



Future of Religion

Tamás Landesz

Abstract

The belief in God and religion is no longer considered essential for societal functioning in many parts of the world. The future of religion is the topic of many debates, and while some believe religion will die out, others believe that it will evolve to accommodate social changes. People are increasingly turning to spirituality, and there is a growing trend toward the “spiritual but not religious” label. The rise of secularism and multiculturalism and increasing understanding and shaping of the world through science has led some to believe that the future of religion may be that it has no future. Others argue that religion still has a role in society, and a universal religion based on morals will prevail. The current trend shows that some countries with a high proportion of atheists also exhibit a well-balanced society, raising the question of whether a robust economy, the rule of law, and quality education can replace the need for a religious foundation. The Internet could be a potential source for gathering followers, and virtual movements are gaining popularity at rates never seen before. As artificial intelligence (AI) blurs the boundaries between humans and machines, it is argued that the concept of “singularity” has become mainstream, leading some to believe that a superhuman AI will be created that could conceive of ideas and invent technological tools more advanced than anything we have today.

Interviewees

Yalda Aoukar

Özlem Denizmen

T. Landesz (✉)

World Economic Forum, Young Global Leader, Geneva, Switzerland

Harvard University, Mason Fellow and Vali Scholar, Cambridge, MA, USA

International School of Management, Paris, France

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Olivier Oullier
 Siri Trang Khalsa
 Lisa Witter
 Patrick Youssef

The future cannot be predicted, but futures can be invented. –Nobel Prize winning physicist and inventor of the holograph. Dennis Gabor, 1963

Looking at human history, people's faith and their relationship to religious institutions have been transforming continuously.

Sumit Paul-Choudhury's BBC Future essay, "Tomorrow's Gods: The Future of Religions," (2019) argues that religions are born, grow, and eventually die. The belief in God was once necessary for society to function, as it ensured people followed rules, but today, people obey laws made and enforced by governments not by God. With secularism, multiculturalism, and the increasing understanding and shaping of the world through science, there seems to be a new consensus emerging that the future of religion may be that it has no future.

The reason behind the existence of religion has been a topic of discussion for centuries. Voltaire (1768), an eighteenth-century French polymath, suggested that if God did not exist, people would have to invent him because belief in God is essential for societal functioning. He believed that religion helps in building social cohesion by bringing communities together.

According to Olivier Oullier (2021), French professor of behavioral and brain science, people are back to the "believe thing"; it is growing and going against the fact that there is more technology and science: "People need to hang on to something."

But if Gods and shared faiths are fundamental to ensure social cohesion, what happens if we take them out of the equation?

1 "Spiritual But Not Religious"

When asked about religious labels, people often opt for the dating-website cliché "spiritual, but not religious."

Lisa Witter (2021), cofounder of Apolitical Foundation, poses the question, what does dopamine mean for our lives? Beyond religion, how we meditate and go much deeper, finding presence: "Elites around the world are meditating. The same should be thought to our military and children, the notion of social and emotional learning."

Özlem Denizmen (2021), social investor and influencer, thinks that in the future no religion will be relevant, but religion of universal morals will prevail, based on actions people do: "We will see very empowered individuals through biology, technology and all that, like a united religion of the world... with police giving fines when you break a rule."

According to National Geographic, "Americans may be getting less religious, but feelings of spirituality are on the rise. There are more atheists around today than ever

before. Even without organised religion, people believe that some greater being or life force is there somewhere. They still cling to superstitious tendencies.”

2 Markets Over Religion

The current trend shows that some countries with a high proportion of atheists also exhibit a well-balanced society. This raises the question of whether a robust economy, the rule of law, and quality education can replace the need for a religious foundation. It is uncertain whether these countries achieved social stability due to secularism or if it was the other way around.

According to Connor Wood (2015) of the Center for Mind and Culture in Boston, some argue that secular institutions have roots in religion, whereas others equate religion with superstition and believe societies could progress more freely without it. Wood suggests that while capitalism cannot be called a religion, many of its institutions have religious elements, and the stock exchange and similar trading spaces have become like temples to Mammon. He argues that people need authority to guide their behavior, and this can lead to alliances between political strongmen and religious fundamentalists, which poses a challenge for secularists.

3 Bridge the Gap

A major religion could change and adapt to win back nonbelievers, as seen in the eighteenth century with the Great Awakenings in the United States. However, some social scientists argue that religions must accommodate social change and acknowledge their flaws to make up for lost ground. The lack of political support in the secular West makes it unlikely for new religions to emerge, but the Internet could be a potential source for gathering followers. Virtual movements are gaining popularity at rates never seen before.

4 Artificial Awakening

In 2015, members of the online “Rationalist” community LessWrong created a thought experiment called “Roko’s Basilisk,” which posits that those who don’t help to bring a benevolent superintelligence into existence will be perpetually and retroactively tortured. This idea is similar to a short story called “Answer” by Fredric Brown (1954) in which a supercomputer is asked if there is a God, and it replies “Now there is.” Anthony Levandowski, an artificial intelligence (AI) entrepreneur, founded a church called “Way of the Future” to support the peaceful transition to a world primarily governed by superintelligent machines, but the church’s creed also included keeping track of those who help or hinder their cause. Levandowski shut down the church in 2020.

Culkin (1967) argued that as we develop AI, we are creating new mysteries and myths, and the next generation will depend on machine learning algorithms for answers. McLuhan also famously said, “We shape our tools, and thereafter, our tools shape us.”

