

## Volume XIX - (2018)

### Religion and Technology in the 21st Century

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*Journal of Unification Studies Vol. 19, 2018 - Pages 133-172*

On April 7, 2018, the New England-Maritimes Regional Group (NEMAAR) of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) held its annual conference at the Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. The theme of the conference was technology and religion. In keeping with the theme, I presented a paper titled, “The Technology Empowered Cleric and the End of Religions as we know them.”

My presentation focused on one aspect of the impact of technology on religion as humanity moves into the 21st century, the rise of the super-empowered cleric. In this article, I will add five other, sometimes conflicting, characteristics of twenty-first century religions: 1) They are shaped by super-empowered clerics; 2) They are focused on the future; 3) They are transient; 4) They are global; 5) They deify humans; and 6) They are politicized. I will illustrate each of these characteristics with an example of a 21st century religion and its leader. I will conclude by applying these categories to the ministry of Rev. and Mrs. Sun Myung Moon.

#### 1. Super-Empowered Clerics

Since time immemorial, certain individuals have emerged from the masses, seized power, and ruled as chiefs, kings, dictators, or presidents. These rulers constructed cities, waged wars, amassed wealth, destroyed rivals, and created empires. To legitimize and strengthen their power they established priesthoods, constructed temples, and claimed divine legitimacy. Once the Hebrew kings Saul, David, and Solomon achieved mastery over the twelve unruly and independent tribes of Israel, they conquered Jerusalem, declared it the sole capital of the Jews, destroyed the shrines and outlawed the rituals of the various tribes, transferred the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, and constructed the famed Temple of Jerusalem. Even General George Washington insisted on using a Bible when he took the oath of office as the nation’s first president and added the words “So help me God” to the constitutionally prescribed text of inauguration to lay claim to religious legitimacy for his presidency.

The Reverend Franklin Graham, the son and heir of the late Rev. Billy Graham declared the election of Donald Trump was evidence of “God’s hand was at work” in placing him in the Oval Office.<sup>[1]</sup> In short, gods, priests, and religion have been instruments of rulers in quivers of chiefs, kings, dictators, and presidents alongside armies, gold, land, trade, wives, and taxes in maintaining his power.

Today, however, as Thomas Friedman argues in *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World After September 11*, modern technology has given rise to a class of “super-empowered individuals,” who have managed to escape the quiver of chiefs, kings, dictators, and presidents and even rival if not eclipse them in power and influence.<sup>[2]</sup> George Soros, Mark Zuckerberg, Robert Murdoch, Oprah Winfrey, Russian oligarch Andrey Kozitsyn, drug lord Pablo Escobar, Osama bin Laden, and a significant number of other individuals have amassed sufficient economic, moral, media, and even military power to take on presidents. Jody Williams, one of Friedman’s most admired super-empowered Individuals, wrote, “on one day in 1998, the United States fired 75 cruise missiles at bin-Laden... at \$1 million apiece.” This was the first war in human history between a superpower state and a super-empowered individual.<sup>[3]</sup>

Modern technology has also empowered religious leaders. Just as the printing press empowered Martin Luther and launched millions of Bible reading Christians, who in turn founded an ever-growing number of new Christian denominations, movements, sects, and cults, so modern technology is radically altering thousands-years old systems of religious leadership. Already in the last decades of the 20th century, super-empowered clerics such as Billy Graham, Menachem Schneerson of the Lubavitch Jewish sect, the Dalai Lama, and Christian televangelist Robert H. Schuller pioneered clerical super-stardom. More recently, Joel Osteen, the

Brazilian cleric Edir Macedo, ISIS caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Buddhist Dhammakaya Chandra Khonnokyoong, and Osama bin Laden have left their marks on religious history. They have presided over virtual congregations, even empires. They exploit the Internet, cheap air travel, mass communications, videos, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and neuroscience. They have at their disposal colossal financial resources made possible by the new global economy.[\[4\]](#)

The Brazilian pastor Edir Macedo is a prime example of the super-empowered cleric of the 21st century. Macedo was born in 1945 in a small town in Brazil. He broke with the Catholic Church and drifted through various religious movements while working as a Brazilian civil servant. After 16 years as a civil servant, he claims that he received a call from God to begin his own ministry. In 1977, he founded the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, or IURD).

