

Preparing for the Coming Faithquake

Faith Tectonics and New World Religions

“If God had wanted it that way, He would have made you all of one religion, but He has done otherwise so to test you in the various ways He has given you. Therefore, press forward in good works; unto God shall you return and He will tell you about those areas in which you disagree.”

—*The Koran*

There is serious problem facing mankind. It is based on the powerful effects of a global society on religious faiths which originate in differing cultural traditions. More than ever before, there is now a strong probability the next fifty years will witness the emergence of new world religions. Are we ready for this next step in our social evolution? Opinions differ, but the facts remain. Traditional religion may be the last casualty of the twentieth century, surviving in the form of cultural archives, greatly reduced in authority and influence.

It would hardly seem that way based on current trends. Over eighty-six percent of Americans call themselves Christian. In 1993, Christian fundamentalists in Vista, California elected enough candidates to a local school board to require the teaching of Bible-based history. Two months later, a fundamentalist rabbi in Jerusalem condemned a local dairy for suggesting dinosaurs on its milk cartons were millions of years old, “despite the fact the world was created only 5,753 years ago.” In Egypt that same week, fundamentalist Muslims in Abu Zabaar prison were recruiting supporters when one of the thugs cursed Islam. The resulting brawl, which lasted three hours, left three dead and eighty five wounded. Why are the devout getting so aggressive? Because they feel threatened, and they have good reason to feel that way.

Even as the faithful gather together worldwide, the orderly integration of world religions, once limited by sheer physical distance, has gotten completely out of control. There are now more Muslims than Unitarians in the United States and the Mormons are expanding rapidly in Brazil. Evangelical Christianity is enjoying phenomenal growth in Korea, while in America, Korean Sun Myung Moon preaches a married Christ who is himself. Japanese Buddhist evangelists teach Los Angelenos to chant the Lotus Sutra while German Neo-Hindus in saffron *jabalas* chant *Hare Krishna* in Red Square, ignoring both the cold weather and the cold war between Russian Orthodox priests and Western tele-preachers bent on rustling their new-found flocks with heavy-metal hallelujah revivals.

It’s open season for souls, it seems, but has anybody taken account of where this is all going to end up? To be frank, if human society does not come up with some generally acceptable world principles acceptable to all world religions fairly soon, millions of people will needlessly suffer and perish in confrontations based on ancient religious disagreement. It seems we’re approaching an inevitable spiritual showdown. Sooner or later, we will have to stop debating whose God is God and whose Holy

Scriptures are the ones to trust. Who's responsible for all this? Will the God in charge please stand up, or is that now our job since we're the ones who stood up 40,000 years ago and took over the place?

The Roots of Regional Religious Tradition

Sociobiologist E. O. Wilson believes massive climactic changes were the ignition point behind the Western religions. At Harvard Divinity School's 175th anniversary in 1992 he described desert-like Middle Eastern landscapes as lushly vegetated in recent prehistory, a true Garden of Eden. Rapid drying of the region acted as an ecological shock wave, dislocating cultures and formalizing religion while oral traditions still spoke of times when life was very different. Likewise, the cultural upheavals represented by the invasions of Aryans, Mongols, and Muslims had a similar effect on religious traditions in Asia and South Asia. Local caste cohesiveness divided entire regions into traditional roles. Since caste itself was part of the religion, when the threat became too intense, Indian and Tibetan tantric traditions evolved which deliberately transcended cultural boundaries and conventions. These Hindu and Buddhist esoteric practices, according to religious scholar Alexander Berzin, appeared when whole societies were searching for spiritual powers to counteract very real fears. When God only knows what's going to happen next, it's important to know how to ask for help.

As it happens all the major world religions originate in specific geographic locations with cultural traditions built in from the beginning. The Mediterranean basin was the cradle for Judaism and early Christianity, which followed the Roman empire to Europe and then to the Americas. From the Arabian desert, Mohammed's message spread south and east from Africa to Persia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. The teachings of the Buddha traveled the trade routes south to Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar, and the silk roads east to China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan. Lao Tzu and Confucius were

both born in China, and so their teachings went west against the flow of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians.

