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# Religion

## in the **Future Global Civilization**

*By Thomas R. McFaul*

**Globalization is intensifying religious conflicts. What will happen in the years ahead?**

**T**he center of any civilization is its culture, and the core of culture is religion. More than any other factor, religion infuses a culture with a perception of reality in the broadest sense of the term by offering explanations for the origins of the universe and giving meaning to history as well as humanity's place in it. Religion defines the nature of good and evil and creates reward and punishment images of life after death.

No single religion dominates among the 6.5 billion people who currently inhabit the Earth. At present, the

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global population is partitioned into an array of cultures that sprang from multiple religious roots. Despite the hundreds of religions that exist around the world, nearly 75% of the planet's population follow only five of the most influential religions in terms of global impact: Christianity (2.1 billion), Islam (1.3 billion), Hinduism (900 million), Buddhism (360–376 million), and Judaism (14–20 million). Christianity and Islam are found in more regions than all other religions. Together they encompass more than half of the world's population. Add Hinduism, and two out of every three persons on Earth belong to only three huge faith traditions. Clearly, religion is one of the major driving forces of the future.

This means that the globalization process powered by technological, economic, and political forces has to travel through and take root in the diverse cultures of the world. Since religion lies at the heart of culture, this suggests that the fragmented world of diverse religions, which remained latent but reemerged at the end of the Cold War, will produce a fragmented global village throughout the twenty-first century unless the world's religious communities can find a way to move beyond their historical antagonisms. How might this be done?

### Seeking Common Ground Among Diverse Worldviews

Two major families of religion dominate the global village. The first consists of the traditions that originated in and spread throughout Asia, and the second involves those that sprang from the Middle East.

The two largest and most influential Asian religions are Hinduism and Buddhism, although Jainism has left its mark despite its small size. The Asian religions or religious philosophies of Confucianism and Taoism have declined in China since the Communist revolution of the late 1940s. But determining the number of people who adhere to these religions is no easy task. According to the research group Adherents, approximately 394 million people prac-

## Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents

- |   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Christianity: 2.1 billion                              | 11. Spiritism: 15 million           |
| 2. Islam: 1.3 billion                                     | 12. Judaism: 14 million             |
| 3. Secular/Nonreligious/<br>Agnostic/Atheist: 1.1 billion | 13. Baha'i: 7 million               |
| 4. Hinduism: 900 million                                  | 14. Jainism: 4.2 million            |
| 5. Chinese traditional religion:<br>394 million           | 15. Shinto: 4 million               |
| 6. Buddhism: 376 million                                  | 16. Cao Dai: 4 million              |
| 7. primal-indigenous: 300 million                         | 17. Zoroastrianism: 2.6 million     |
| 8. African traditional and diasporic:<br>100 million      | 18. Tenrikyo: 2 million             |
| 9. Sikhism: 23 million                                    | 19. Neo-Paganism: 1 million         |
| 10. Juche: 19 million                                     | 20. Unitarian-Universalism: 800,000 |
|   | 21. Rastafarianism: 600,000         |
|   | 22. Scientology: 500,000            |

Source: © 2005 [www.adherents.com](http://www.adherents.com)

tice what is often referred to as "traditional Chinese religion," which includes Taoism and Confucianism. Taoism, however, can be practiced as either a religion or a philosophy. Confucianism, too, is less a religion than a code of ethical and moral conduct that contains religious elements, such as ancestor worship. Shintoism, an indigenous Japanese religion based on the deification of nature, declined greatly after World War II.

The three most significant Middle Eastern religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which are called the Abrahamic faiths because they trace their origins to Abraham.

The impact of these two families of religion in bringing either greater peace and justice or hatred and hostility into the global village will depend on the extent to which they stress either their similarities or their differences. All the world religions espouse both a worldview and a code of morality. All religions embody dissimilarities that decrease the possibility of finding common ground for cooperation, as well as similarities that increase it.

Dissimilarities exist both within and between the Asian and Abrahamic religions. At the worldview level, the Asian religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism share the common themes of enlightenment, karma, reincarnation, and duty. At the same time, they interpret these themes differently. Hinduism and Sikhism are pantheistic because they see the uni-

verse as God's body. Buddhism does not recognize a supreme entity but rather a single cosmic "truth." Like Buddhism, Jainism could essentially be defined as atheistic (at least by Western standards). Jainism, however, assumes that every individual possesses a unique and eternal soul. Despite their conceptual differences, the central objective of the most prominent Asian religions is the achievement of enlightenment that ends karma-driven reincarnation. Each religion prescribes a different moral pathway that believers must follow in order to stop the dreaded cycle of rebirth.

The Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—share the common themes of monotheism, revelation among divine mediators, and life after death in heaven or hell based on "one life only" obedience to the moral law or faith. All believe that God communicates to an estranged humanity through chosen mediators who convey God's revelations; all possess sacred histories that appear in their sacred scriptures, along with a moral code or a faith pathway that believers must follow in order to achieve the goal of heaven or paradise after death.

Although the shared monotheistic belief could provide common ground for unifying the Abrahamic faiths, it does not, because each of these three religions interprets it differently. All adhere to the doctrine of progressive revelation. Each considers its sacred text (the Torah, the Bible, or the Qur'an) to be superior

to the others and its revelations to be absolute, final, and upon which no further improvements can be made. Each identifies a superior divine mediator (Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad) who reveals God's highest spiritual and moral truths to humanity.

Anyone who searches the world religions for a unified common ground will sooner or later encounter seemingly irreconcilable worldview differences. The contrasting assumptions that the Asian and Abrahamic religions make about ultimate reality—that God and the universe are one (Hindu), that God and the universe are separate (Christianity and Islam), that there are multiple gods (Hindu and Shinto), that "God" does not exist (Buddhist)—preclude the possibility of conceptual synthesis.

Simply stated, *a shared Asian and Middle Eastern religious worldview that could serve as common ground for bringing greater peace and justice into the pluralistic global village does not yet exist.* While such a shared religious worldview might emerge at some point in the future, this possibility remains at best a low probability.

On a conceptual level, Asian religions are more open to pluralism than are Abrahamic faiths and are more accepting of others as spiritual equals in pursuit of Truth.

The Abrahamic religions also possess the potential for developing greater tolerance, providing they move beyond narrow interpretations of their shared monotheism. If this could be accomplished, the potential for bringing greater peace and justice into the global village would take a major step forward. This could happen if their adherents make two significant changes in their worldviews, which would be no easy task.

First, just as the goal of the predominant Asian religions is liberation from reincarnation, monotheism itself needs to be liberated from the boundaries that each of the Abrahamic religions has erected around it.

What is needed is an expanded definition of monotheism that opens the door for constructive dialogue and leads to a new way of thinking about God's multireligion revela-

tions as combined insights. This new form of monotheism might be called "radical monotheism." It might allow the devoted followers of all the Abrahamic faiths to see themselves as spiritual and moral partners who are equal in revealing truths about God. Their combined revelations would provide a more comprehensive understanding of God's purposes for humanity than the specific revelations of any single faith.

Second, radical monotheism might also innovate the concept of revelation. One of the central tenets of radical monotheism might be "continuous" rather than "progressive" revelation. The idea of continuous revelation preserves many of the strengths of progressive revelation and also goes beyond them by stimulating greater openness to interfaith conversation. Within the Abrahamic religions, progressive revelation has been viewed as a stepladder to perfection. The concept of continuous revelation negates the belief that later revelations, even within a single tradition, are necessarily superior to earlier ones. Continuous revelation combines chronology and equality in the same way that all the pearls in a necklace are lined up next to each other and contribute equally to its beauty.

Continuous revelation implies that no single past revelation contains God's final Truth. It also assumes that God will continue to reveal new truths to humanity in the future. Accepting the concept of continuous revelation means that no religion possesses or uses God exclusively for its own purposes. It allows God to be God. Each religion's truths are part of a larger repository that includes the revealed truths of multiple religions.

Thus, even though no overarching worldview currently exists to unify the world religions, the potential to move in this direction does exist. This begins with the recognition—first by individuals, then by congregations, communities, and so on—that Truth is greater than the capacity of any single religion to grasp it in full. Starting with the idea that God does exist and employing

the broad concept of radical monotheism, the Middle Eastern religions can conclude that God has provided multiple revelations, because divine transcendence surpasses any religion's capacity to contain all of Truth. If enough people are able to accept this idea, the potential exists for significant cross-religious dialogue. Thus, while it might seem counterintuitive, both the Asian religion of Jainism and Middle Eastern radical monotheism lead to the same conclusion that Truth is many, even though they start at the opposite ends of the worldview spectrum.

The parallel between Western radical monotheism and Hindu pantheism is equally striking, although once again the connection between the two is not immediately evident. Hinduism begins with the affirmation that Truth is one and there are many paths to it. This allows for widespread diversity among Hindus regarding their choice of worship rituals and deity images. Radical monotheism presupposes that the multiple revelations of the Middle Eastern religions in combination convey insights into the nature of God to a far greater extent than those of any single tradition. When the theological ground is shifted from exclusivist monotheism to radical monotheism, it is but a small step to recognize that God has provided multiple revelations. In other words, like Hinduism, the Middle Eastern religions in total provide multiple paths to God.