As with any individual aspiring to join the ranks of the super-empowered, Macedo realized that he needed to target a particular constituency with a forceful message. The world of ministers is as blood thirsty, competitive, and take no prisoners as the world of business. Super-empowered individuals of business measure their success in dollars, while super-empowered religious leaders measure their success by souls. In both cases, Forbes and other business magazines argue, establishing a distinctive and powerful brand is crucial for success. Macedo's brand is also the title of his three-volume 2013 autobiography, "Nothing to Lose" (Nada Que Perder). It is the subject of many church blogs and YouTube videos, figures prominently on church documents and billboards, and is even plastered across the facades of many of his churches and administrative buildings.

The subtitles of his volumes summarize the central themes of Macedo's winning brand: "Moments of Belief that Changed my Life," "My Challenges when Facing the Impossible," and "From Bandstand to Temple of Solomon: A Faith that Transforms."

Dan Pallotta, founder of Advertising for Humanity, published an article in the Harvard Business Review in which he highlighted the importance of branding for companies, products and people. "Branding is much more than a name or a logo. Brand is everything and everything is brand," he wrote. Brand is strategy, call to action, customer service, the way you speak, your communication tools, your staff, your facilities, your logo, and your visuals.[\[5\]](#)

Macedo's strategy is to single out the huge population of Brazil's underserved emerging lower middle class, known as the 'C Class,' and target them with the message that belief can change their lives, as it has his. He draws heavily on the then popular Prosperity Gospel popularized by Oral Roberts, Reverend Ike, and Jim Bakker. Like the populations of many poor and emerging countries in the 1970s, the Brazilian poor and precariously established middle class saw the American television series like Dallas (1978-1991), and it made them realize that they too could escape poverty and underdevelopment. Even more potent was the conviction that they too were entitled to enjoy the prosperous lifestyle enjoyed by Americans.

Macedo appealed to the C Class by targeting the Catholic Church as even more responsible for the current poverty of most Brazilians than the corrupt chain of emperors, dictators, generals, and foreign (American) corporations that had dominated the country since independence in 1822.

One of his early acts that led to his media fame was the "kicking of the saint" incident on October 12, 1995. One of his bishops, Sergio Von Helder, kicked a statue of Our Lady of Aparecida, the patron saint of Brazil, on her Brazilian national feast day. An outraged Catholic establishment convinced the Brazilian authorities to take the bishop to trial, and he was sentenced to two years in prison. He only escaped prison by fleeing to South Africa.

This and other outrageous incidents firmly established Macedo as what Max Weber described as a "cult" leader. Weber and more recently Rodney Stark argue that cults are distinguished by the high degree of tension between the movement and the mainstream culture surrounding it. In the case of Macedo, the prevailing Catholic culture of Brazil became the target of his ire. Every Brazilian and Catholic village and city features the local church dedicated to a particular saint, as well as saint's holy days, processions, street corner statues and shrines, pilgrimages, holy cards, novenas, and festivals. His attacks against the veneration of saints attracted controversy as well as followers.[\[6\]](#)

Authorities and the Brazilian media repeatedly charged him with the crime of charlatanism, but this only served to further mobilize his followers. During each encounter with the police, his followers camped out in front of the police precinct where he was held, and hence even those media organizations firmly opposed to him had no choice but to give him ample coverage. In Brazil and other developing countries where he was finding a following, people hailed him a valiant champion of religious freedom persecuted by corrupt police and government authorities. This and other acts of "persecution" by civil and religious authorities only further convinced his followers that he was an authentic religious leader, persecuted as even Jesus himself was persecuted. Macedo confirmed this opinion in his book, *In the Footsteps of Jesus*.[\[7\]](#)

A second teaching that placed Macedo firmly against the prevailing Catholic establishment was his practice of exorcisms. The Second Vatican Council of the mid-1960s had downplayed exorcisms in their campaign to modernize the Catholic Church. Macedo, on the other hand, realized that the Brazilian, and later global poor, firmly believed that they were not individually responsible for their lowly status in society. They were victims of corrupt governments, vile dictators, American corporations, immoral clergy, or domineering bishops. Macedo preached that all of these evil powers were but earthly manifestations of the devil. The first step to individual and social salvation, he insisted, was liberation from the unclean spirits that lurked inside the individual. Then, and only then, could the family, society, the state, and the world be freed.

