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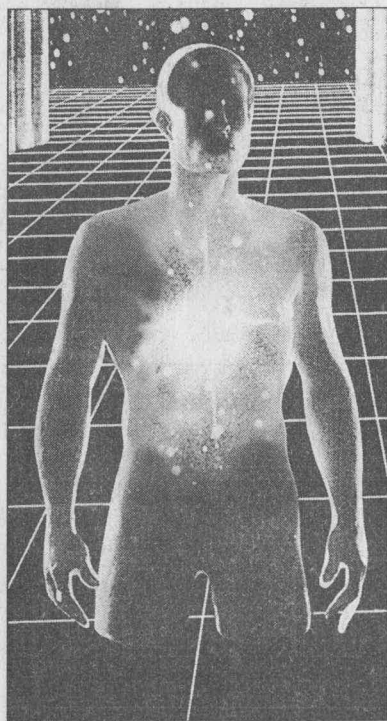
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Major changes foreseen in religious expression



Space travel, technology, bionics, media likely to affect belief in God

Last of five parts

By Larry Witham
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Belief in God will survive for another thousand years. So will hope and charity.

Those are the certainties.

It's the expression of religion — the form of worship, Scriptures and spiritual experiences — that may be in for monumental change.

Ten centuries from now, religious thinkers speculate, the faithful will adhere to religions that have been reconfigured by technology, media and even space travel or bionics.

On one level or another, all this change will be good for humanity, they say. It also will be "good for God," or what some traditions call the "ultimate reality."

We're going to get to know Him a lot better.

Picture it: On a day of worship in the year 3000, people still gather at churches or temples with spires and glowing windows. But inside, virtual reality projections open up vistas of a Grand Canyon, choirs of angels hovering skyward.

Worshippers pray for the latest space probe, manned by a devout monk. They quote from Scripture that says "blessed are" the artificially intelligent robots.

With planet Mars a thriving suburb, Christian, Muslim and Hindu theologians will have adjusted their creeds.

And the earthly Jerusalem, home to the Jews, will be a city known across the solar system as fountainhead of three world religions — and perhaps even a fourth



Predictions — informed guesses, really — about what we can expect in the new millennium for our planet, bodies, minds, machines and spirituality.

by 3000.

"In the year 3000, people will still be saying the Lord's Prayer, but the words 'on Earth as it is in Heaven' will have a whole new meaning," predicts the Rev. Richard Kirby, director of the World Network of Religious Futurists.

The world's faiths are inherently futuristic and forward looking, of-

fering the eternal hope of the Alpha and Omega, Judgment Day and God's kingdom, eternal cycles of birth, Nirvana and life everlasting.

They all allow the distinct possibility that, barring the Second Coming of Christ or other apocalyptic event, man still will inhabit Earth 1,000 years hence, continuing great spiritual quests.

Todd Johnson, co-editor of the World Christian Encyclopedia, says religions tend to have "end-of-history views" in which the ultimate power, such as God, is expected to transform the world in foreseeable lifetimes.

"That limits long-distance thinking," Mr. Johnson says. "But it doesn't preclude looking at the future."

One way to get a picture of the future is to extrapolate from the present. Today, six in 10 people are monotheists — or believers in a single creator. These include Christians, Jews and Muslims. According to the encyclopedia's pro-

jections, that portion will increase about 5 percent by the year 2200.

The next largest religious blocs are polytheistic or pantheistic — embracing a belief in many gods or nature as a god. These include Hinduism (12 percent) and Buddhism (5 percent). The "nonreligious" make up 14 percent of the planet's population; devout atheists account for 3.5 percent.

All of these religious blocs, the encyclopedia predicts, will experience only slight losses or gains in the next 200 years.

But to make predictions about the year 3000 is more difficult. Few religious leaders want to engage in such speculation. To the extent that they will, says Mr. Kirby of the World Network of Religious Futurists, they are egged on by the foresight of science.

"The movement about religion and the future grows out of the interest in science of the future," he says.

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Space travel, technology may help to shape religion over next 1,000 years

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Three scenarios

Futurists envision three scenarios for the state of religion in 3000, or at least the very far future:

- A world of no religion, only science.
- A world where one religion has prevailed, or a uniform spirituality pervades humanity.
- A world of religious diversity, but peaceful and productive coexistence.