In sum, the goal of bringing greater peace and justice into the global village would be well served if the devoted followers of the world religions were to (1) view their collective insights as multiple pathways to understanding ultimate reality and (2) commit to identifying through open dialogue their combined, although individually limited, truths.

One of the ironies of comparing world religions is that, despite their theological and philosophical differences, they share a common core of moral values. Unlike the challenges related to integrating monotheism, pantheism, and atheism at the



worldview level, combining values across interfaith boundaries is relatively easy and straightforward. Each religion values specific virtues based on an image of ideal character development. Despite dissimilarities on issues such as gender, caste, and economic equity, *the world religions share and have always shared a common core of values, such as compassion, mercy, love, kindness, and justice.*

### Three Visions of the Future

The following three scenarios explore whether the world religions will bring greater peace and justice or more hatred and hostility into the global village. The “voice” in each of the narratives is that of someone who is living in the year 2050, reflecting on changes that have occurred during the first half of the twenty-first century. All three scenarios are both possible and plausible.

#### **Scenario 1—Exclusivism:** *I’m Right and You’re Wrong*

It is the year 2050. Many changes have occurred since the start of the new millennium as economic, cultural, and religious interpenetration has continued to expand throughout the global village with the speed of a galloping horse. Sadly, most of these changes have taken a turn for the worse. Hostile and violent confrontations are appallingly common. The vision of universal peace that found the world hopeful at the turn of the century has faded into a distant memory. The global village is disintegrating into the uncompromising chaos of “I’m right and you’re wrong.”

Much of the blame for this sad twist of fate falls at the foot of religion. The world’s two largest spiritual traditions, Christianity and Islam, have turned their backs on the quest to find the common ground that would transcend their differences. Other faiths have followed in their footsteps. Hostilities exist at both the interfaith and intrafaith levels, as conservatives and liberals alike reject each other’s interpretations of the same faith.

Despite the existence of a universal core of ethics that the world religions share, they remain divided along the lines of their worldview differences. Many leaders fear that the loss of their distinctiveness will create a crisis of identity among the laity, which will leave them feeling adrift in a purposeless universe. To be faithful means shunning alternative worldviews. The deep anxieties that permeate all the world religions create high walls of separation that block cooperation on ethical issues. It is a time of digging in and protecting worldview turf. Hatred and hostility in the global village have increased.

#### **Scenario 2—Pluralism:** *Despite Our Differences, We Can Live Together*

It is the year 2050. It has become clear to even the most nostalgic exclusivist that there can be no return to the earlier days of religious and cultural isolation. The sprawling electronic communications web now encircles the entire planet. Homogeneous regions have become more heterogeneous. The long-term trend toward growing worldwide religious pluralism continues unabated.

**Scenario 1—Exclusivism:** Despite the existence of a universal core of ethics that the world religions share, they remain divided along the lines of their worldview differences.

As pluralism spreads, the number of regions that are controlled by exclusivist religious elites steadily shrinks. Ever so slowly but surely, hostilities between groups ebb as the inhabitants of the global village learn how to live with diversity. The vast majority of citizens of the global village have begun to say, “Despite our differences, we can live together.”

Much of the credit for this trend toward greater peace can be attributed to religion. This did not occur

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because all the differences among the leaders and laity of the world religions disappeared. Many disagreements continue. Nonetheless, the vast majority of followers of the world religions have matured in their ability to live with the tension caused by deep devotion to their own beliefs and respectful appreciation of the views of others.

The citizens of the global village have learned to live productively rather than destructively with religious pluralism. The world's inhabitants have accepted that, while a single Truth might exist, human beings can only experience it as many truths. As a result, widespread tolerance toward worldview variations have increased. Instead of concentrating on their differences, leaders of the world religions have searched for the common ground that would unite them. By mid-century, the citizens of the global village were spending more time and energy emphasizing ethical similarities than accentuating worldview disparities. This opened the door to numerous possibilities for interfaith cooperation, which in turn resulted in increasing peace and justice in the global village.



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**Scenario 3—Inclusivism:  
We're Becoming One Family**

It is the year 2050. The hopeful vision of universal peace that seemed like a distant mirage at the start of the twenty-first century is now becoming a reality. The once-feared clash of civilizations has all but disappeared. Everywhere, at points near and far, citizens of the global village are saying, "Look at us! We're becoming one family."

Much of the credit goes to the remarkable turnaround that the lead-

**Scenario 3—Inclusivism:** The world religions converge.

ers and laity of the world religions made in seeking to overcome their differences. While some settled in at the level of learning to live with pluralism, others found this to be too limiting. They wanted more than peaceful coexistence among diverse groups, because they feared that tolerance could easily give way to intolerance. Pluralism would backslide toward exclusivism and the hatreds that it always creates. As a result, they pushed the faithful to think beyond pluralism and to aspire to an inclusive religious vision that would unite the planet.