The temple Macedo built highlights still another attribute of the super empowered individual, whether economic or religious. In 2004, the church imported \$8 million worth of stones from Israel and constructed a \$300 million replica of the Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. *Forbes* magazine hailed the Sao Paulo temple as Brazil's largest religious space, "dethroning the Basilica of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida," and twice as tall as the iconic statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>[8]</sup>

Macedo's Sao Paulo temple and attached new headquarters fly the flags of Brazil, the church, and Israel. Macedo and his church have grown to be fiercely pro-Israel and militantly anti-Muslim. Many of his closest advisors are Israelis and Jewish converts, and he has made repeated visits to Israel.

Like other aspiring super-empowered individuals, the media can make or break you. Macedo early on recognized that control of the Brazilian television networks was the key to both returning Christianity to its biblical roots and spreading the good news of material prosperity to the world. His church controls twenty-three TV stations, forty radio stations, two major newspapers, and the second largest television network, Rede Record. He has published over 34 books that sold millions of copies in Brazil and then worldwide among the estimated 260 million Portuguese-speakers in Brazil, Africa, Asia, and Europe. His media empire portrayed his arrests as virtual proof of his image of a suffering servant or a persecuted prophet, while other media outlets cultivated the image of a schemer, corrupt religious charlatan, and virtual crook.

From his current corporate headquarters in New York City, Macedo runs a real estate agency, a health insurance company, and an airline, and claims a global membership of 15 million. He has even developed a distinctive foreign policy. He cooperates with other Evangelical Christians and Christian Zionists in the activities of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem. He differs from the official Brazilian, UN, and international policy that East Jerusalem is occupied territory, the West Bank Jewish settlements are illegal, and the official capital of Israel is Tel Aviv. In addition to supporting Israel, Macedo has cultivated strong ties and interests with Portuguese-speaking countries such as Portugal, Mozambique, and Angola. The church has also expanded rapidly throughout Latin America and Africa and among the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking migrants in the USA, Canada, and Europe.

Along with his persecuted prophet image and headline-grabbing projects, Macedo constructed a financial empire that rivalled those of George Soros, Robert Murdoch, Bernie Madoff, Bill Gates, Carlos Slim, Mukesh Ambani, and Jack Ma. Like these other super-empowered individuals of business, crime, and media, Macedo's financial empire fully exploits what Thomas Friedman defined as the flat world. Products, ideas, capital, films, fashion, music, tourists, drugs, air pollution, epidemics, and migrants flow freely across the once formidable national borders with little to impede their flow.<sup>[9]</sup>

In 1987, *Forbes* magazine published its first annual list of the richest men in the world. It categorized the world's movers and shakers into ten categories: Manufacturing, Retail, Media, High Technology, Agriculture, Oil, Finance, Real Estate, Engineering, and Services. It was only in 2011 that *Forbes* and other business periodicals began paying attention to the growing number of men who made their fortunes in religion. By 2013, Macedo topped *Forbes* magazine's world billionaire pastors list, with a reported worth of \$1.24 billion.<sup>[10]</sup> According to *Forbes*, Bloomberg News, and other financial publications, Macedo mastered online banking, exploited offshore tax havens, engaged in money laundering, and even crypto currencies that handled over \$2 billion between 2003 and 2008. His shell companies bear such mysterious names as Cableinvest Limited and Investholding Limited. His mastery of modern banking technology is yet another characteristic of a super-empowered individual.