The scientific materialists of the 1800s were the first to envision a planet of science alone. H.G. Wells, with his 1902 book "Anticipations," is considered the father of secular futurism.

In this view, supernatural religion, or what science dismisses as "superstition," would disappear entirely.

A belief in the decline of religion was central to social scientist Burnham Beckwith's 1996 book, "The Next 500 Years." Another work, "The Third Millennium: A History of the World, AD 2000-3000," asserts the last great "religion" would be Marxism.

Today's heirs of Wells' worldview are wondering, however, whether something like a scientific religion must remain as a "sacred narrative" that binds humanity.

Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson has argued that once the gods in nature and the sky are gone, humanity will need another religiouslike epic story. He proposes the Darwinian tale of evolution, for "the true evolutionary epic, retold as poetry, is as intrinsically ennobling as any religious epic," he writes.

Like the purely scientific vision of 3000, the second scenario envisions one blanket belief covering humankind. This belief, however, would be religious at its core.

In his 1949 essay, "The Religion of the World in AD 3000," the missionary futurist L.E. Brown foresaw the extinction of all faiths except Christianity, its only rival being atheistic materialism.

Similarly, the Islamic futurist Ziauddin Sardar has predicted in the British journal *Futures* that Islam is "poised to become a global force."

Diversity of faith

That does not necessarily entail religious hegemony, says Dartmouth anthropologist Dale F. Eickelman, an expert on Muslim trends.

"Most believers would be willing to acknowledge that no one religion will be triumphant," he says. "Even if they believe they have a monopoly on truth, they recognize that others make the same claim."

Mr. Eickelman cites the Syrian Muslim thinker Mohammed Shahrur, who proposes the unifying idea that all believing humans are Muslims in their hearts. "As long as you don't reject the idea of a Supreme Being, then you are Muslim," Mr. Shahrur teaches.

Sohail Inayatullah, chairman of the School of Futures Studies in Queensland, Australia, sees the planet one day covered by a spirituality that evolves beyond organized faith groups.

"Just as communism and capitalism will fade from our reality, religion will as well, leading to some type of global spirituality," Mr. Inayatullah says.

If these first two scenarios seem to portray 3000 as a time of uniform outlook on Earth, the third scenario — and the one most popular among religious futurists — assumes a continuation of religious diversity.

"There will be a radiation and proliferation of religions, and new important religions will spring up that will attract many adherents," wrote H. Gerjouw in his 1992 book, "The Most Significant Events of the Next Thousand Years."

The diversity of the present was evident at the Parliament of World Religions, which met earlier this month in Cape Town, South Africa, under the symbols of 12 world faiths. Some scholars urged that there should be 15 symbols to include Western esoteric traditions, humanistic philosophies and the vast post-missionary churches in Africa.

The Encyclopedia of American Religions already lists 2,300 spiritual groups in this nation alone.

Leonard Swidler, a Roman Catholic and historian of religion, says in an interview that the dominant religions and founders will remain in 3000, but no longer will disparage smaller or rival groups.

"We are entering into an age of dialogue," says Mr. Swidler, who helped found the Global Dialogue Institute in 1994. "Jesus of Nazareth is always going to be a red line through history. He is like a magnet as a human being, and that is not going to go away."

Yet the increased discussion among different faiths will demand that they find a common name for God, Mr. Swidler says.

"We do need to come up with some name to celebrate and recall for all of us the unity that we share," he says. His center pro-

poses a new and elevated-sounding Latin word: "Dialogus."

different conceptions of the sacred, space ships with chapels and artificial planets where they can go on spiritual retreats.

Charles Cameron, senior analyst at the Arlington Institute in Virginia, is also a student of theology and designer of the HipBone computer games. He believes sanctuaries in 3000 will be fantastic to the senses.

"The cathedral of the future will be something we build in virtual space, not too different from the spaces we inhabit when we play computer games," he says.

Artists and religious leaders will be the first to realize this potential.