The slow spread of regional faiths on foot and primitive forms of transportation allowed large areas to become associated with one belief or another, a geographical religious predominance which has lasted until the present. When differing faiths encountered each other, there was usually either conversion or persecution. This often required near de-humanization of minority non-believers, be they Inca, Jew, Mormon, or Moonie. Western faiths especially have problems with synthesis; fundamentalist Muslims vie with born-again Christians in “us-versus-them” theologies. In the East, mergers were tolerated, although sometimes uncomfortable. In a primal case of the uninvited dinner guest, the unruly South Indian Dravidic deity Shiva, faced with the encroachment of the grand new gods of the conquering Aryans, just moved in with elegant Brahma and Vishnu, trident, snakes and all.

As Christianity slowly worked its way into Europe, Celtic pagan religious feasts were resurfaced as Christian holidays. Grottos such as Lourdes, once dedicated to local female deities, became associated with the Virgin Mary. Animist mountain demons in the Himalayas were converted by Buddhist yogis into heroic “*dharmapalas*,” “guardians of the Dharma”. The encroaching religion rarely usurped earlier beliefs; more often it absorbed them after converting the ruling classes. Nepal, for instance, was Buddhist until King Jayasthiti Malla decided in the fifteenth century it would be nicer to be Hindu. Traditional Nepali Buddhists stayed put, since the Hindu gods had always been part of Nepali Buddhism, but unable to compete in caste ranking, they have suffered socially to this day. England’s s Henry VIII created the Anglican church as a convenience and nationalized the monasteries for their assets. Mongolia became Buddhist when a Tibetan lama won a religious contest. The gentle Dalai Lama became Pope to a population of rambunctious Mongols. Perhaps the smoothest mass conversion of all occurred in the year 1000 A.D. when the Icelandic *Althing*, the parliament, met and simply voted in Christianity for the entire island.

In a rare instance of East-West accommodation, the message of Christ may have transformed a romantic North Indian shepherd deity into the divine Krishna. Some Indian historians have noted that the earliest popularization of this long established cult began surprisingly close in time to India's first historical contact with the Christian missionary-apostle Thomas, about 74 AD. This could help explain why Krishna's counsel to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, loving God incarnate as teacher, seems to be a South Asian "Sermon on the Mount" inserted into an epic war drama, the *Mahabharata*, otherwise devoted to impersonal concepts such as *dharma* and *karma*. India may have accepted the message but not the messenger. Thomas himself, according to history, was martyred on the banks of the Ganges in that year. Was it Christ's glory or Paul's karma? Nobody knows. Tara, who is Ishtar to the Babylonians, and Kwan-Yin to the Chinese, Goddess of Mercy, is derived from the male "Buddha of Compassion", Avelokitesvara (Sanskrit "*he-who-looks-down-on-all*"). She then became the Japanese "Bodhisattva of Compassion", Kanon, and even the brand name for a Japanese camera. Kwan-Yin is sometimes depicted holding an infant, a recent change based on copies of Christian madonnas introduced along the Chinese coast by Portuguese traders in the sixteenth century. When the East rejected a religion, it was more often in reaction to a foreign culture rather than a foreign theology. "First come the priests," warned the first King of Nepal, Prithvi Narayan Shah, "then come the cannons." When the shoguns of sixteenth century Japan shut out Christianity, it was part of a total exclusionary policy so complete that all Western technology was banned at the same time. Commodore Perry found Japanese samurai still hacking away at each other with swords in the mid-nineteenth century, hundreds of years after the development of reliable firearms.

As a result of this natural tendency to ground in a particular area, each religion in the world today is expressed and experienced through the deepest traditions of a specific regional culture. As we merge into an inevitable world consciousness during the next century, these regional beliefs may become our last links with centuries of tradition. By the 1990's, given the unsteady world conditions prevailing, it should not

seem surprising that more people than ever before are discovering both the cultural security and, for many, culturally appropriate answers available through religious belief and practice. There are two sides to this, however. In one sense we are cheered to see the Russian Patriarch again leading his flock in Moscow, the Dalai Lama meeting with leaders in religion and science, and Mother Teresa's epiphany in the slums of Calcutta. Yet in another slightly more sinister sense this may also represent a sort of spiritual time bomb. There's room for only so many heavens on one earth. Despite the initial celebration of faith in the universal spirituality of man, it was demonstrated in the second chapter that there are actually only a few major world faiths, they are ultimately mutually exclusive, and despite the chaotic state of affairs nobody seems to be considering a merger yet.

