eventually be needed. Human families, and their critical procreative role, will need to be strengthened.

The increasing influence of religion on society, of course, does not prove that God is a futurist, that is, a being who foresees the future in all its multi-dimensional complexity. Yet one of humanity's first attempts to study the future was ancient prophecy. The prophets of the Old and New Testaments looked forward to a new world and, at times, to the projected end of the world itself. The Mayan civilization had deep insights into large-scale cycles of time, enabling them to make some far-reaching prophecies, including about a society which would one day fatally debase its environment.

The Bible is decisively future-facing in its outlook on the world, from Genesis (promising, for example, a long line of future generations from Abraham's seed) to the overtly apocalyptic Book of Revelation. Many commentators believe Western civilization drew inspiration, in its rise to global power, from the Bible's messianic, idealistic message, for example in the renowned Protestant work ethic geared towards building an earthly kingdom to the glory of God.

Given that religious belief systems are increasing in influence despite decades of secular economic globalization, it's my perspective that the future of God looks promising. And, given that biblical theology is inherently prophetic and eschatological, one might even be tempted to say: the future of a futuristic God is bright.

For us, too, in our fascinating discipline, the future of the future is looking up. Slowly, in sense, a giant new science, with deep philosophical roots in the human past, is awakening.

Acknowledgments

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