"We'll see some fantastic digital cathedrals — dizzying palaces of the sacred with hidden gardens, landscapes and sudden vistas — which contain all the treasures of a religion," Mr. Cameron says.

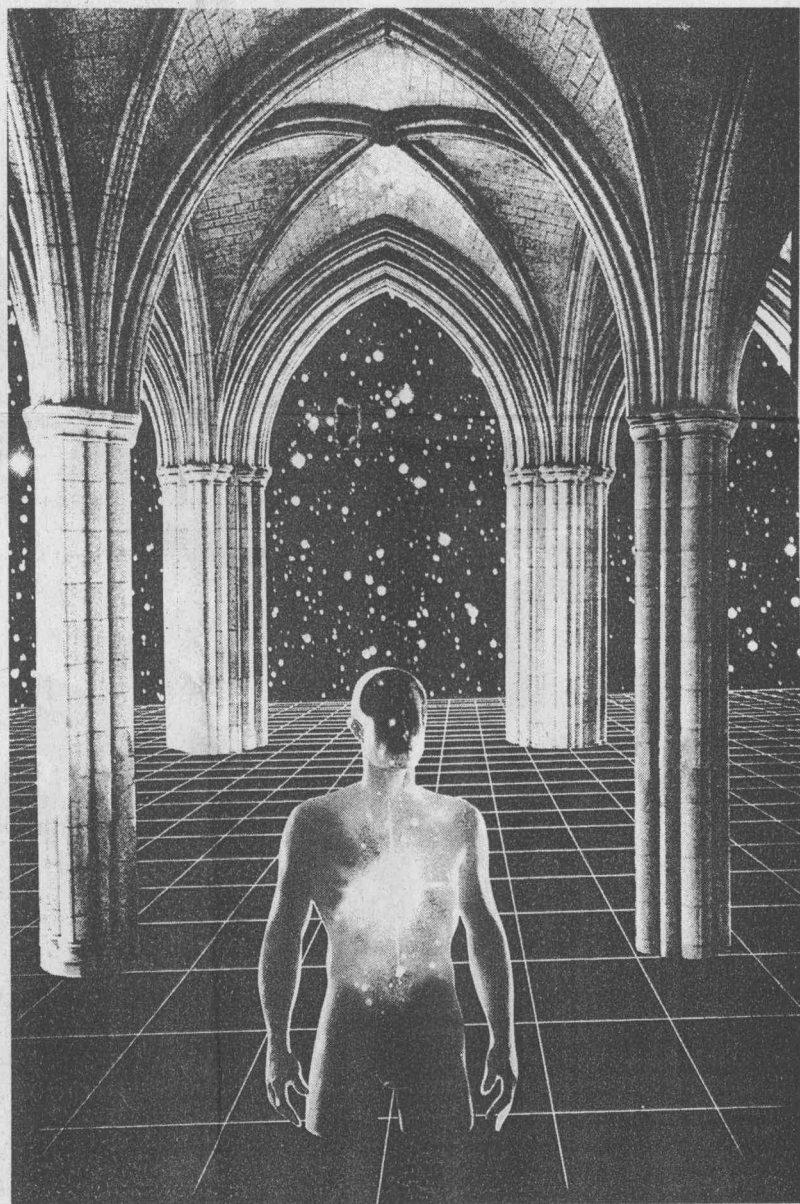


Illustration by John Kascht/The Washington Times

Palaces of the sacred

Religion may be defined, Mr. Swidler said, as "an explanation of the ultimate meaning of life and how to live accordingly, based on the notion of a transcendent." Every religion also has developed "four c's" — a moral code, a theological creed, a cult of worship and a community structure.

Financier John Templeton sold his multimillion-dollar Templeton Fund to begin making grants in 1990 for researching religion and science of the future. In 3000, he believes, love still will be the code of the faiths. "Prayer, creativity and love," Mr. Templeton says.

In 1972, he endowed the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion to make heroes of modern saints and innovators — those who, like the first winner, Mother Teresa, serve God and the needy, or who verify spiritual reality with science. Such saints will not disappear by 3000, he says.

"Religion will likely be more important than in the past, because science and human discovery will know so much more about what I call the basic spiritual realities that are invisible," Mr. Templeton says.