One might imagine that religious innovation was constant. In fact, nearly all recent religious innovations have been simply new interpretations of already existing theologies. Mormons, Pentecostals, and Christian Scientists all worship the same Jesus as Roman Catholics; and yet none of these sects existed two hundred years ago. The ecstatic devotion of Lord Chaitanya for Lord Krishna in the fifteenth century originated his egalitarian Hindu sect, known to the West as the "Hare Krishnas", while the Indian mystic Ramakrishna established an international following behind Swami Vivekananda in Victorian Calcutta. Still, from pop guru Deepak Chopra to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, they all promote basically the same Hindu philosophy. In nineteenth century Germany, both Zionism and Reform Judaism were born. In twentieth century Japan, the small Nichiren Shoshu, a small Buddhist sect centering around chanting the name of the Lotus Sutra, acquired a lay auxiliary. The Soka Gakkai preached material success and practiced politics until scandals separated the priesthood from their promoters leaving ten million chanters with only their scriptures for a lineage.

There has been no shortage of creative sectarianism among the major powers, but entire areas are still gathered by religion into geographical cultural systems that can't run their neighbors spiritual

software. All recent attempts at creative rather than exclusive interfaces have crashed, sometimes creating even further conflicts than had previously existed. As immigration and travel increase, the physical boundaries between cultures become more porous and permeable, but the cultural boundaries enforced by faith usually remain. One can travel to America and become Christian or to India and become Buddhist, but there is no religion that doesn't call a particular continent "home".

Like the geological pressures at the edge of a fault, world religious pressure is building to new intensities. Geologists tell us that the continents are floating on massive granite plates that slowly grind up against each other. The study of this phenomena, plate tectonics, suggests most earthquakes and volcanic activity result from pressures generated at the boundaries of these plates. The "faith tectonics" of regional religions is already beginning to cause shocks and eruptions all along the cultural fault lines. A growing worldwide shift back to stronger religious belief, especially as a force to promote national unity, might have been helpful fifty years ago. Unfortunately, the time has long passed for promotion of any God who loves anyone especially. We are facing more than a global cultural shift; we may be facing a basic paradigm shift as dramatic as the notion that unbelievers can be saints. If anything can relieve the massive cultural stresses based on our differing dogmas the resulting "faithquakes" would be a global phenomena.

End Times or New Beginnings?

With world consciousness moving from local to global concerns, typified by international ecological concerns and multiple refugee aid organizations, there simply may not be enough plasticity in the regionalism of traditional religions. Returning to the metaphor of "faith tectonics", the result would be spiritual mergers resulting ultimately in completely new traditions based on global understanding than local traditions. Rather than avoiding science, it seems probable that any new religious philosophies will embrace

technology as a tool for discovery and compassion rather than simply the cutting edge for business or for war.

It is a shame that nothing resembling a global faith has sprung up anywhere recently, given the current circumstances. With satellite, phone, and fax, our global net is already beginning to shrink us into an interconnected people separated only incidentally by geography and culture. Peoples and practices are blending as never before. All over the world it is happening. The global impact of technology creates a common dialect for commerce and communication, and with it generates and passes along intercultural concepts that could not have been understood or even imagined before we started talking to each other. The language of the digital age is beginning to energize billions of interconnected communications circuits into an interactive web.

It has happened before. The rapid spread of early Christianity was due largely to the existence of sophisticated Greek communities in cities lining the perimeter of the Mediterranean Sea. The Roman empire, nearly at its historic height, interconnected the entire Greco-Roman world in a common law and language. The message of Jesus, carried from city to city by the journeys of Paul and the early apostles, found a receptive audience among Hellenic Romans and Greeks adrift without a religion that made any sense and too many philosophies that did. If there were ever a time similar to the Roman empire at the birth of the Christian era when a faith could travel almost everywhere that counted in a short time, we have nearly identical conditions now with our interlinked global communications networks.