## 2. Future Focus

On June 29, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi mounted the pulpit of the famed al-Nuri mosque in the Iraqi city of Mosul. He declared the re-establishment of the institution of the Islamic caliphate, originally established by the Prophet Mohammed. Unlike Jesus who clearly separated the things of Caesar from those of God, Islam forged a dynamic union of church and state. Following the Prophet's death in 632, four so called Rightly Guided Caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali ruled the expanding Islamic ummah—the nation of Islam. It became an empire that spread from Spain to Indonesia. The caliphate was successively assumed by various rulers and claimants, as various quasi-independent Muslim kingdoms and empires rose and fell. In spite of the complex fate of the caliphate, the model of Islamic rule established by the Prophet and embodied in the first four rightly guided caliphs has remained the Islamic ideal.<sup>[11]</sup>

The decline of the caliphate began with the reemergence of Christian Spain and the final expulsion of the Muslims from the peninsula in 1492. China seized the region of Xinjiang, Imperial Russia expanded into the ancient Islamic kingdoms of Central Asia, Western Europe reclaimed Spain, Portugal, and Sicily, and in the 19th Century the French, Dutch, Spanish, and British seized huge chunks of Africa, India, South East Asia, and Indonesia. Even the United States occupied the Islamic southern regions of the Philippines. Military occupation was accompanied by economic exploitation, cultural domination, and the free reign of Christian missionaries.

By the early 20th century, the Ottoman Turkish caliph in Istanbul, Abdulmecid II, of the Ottoman Turkish dynasty, only ruled over modern-day Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The defeat of the Turkish Empire during the First World War resulted in the dismemberment of the

once great Islamic Empire with only Turkey remaining independent. President Ataturk abolished the caliphate in 1924 when he became the ruler of the newly established secular state of Turkey.

At the end of the Second World War Europe reluctantly relinquished its overseas empires and installed Western educated puppet regimes throughout the former Muslim world. In some cases revolutionary regimes and dictators overthrew the Western style regimes but secular regimes remained the norm for both. Even those new states that embraced Marxism as the instrument for state building and industrialization, found no place for wither Islam or the caliphate. But, the western supported, revolutionary, and Marxist regimes all failed in their quests to drag their countries into the modern world. They even failed to instill any notion of loyalty to the artificially carved out nation-states. The educated elites imitated their former European and American rulers, the youth searched frantically for intellectual and political roots, and the masses remained bound to their Islamic faith and culture.

Presidents, kings, and dictators frantically attempted to cling to power in the Islamic world, some even coopting Islam as an instrument to keep the masses docile. The first major sign that the secular nation-state ideal imposed on the Islamic world was no longer tenable came in 1979 when an obscure exiled Iranian Muslim cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, overthrew the Western imposed and supported Shah and instituted an Islamic revolution. Khomeini did not restore the caliphate but he did restore the Prophet Mohammed's rule of the prophet-king. Khomeini in 1970 published his book, *Islamic Government*, which is claimed by many to be the most influential document written in modern times in support of Islamic rule. He argued that the West supported secular kings, presidents, and dictators in the Islamic world

... to keep us backward, to keep us in our present miserable state so they can exploit our riches, our underground wealth, our lands and our human resources. They want us to remain afflicted and wretched, and our poor to be trapped in their misery... they and their agents wish to go on living in huge palaces and enjoying lives of abominable luxury... They have also made an assessment of our people's intelligence and come to the conclusion that the only barrier blocking their way are Islam and the religious leadership."[\[12\]](#)

Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as the first of a generation of super-empowered Islamic clerics who mastered the latest in communications technology in the 1960s and 1970s. From his exile in Iraq and later in Paris he created a communications network that united Shiites and other Muslims from their home countries to the growing global diaspora. Hamid Mowlana argues in *Global Communication in Transition* that the Ayatollah inaugurated a revolution in communications in breaking through the Western dominated nation-state monopoly in mass communication by addressing the Islamic world as a whole. From his exile in Paris, the Ayatollah established a "global information infrastructure" reaching the entire Muslim world that effectively mobilized a large segment of the Islamic world, both Shia and Sunni. Mowlana argues that the Ayatollah not only used new technology to further his vision but radically transformed the global function of communications to enable him and other clerics and lay Muslims to exploit the Internet, Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and cable and satellite global news channels. Khomeini became a super-empowered cleric and assumed a powerful role in shaping the modern world.[\[13\]](#)

Khomeini's global information infrastructure spread the good news of a Muslim revival worldwide. This message demanded the erasing of the Western imposed "national" borders, the reunification of the Islamic *ummah*, and the restoration of the caliphate. Following the Islamic revolution, this vision swept the Muslim world like a tidal wave. However, while of major historic and religious significance, the success of the Iranian revolution was largely limited to the Shiite world. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and a succession of Sunni revolutionary figures undertook the next step in the Islamic revival, the restoration of the caliphate.