Religious behavior and worship in 3000 is a subject of generous speculation.

Futurists speak of humans having altars — whether real or computer generated — designed to fit

Religion as a constant

What will be the creed, or theology, of the future?

Mr. Kirby uses the term "Christosophical" to speak of a future belief system in which the concept of Christ and all other good ideas of religion and philosophy are joined.

But the goal is not to create theological mush, Mr. Kirby said in a talk at the Ninth General Assembly of the World Future Society, which met in July. "Are we to settle therefore for what I call a New Age Theology, which is sort of an 'Everything is OK, and it's all rosy'? No, I don't think so, because that leaves unexplained the problem of evil."

Thus, the theology of the future, as he calls it, also will address why there is suffering. It will continue to motivate troops of religious orders and missionaries to help the needy and comfort the sorrowful.

The study of theology also might become more experiential than mere book learning, theologian Harvey Cox writes. The *Summa Theologica* — Catholic friar Thomas Aquinas' 1,000-chapter work attempting to address every Christian belief and philosophical claim in the 13th century — may be overshadowed in the next millennium.

"The next *Summa* might consist of a thousand alternative states of being," Mr. Cox writes in his 1973 book, "Seduction of the Spirit."

Rather than "merely tolerating or studying" the teachings of American Indian religion, Hinduism or Carmelite mysticism, one

could sample them "at least temporarily" as mental states, Mr. Cox writes.

A changing hierarchy

Talk of religious experience and personal interpretation of theology always has meant trouble for organized religion, and the same will be true in the future.

There always will be teachers who specialize in ideas, and religious helpers who feel called to do special works of goodness or heroism. But the future does not look too good for top-down, controlling hierarchies, the futurists say.

In the 1990s, Pope John Paul II suggested that the office of the papacy might play a different role in the future. Some have limned an image of the pope as chairman of the board of a world Christianity. Interfaith circles have floated the idea of a world body of wise spiritual men and women.

James Houston, chancellor of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, sees the end of the "top-down" rule of bishops but no end to exemplary figures leading the wider public. "It would be a verticality of spirit more than a verticality of authority," he says.

Moreover, he adds, religion will move toward a greater emphasis on the present: "It's been the wrong use of history to look for a golden age in the past or the future."

'What is a human?'

Futurists agree that human beings — both physically and perhaps even mentally — could be quite different in 3000 than the way we are today.

We could be changed by genetic engineering or the implantation of bionic devices. Man could be forced to relate in new ways to robots and other artificially intelligent "beings" around us.

The biotechnology revolution could split the human "species" by the next millennium, through the use of germ line changes. These genetic alterations in embryos create new traits that are passed on to the next generation.

Alternatively, a durable biological human of one kind would endure, but enhancements such as height, facial features or specialized skills might separate us into inferior and superior classes.

Future religions will not take this lightly, says Graham T.T. Molitor, co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of the Future*.

"Organized religion, along with other critics and crusaders, will exert powerful effort to oppose life-altering genetic technologies," he writes in the *Futurist*, a journal published by the World Future Society in Bethesda.

"We will be stretching and bending our notions of what the human is," says Kevin Kelly, editor-at-large of *Wired* magazine. "Half of what theology will talk about is, 'What is a human?'"

Describing the deity

Discoveries in science, according to this outlook, will only describe the deity in greater ways. To what extent God's existence ever will be proved, however, is up for debate.

"We are trying to change a mind-set that scientists do not discover God," Mr. Templeton says. "Any discovery in science is a discovery about God."

The scientific futurists, heirs to H.G. Wells, have scoffed at the idea that science could find a truly supernatural realm. Modern scientists have derided the idea as alchemy, a search for a gauge that can find God in the material world.

Mr. Kelly says his theology does not expect such a final proof or disproof. "We will discover more and more evidence for the existence of God that can also be evidence of no God," he says.

As we are now, human beings in 3000 ultimately will be free and responsible to choose their God and their way of worship.

"And as long as we are human," Mr. Swidler of the Global Dialogue Institute says, "there will be religion and there will be outsiders. They will go this way simply because others are going that way."