In our current scenario the globe becomes the Mediterranean, and the plight of the early pre-Christians is at hand. They had all the Greek religions and the Roman religions and some Egyptian cults on the side. Those disliking the devotional ceremonies of the Mithraic mysteries often found doctrinaire Stoics a bit too Zen. Intellectuals rarely believed in Zeus but criticized the Epicureans as “be here now” utopians of doubtful patriotism. To many Greeks, Judaism was appealing, but circumcision was appalling. Still,

many were attracted to its monotheism, domestic values, and sense of social justice. The messianic promise of Christianity, combined with the full richness of its Jewish heritage, was different and exciting. Once St. Paul pioneered baptism without circumcision - a crucial turning point in the faith - the Christian message spread from one Greek community to another like wildfire. Every book in the New Testament was written in Greek, the common scientific and philosophical language of the Roman empire. Jesus, who spoke Aramaic, could never have read the Gospels. His message was, surprisingly, more relevant to a people he had never known than to his Jewish co-religionists. The time was right; society was ripe for a change; and in less than a hundred years the Gospel had spread everywhere Latin or Greek was spoken. In only three hundred years Christianity was the religion of the Western world.

In a similar vein the present world provides us with more than a dozen major world faiths, each with scores of legitimate variations, not to mention general philosophical schools, cultural traditions, and regional cults led by local charismatics from swamis to Swaggarts. There is no end to the choices available these days, from the God of Abraham to the Gods of Zoroaster. There is one vast difference, however, and it is in the power that organized religion actually holds in modern secular society. One of the more useful results of the intercultural blending among the nations of the world is an agreement on rule by law rather than by dictate. Since human law is traditionally enforced by secular authority, in the twentieth century traditional values are increasingly promoted by civil, rather than religious, agencies from the Red Cross to the Girl Scouts. Ironically, the most brutal behavior seems to originate with those claiming to be guided by some fundamentalist religious source. The last decade of the twentieth century has been, in this respect, rather grim.

In the past dozen years we have watched fundamentalist Muslims in Iran kill Bahais, fundamentalist Hindus in Bombay kill Muslims, Buddhist Sri Lankans kill Hindu Tamils, Communist Cambodians kill Buddhist Cambodians, Christian Americans kill Iraqi Muslims; and God or Allah or Jehovah is behind all

this? Not bloody likely. “We must never forget”, wrote Reinhold Niebuhr, “the depth of evil to which individuals and communities may sink, particularly when they try to play the role of God in history.” Still, try to convince a fundamentalist of any major faith that an unbeliever may also go to heaven, and some holy quote will be produced proving otherwise. There is only so much flexibility available if one has to ground, ultimately, in religious dogma. In 1991, at the World Council of Churches meeting in Canberra, Australia, a Greek Orthodox prelate protested that Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung’s depiction of Kwan-yin as an image of the Holy Spirit had gone too far. An invocation that included elements of native American appeals to the forces of nature was similarly criticized as being nearly pagan. As our world culture grows, it is increasingly difficult to be a religious purist, and in response the purists insist even more upon getting back to fundamentals.

This is, in essence, the basis of the underlying problem. All attempts at world ecumenism have been unsuccessful from the start because they always started from the basis of one major world faith or another. A broad minded Buddhist cannot really be a Christian any more than a sincere Muslim could embrace Judaism. A religious person has to be a this or a that. Less religious individuals have an even greater problem. To define one’s self as agnostic or atheist seems to express an active nihilism that few actually feel. Indeed, many of those who are lukewarm about their faith would enjoy a deeper devotion, but do not know how to find it without submerging their intellect in the passivity of dogma and ritual.

A Scientific Approach?