Like pluralists, the inclusivists recognized that they stood on common ethical ground in their collective commitment to the values of compassion, mercy, love, kindness, and justice, among others; but they wanted more. They searched for ways to stretch the boundaries of inclusivism beyond ethics and into the domain of divergent worldviews. This was no easy task, but in the end it began to show visible results. They sought to weave together their many truths into an integrated worldview tapestry of greater Truth. They were adamant in their commitment not to freeze their combined vision into a

**Scenario 2—Pluralism:** The citizens of the global village have learned to live productively rather than destructively with one another.

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final version of the truth, but instead to see it merely as a platform to the continuing discovery of even greater truths.

If the world religions contain shared values, they might also contain similar worldview insights that centuries of squabbling have obscured. Finding worldview similarities was the most difficult task of all, but by mid-century the widening circle of inclusivists had become resolute in their conviction that historical disagreements would no longer divide them. They became world citizens in every sense. They lived by the belief that the global village required not only a global ethics, but a global worldview as well. They made steady progress in this direction; as a result, they brought greater peace and justice into the global village.

### The Most Preferred Future

Which of these visions of the future is the most desirable and which is the most likely to happen?

Let's start with the most preferred future. The strength of the Pluralism Scenario is that it envisions a global village where tolerance toward diversity becomes normative. When diverse groups learn to live peacefully together, then hatred and hostility decrease. Leaders and laity of the world religions set aside the desire to defend their diverse worldviews and focus on the shared ethical foundation that promotes collaboration.

Nonetheless, the Pluralist Scenario has two major limitations. The first restricts the adherents of one religion from criticizing the practices of other religions. The downside of worldview tolerance is that it closes off the possibility of addressing behaviors that perpetuate historical unfairness against oppressed groups, such as women and minorities. Tolerance of diversity can become a cover to perpetuate injustice and cruelty. The second limitation involves the fragility of Pluralism because the potential to drift toward Exclusivism remains a constant threat.

The Inclusivism Scenario moves beyond these limitations. It starts with the presumption that developing a common worldview is possible

despite the fact that at this stage of human evolution such an emergent worldview would face formidable obstacles.

The least preferred future is Exclusivism, where the adherents of the world religions cannot get beyond their worldview difference to the level of ethical cooperation. Pluralism is the second most preferred scenario because it stresses cooperation at the moral level while tolerating worldview differences that cannot be transcended at the conceptual level. Inclusivism is the most preferred scenario because it envisions that, at some point in the future, the global village will have not only a global ethics, but a global worldview as well.

### The Most Probable Future

While Inclusivism is the most preferred scenario, it is not the most probable future for the obvious reason that humanity is not ready for this possibility. This means that the future will likely move toward greater Exclusivism, greater Pluralism, or some combination of the two. For this author, the most probable future is this: From now until 2025, Exclusivism will increase. Between 2025 and 2050, Pluralism will gradually replace it.

Since the 1970s, the globalization process that is driving the creation of the global village has accelerated as a result of the worldwide expansion of electronic communications and transportation, world migration, and cross-cultural interpenetration. At the start of the twenty-first century, there are more worldwide, heterogeneous face-to-face interreligious encounters than at any other point during the previous century.

While religious diversity offers opportunities for more interreligious dialogue, the opposite possibility also exists. Encountering the "other" for the first time can be both an intimidating and an exciting experience. Exclusivism will increase in the next two decades because interreligious defensiveness appears to be associated with the current state of globalization. This means that conflict will probably escalate in the next two decades. Then, by the end

of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the global village will start trending toward greater interreligious tolerance. The more that the followers of the world's religions interact through face-to-face contact, the more they will learn to live with diversity and seek nonviolent ways to deal with their differences.

Might Inclusivism eventually emerge as a world-altering trend? This question cannot be answered at this stage of human evolution because the growing global village is still in its infancy. Perhaps the future generations who will inhabit the global village will be destined forever to swing back and forth between the Exclusivist and Pluralist Scenarios. Then again, it is in the nature of the future to bring forth surprises beyond anyone's wildest expectation.

It is reasonable to forecast that in the short run Exclusivism will prevail over Pluralism and that Pluralism will gradually replace Exclusivism. If this occurs, then tolerance will replace intolerance. Distrust will give way to trust, and the religions of the world will join together to bring greater peace and justice into the global village.

There is, of course, no guarantee that this will happen. The trend toward Exclusivism could become stronger by 2050. However, assuming that by mid-century religious Pluralism will be a more powerful driving force than Exclusivism, the norm of learning to live with differences will become more universal. Then, who knows? This might set the stage for the next level of human evolution—the eventual development of an inclusive, global worldview that builds on an already existing global ethics.



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