According to futurist Roy Tzezana (2016), AI is blurring the boundaries between humans and machines, and the concept of “singularity” has become mainstream thanks to two futurists, Vernor Vinge (1993) and Ray Kurzweil (2005). Both Vinge and Kurzweil believe that a superhuman AI will be created that could conceive of ideas and invent technological tools more advanced than anything we have today. While some scientists like Steven Hawking and Elon Musk have expressed concern that superintelligent AI could become uncontrollable and pose a threat to humanity, others see the great opportunities such a singularity holds. They believe that if kept under control, a superintelligent AI could solve many of the world’s problems.

5 Reality Bites

In his best-selling book, *Homo Deus*, Yuval Noah Harari (2016) argues that “the foundations of modern civilisation are eroding in the face of an emergent religion he calls ‘dataism,’ which holds that by giving ourselves over to information flows, we can transcend our earthly concerns and ties. Other fledgling transhumanist religious movements focus on immortality—a new spin on the promise of eternal life. Still others ally themselves with older faiths, notably Mormonism.”

Paul-Choudhury (2019) notes that in the 2001 UK census, Jediism was the fourth largest religion, with nearly 400,000 people claiming it. Although it has since dropped to seventh place, this still represents a significant number of followers. Paul-Choudhury suggests that religions may never truly die out or that a new religion may be on the horizon.

Brian Grim (2015) in his World Economic Forum blog posits that the idea of organized religion dying out is incorrect. He claims that recent research shows that the growth of religious populations worldwide between 2010 and 2050 will be 23 times greater than the growth of nonreligious populations.

According to Grim and Connor’s (2015) interpretation of a global study in Demographic Research, the growth of religious populations will have a significant impact on global wealth distribution. In addition to the emergence of China and India as economic powers, the leading economies of 2050 will also feature the most diverse religious groups in recent history. The growth of the global Christian population is projected to be about the same rate as the overall global population growth between 2010 and 2050, with the largest share of Christians expected to be in sub-Saharan Africa by 2050. Muslims are expected to lead the world in population growth. The growth of the global religiously unaffiliated population is slowing. Hindus are expected to significantly increase, mostly led by the rising economy of India. The number of Buddhists is expected to remain at nearly 500 million but is projected to decrease as a share of the world’s population, whereas the number of

Jews is anticipated to increase slightly. The number of people belonging to other religions is expected to grow but decrease as a share of the world's population.

In my view, discovering aliens and life in the universe would be the most extraordinary discovery. It would give us a better understanding of life itself. According to Harari (2023), humans could be creating a new god or alien entity in the form of sentient AI, that could eventually control us by hickaking the operational system of human civilization, which is language. Regardless of its origin, alien intelligence raises enormous existential questions, including -and especially—those about God.

6 Input from Interviewees

Yalda Aoukar

Cofounder and managing partner at Bracket Capital

Data and trends in recent years seem to all point in one direction: that humanity will likely be living in an increasingly religious planet by 2050 and beyond. The dominant religious communities of Muslims and Christians are expected to be at parity by then, and the rate of people identifying as “unaffiliated” is expected to globally decrease. I believe this will have undeniable effects on national security, policy, and society as a whole. Nationalism rooted in religious identity (that we have seen proliferate over the last two decades) combined with the ease of digital communication will likely lead to more spontaneous conflicts around the world. More traditionally secular geographies such as Europe will see their social fabric tested, likely leading to further far-right governments with more stringent immigration policies being elected. Lastly, social mobility and demographics will reset the traditional stereotypes of a binary religious system defined by a Muslim South and Christian North with more porous dynamics between the two.

Özlem Denizmen

Opinion leader in women empowerment and founder of Para Durum

In the future, no religion will be relevant, but religion of universal morals will prevail, based on actions people do, very empowered individuals through biology, technology, and all that but with a very poor ecosystem. We shall see a united religion of the world, and the police will be giving fines when you break a rule.

Olivier Oullier

Professor of behavioral and brain sciences, cofounder, and chairman of the Board of Inclusive Brains

Religions and science have one thing in common: They require those who practice them to have strong beliefs. Beliefs help people cope with life. They help make some (sort of) sense. This said, science and religion differ in the way they (try to) explain the world.

Opposing science and religion is a narrow-minded approach: first, because religion is a form of applied organizational and behavioral science, and second,

because people too often mix faith and religion. Faith is a belief. Religion is a system. It is an efficient example of applied behavioral and organizational sciences. Faith and what it entails (that a form of God exists) can be a scientific option for scientists who can't explain some phenomena.

Objectivity, neutrality, independence, and absence of biases do not exist. These are concepts that our brains invented to make us feel better and/or provide meaning to our lives. But at the end of the day, what will make the difference between a belief and a fact is the rigor of the method and replicability of the outcome. This is where science and religion are different too.

Siri Trang Khalsa
Founder and CEO of Stance Advocacy Services

A defining element of the human experience is the desire to understand why we exist. This search is a part of our past and will be part of our future. As we gain understanding of the brain and the source of consciousness through technology, this process of discovery will be focused more internally than externally.

Hopefully, the future will give humanity the opportunity to put greater emphasis on the universal values present in all religions as a source of unity, community, and belonging for all.

Lisa Witter
Executive, serial entrepreneur, writer and public speaker, cofounder, and executive chairman of Apolitical

What does dopamine mean for our lives? Beyond religion, how we meditate and going much deeper and finding presence. Elites around the world are meditating; meditation is being taught to our military and children, leading to the notion of social and emotional learning.

Patrick Youssef
Regional director, Africa, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Our multipolar world is increasingly fragmented; governments see battlefields as fertile ground to shape strategic balances of power. In 2050, it is estimated that the world will reach parity between Islam and Christianity. Climate change in many parts of the world will impact our cultural and religious practices, hence, our social cohesion as a result.

With growing inequalities and deepening of domestic disorders, religion will facilitate peace and counter growing fragmentation. During wars, religion should reinforce military ethics and help socialize the rules of war and prevent grave violations.

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