The challenge facing emerging world theologies is that they cannot be in opposition to any other. They must come from an entirely new perspective. It would be impossible for any novel belief system to supplant or absorb any current world faith. There are simply too many of the faithful. There could arise, however, higher order philosophies based on generally accepted knowledge, knowledge not available in the

past. Such revelation would not require a holy book of rules and religious history, nor would it incorporate social philosophies set down by a teacher and his followers in ancient times. If the basic premises were accepted as culturally transparent, without any regional bias, they need not conflict with religious faith. Science, in terms of a power that most of us respect without question, is already the most powerful religion on the planet today. Could we use scientific method, in this case neurological insight, to provide answers as unequivocal as religions do, reinforce a comprehensive philosophy of life, justify a moral code, and suggest inspirational practices for personal self-improvement? Neither Jesus nor Moses nor Mohammed ever said that we couldn't use a common language to bridge the divisions that make humans act worse than any animals on the planet. In fact, there is no book of any prophet or any Savior where they don't tell us to do everything in our power to get along with each other, and modern science is one of those things most of us agree about.

This is the possibility which seems to have passed unnoticed. Since all major religions are adaptable, they must be somewhat pliable. Nearly all religious dogma is based on interpretations of statements or writings general enough to transcend culture. New interpretations are never unthinkable. To introduce a useful metaphor, just as pressure at the earth's core can make solid rock flow like plastic, so contemporary social pressures might become intense enough to force new adaptations and interpretations of the most traditional and stratified mainstream faiths. Like continental plates meeting and creating new land masses, if common grounds were discovered, we would have a new basis for universal friendship and understanding among peoples. The universal language of science may be Greek to many, but like the original Greek of the New Testament, it may be the only language we can all read and understand at the same time wherever we are. If we could find a basis for a shared metaphysics through a shared confidence in legitimate science, we might finally learn to appreciate our global religions for what they are: poetic wisdom from our personal ancestors who needed neither positron emission tomographs or scanning electron microscopes to perceive

the underlying wisdom of human existence. Wisdom is found in the universals, not the details, and a universal human metaphysics could be possible only if the details have no cultural basis or bias at all.

If science is to be the shared language of the twenty first century, it follows that any religion that expects to survive into the next millenium will have to either rephrase some dogma or retire to the levels of Wiccans. Smart people ultimately rule the world and if the smart religious people start agreeing about science, world faiths will either find a way to share or shut their doors in fundamentalist xenophobia. Any form of world harmony can take place only if enough people from different nations are interconnected with each other in some meaningful way. Fortunately, this is already happening along the rapidly proliferating international information highways. Just as the neuronal networks in the human brain eventually become dense enough to create a coherent sense of self, when will the human to human density pass a point at which we begin to awaken to the beginnings of a common identity, a dynamic human consciousness arising from our growing interconnective density of minds? The steady decrease in the cost of information transfer guarantees that vastly larger numbers of people will soon be sharing whole aspects of their personal, professional, or even spiritual lives; chatting, buying, selling, sharing, more of the same files, GIFs, MPEGS, affinity networks, breaking ideas, news services, technologies, and of course, entertainment, than ever before. Between inexpensive information storage and cheap global transmission by satellite, Internet and World Wide Web, hundreds of thousands of the world's best minds are starting to share the same world all over the world. With science, commerce, and technology already largely expressed and understood through a common world language, our world is heading for a new concept of human unity, one which it really cannot avoid.

Cyber Selfhood and The New World Order

Each of us has an inner reality which we know all too well as well as an innumerable number of social personae with which we face the world and its experiences. The person we expose to our intimates is not always the person we are to the shopkeeper. Our spouse and our doctor experience different versions of who we think we are. Most of this social interaction is, in turn, moderated and influenced by archetypes or models provided by our culture or media. In a sense, when we communicate with others we constantly modify the projection of our actual inner selves through a mix of sympathetic sharing and mutually accepted models of appearance and behavior. Until very recently, it has always been assumed that we would share more of these points of similarity with those from our local, or at least national neighborhood. In the last few years, however, the growing availability of computers throughout the world along with the concurrent growth of the Internet and World Wide Web have created a new form of sharing that was never available before. Millions of individuals from all over the world are discovering others who share the personal interests, tastes, and philosophies and they are discovering them all over the world.