Journalist Karl Vick of the *Washington Post* wrote that in the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center, President Bush and the American administration clearly recognized that "the goal of reuniting Muslims under a single flag stands at the heart of the radical Islamic ideology." Vick reported that Al Qaeda had recently launched an Internet newscast that it named "The Voice of the Caliphate."[\[14\]](#) The liberation of the Muslim *ummah* from American, European, Russian, Chinese, and Israeli occupations, the overthrow of corrupt dictators and monarchs, and the reunification of the once united Muslim world were goals that all the followers of the Prophet could identify with. But, Vick argues, the notion of the caliphate resonates at a much deeper level than the above listed political goals. Even among the most secular and westernized Muslims, the notion of caliphate as a coalescing institution endures.

Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Confucianism share a unique historical consciousness that Christians and Buddhists lack. The failure of Jesus to return "Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled," (Matthew 24:34), left the early Christians virtually lost in this world. Visions of future earthly reign peace, the end to war, the reign of love, and a fading hope that a Messiah would emerge from the heavens to save humanity were a poor substitute for the concrete historic reality of an elaborate and a detailed Islamic state established by the Prophet. Mohammed left behind him not a vague promise to return, but rather the institution of the caliphate, a powerful army, a united Arabian peninsula, elaborate rules regulating diet, dress, sexuality, economic, holidays, worship, and warfare, as well as a fervent mission among his followers to further Islam.

When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself as the new caliph on June 29, 2014 he restored this central pillar of Islam founded by the Prophet himself. He declared that Islamic history has resumed its forward march into the 21st century after centuries of stagnation. He understood that the restoration of the Islamic caliphate would

require all the blood and gore, wars and massacres, and sacrifices and dedication that the Prophet himself had exhibited in establishing the first Islamic Empire. With the USA, Europe, Russia, India, Israel, and China committed to maintaining a divided Islamic world, supporting their preferred kings and dictators, and retaining the chunks of the *ummah* they presently occupy, the restoration of the Islamic caliphate by al Baghdadi will require as many wars and as much bloodshed as it did of the Prophet himself.[15]

The followers of Jesus do not hold the Byzantine Empire or Holy Roman Empire as a model to be restored in their quest to construct a Christian future, but still wait for the return of long-delayed Messiah to establish his kingdom on earth. However, for Muslims, their vision is of a past empire as a blueprint for the future. It is a vision shared by some Jews, Confucians, and Hindus as well.

When Israeli settlers demolish a Palestinian town on the West Bank and banish its residents to a refugee camp, they do not consider themselves war criminals. They are “redeeming the land” after over two thousand years of non-Jewish occupation. The plight of 6 million stateless Palestinians in the Diaspora and two million in the Gaza Strip prison is the necessary price Jews must pay for restoring the Empire of King David and King Solomon. Saul exterminated the inhabitants of Jericho and King David slaughtered the adults and enslaved the children of Jerusalem when he conquered it from the Jebusites. The present prime ministers, generals, and settlers merely follow this model.

Likewise, the BJP in India is intent on restoring the Subcontinent to the glorious days before the invasions of Islam and the British. What the West might condemn as war crimes, violations of human rights, terrorism, and ethnic cleansing, al-Baghdadi, the Israelis and Hindus justify as legitimate and necessary measures for the restoration of their ancient kingdoms.

### 3. Transient

One of my California surfer students once described his ongoing and never-ending search for god as “spiritual surfing.” He was always looking for the next great wave, jetting from one Pacific island to another, totally enthralled with the last one but ever on the lookout for the next bigger and more thrilling experience.