We are witnessing the beginnings of cyber-selfhood, the global interconnection with other minds like our own in networks that exist beyond the normal bounds of social culture or even statehood but resonate with our inner sense of self. The trend has just recently appeared but it will grow until it has both unpredictable and beneficial effects for all of us on this earth. The implications of the growth of this cyber-selfhood on world culture are ominous. To the extent that poultry farmers in Missouri, Tehran, Seoul, and Brisbane all share a common interest in chickens, the more they communicate on the web, the more they will see their cyber-friends as part of a friendship circle more personal than local neighbors with entirely different concerns. They will also discover that many cultural biases simply get in the way, while cultural delights are there to share with their international friends. We will learn that we can not only define ourselves but our cultures more clearly in the midst of friendly others.

To be sure, there are inherent problems with opening up to individuals who may not always have our best interests in mind, but friendship is not marred by caution. The stories we have heard about romances and heartbreaks on the Internet are reminders that there will still be cyber-insincerity to cloud the attempts of /those who are excited and enlivened by the concept of friends from all over. Still, as most people really are not out to hurt or to harm, the numbers alone point to a time not far off when each of us can count on numbering among our best friends individuals we have never seen or met in person, but who share some of our deepest concerns, ideas, and hopes. If this happens, it will not only tend to link peoples from differing cultures and countries together as never before, it will have an even more impressive effect on the lives of the very individuals who reach out to their cyber-similars.

This does not suggest that we will become rude to our neighbors or wedded to our computers, just that we may begin to think of people all over the globe as personal friends. In the universal search for our souls, our spiritual centers, or our own mental clarity, our entrance to the path is always conditional on relinquishing the specifics of personal ego in service of that higher goal. This will be reinforced as we discover personal support among those who may live far from our homes, in entirely different worlds.. Still, with our isolated idiosyncratic minds we could never have known we were so alike to others so far away until we could meet and share so much over the new superhighways. As millions of people begin to enjoy the relaxation of boundaries that friendship allows, the more we will begin to resonate to the currents and concepts which we all share, the universal questions of human dignity, behavior, and survival. As we begin to interconnect our minds in a spirit of sharing and cooperation, we may begin to awaken en masse as each of us adds another neural node of consciousness along the networks of digital time and space connecting us together. If we connect enough of us together, we will find all the answers we need.

We have that common language, we have a way to communicate and plenty of reason to, how can we avoid awakening to a new sense of our shared humanity? All the great monuments to the alliance of

technology and the human spirit from the cathedrals of medieval France to the Saturn 5 moon rocket resulted from unprecedented cooperation between specialists. Likewise it is the massive interconnection of individual minds through the communications technologies of the next decade which may take us to the greatest levels of human achievement we have ever seen. We cannot even imagine what we may accomplish then because when large numbers of us work together in the furtherance of some greater goal, the unexpected always occurs. It shows itself in the genius of the Taj Mahal, the space shuttle, and the eradication of smallpox. If there is ever evidence of a higher power at work that guides us to a better destiny, it is when we get together in the name of something better than personal gratification. In that common cooperation we emerge from our virtual islands of the mind and accept our higher guidance and goodness whether we call it the will of God or the collective soul of mankind. As this begins to happen more and more on a worldwide level it will be hard to justify hard feelings or hard boundaries, and how could we make war on our friends all over? It seems a better world may be simply inevitable, along with a shared sense of humanity that we cannot yet even imagine.

Technology will make it possible, but it cannot make it work. That will be up to us, and up to our leaders, both national and spiritual. Together we will do it, and sooner than we think. The Church never had a problem with the law of gravity, and as our world contracts, we will find our truths in a language we can all speak. Science was never the competition. It's simply one more in a long line of explanations, but it's the best one we have this time around. Even a single moment of insight, of seeing things from another perspective, can make all the difference. It doesn't take very long to read this book, for instance, but the chances are it made you think. If enough people really thought about things, it could make all difference in the world.

Does natural law exist by the will of God? Is there an ultimate reality that centers us universally and personally, that pertains to our enemy just as it does to us, that sets the limits of our existence in a manner

we can intuit, for reasons which seem just? Is there a reason to be good? More to the point, is there any way we can find that point of reference that will allow us to answer these questions without offending either the rational or the faithful? This is still the challenge facing the world poised at the new millennium. Will it be a new cycle, or the old run-around? The answer to that one, like all the others, comes directly from mindful observation. From what we can perceive, the process is already underway.