From the elusive search for the next big wave to the quest for the latest smartphone, from the newest fashion in sneakers to the next Hollywood blockbuster, from the latest super model to the newest Argentinian wine, modern society is ever on the search for the next big one. PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel argues in *Zero to One* that in both the economic and religious spheres that “there are major secrets left to be uncovered, insights that existing institutions have failed to unlock.” Every opportunity in business happens only once, he argues. Bill Gates recognized a need and built the first operating system, and Mark Zuckerberg noticed that Harvard students had no platform to interact and created a social network. Both men then moved on to their next great accomplishment. Likewise, the cults, sects, and movements of the 21st century, founded by a plethora of clerics, prophets, gurus and even gods, arose to meet the challenges of modernity. Yet in time they either faded into obscurity or took their place among the established world religions, part of the never-ending human search to discover the yet uncovered spiritual secrets and achieve new insights.[16]

Sociologist Max Weber argued in *Theory of Social and Economic Organization* that upstart cults based on charismatic leadership inevitably die out or are routinized into mainstream denominations.[17] Thiel, on the other hand, insists that the “wild fringe” of cults are a sign of the healthy, vital center. He holds that it is the charismatic weirdos who inject spiritual activism and inquiry into religious denominations.

During the last decades of the 20th century, the Jonestown cult, Warren Jeffs, Waco, God’s Warriors, the Solar Temple, Scientology, Aum Shinrikyo, Falun Gong, Hare Krishna, and the host of other recent and current cults have been the ocean peaks that spiritual surfers seek. When one cult dies out or governments destroy it, the dedicated surfer passes on to the next in the eternal and unquenched search for what psychologist Abraham Maslow in *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* named “peak experiences.” He described these primal religious experiences as “moments of highest happiness and fulfillment.” He stresses that such experiences are not achieved in the confines of a traditional communal religious service, but are rather “the private, lonely, personal illumination, revelation, or ecstasy of some acutely sensitive prophet or seer.”[18]

An example of a fringe cult that swept through the baby boom generation in the 1960s and 1970s, only to decline into relative obscurity, was the Rajneesh Movement founded by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh.

Born into modest circumstances in 1931, Rajneesh studied the writings of religious traditions, mystics, and philosophers from around the world and achieved notoriety as an itinerate preacher. In 1974 he established a permanent ashram in Pune, just east of Mumbai where he offered a variety of “transformational tools” for Indian and foreign visitors.

Central to his teaching was the “neo-sannyas,” which he described as a totally new form of spiritual discipline, one that had once existed but had since been routinized into an empty shell of imitation by the religions of the world. Rather than suppressing sexual and other human urges as taught by most world religions, Rajneesh taught that desires were to be accepted, experienced, and surpassed.[19] Once this inner flowering had taken place, desires such as that for sex would be left behind.[20] The new man would no longer be trapped in institutions such as family, marriage, political ideologies and [established] religions.[21]

*From Sex to Super Consciousness* and his other writings and teachings on sexual matters attracted the attention of the Indian government and religious authorities.<sup>[22]</sup> The mere chapter titles of his book were cause for alarm in the eyes of many: “Self energy from sex energy,” “Sex, the genesis of love,” “From repression to emancipation,” and “Sex, the super-atom.”

By 1981, pressures from both the Indian government and traditional religious authorities forced him to transfer his activities to the state of Oregon, where he founded a 60,000-acre commune. Within three years, his 7,000 followers had established a flourishing community with its own fire department, police, restaurants, malls, airport, reservoir, and bus system. Rajneesh took the USA by storm in 1981 with his unique combination of ‘60s cult fascination, acceptance of liberal sexual norms, and enthusiastic embrace of modern technology.<sup>[23]</sup>

Hugh B. Urban underscored Rajneesh’s phenomenal ability to master the instruments of modern finance to transform himself into one of Friedman’s Super-Empowered individuals. Urban wrote, “One of the most astonishing features of the early Rajneesh movement was its remarkable success as a business enterprise.”<sup>[24]</sup> “[B]y the 1980s, the movement had evolved into a complex, interlocking network of corporations, with an astonishing number of both spiritual and secular businesses worldwide, offering everything from yoga and psychological counselling to cleaning services.”<sup>[25]</sup> Urban described his financial empire as a corporate machine consisting of various front companies and subsidiaries.<sup>[26]</sup>

Enjoying the pleasures of this world is central to the branding of Rajneesh. Rolls-Royces, private jets, lavish life style, and sexual freedom are central to the Rajneesh brand. “Persecution” by American, Indian, and other governments only served to reinforce this brand. Even while in India researching Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh I noticed a car parked outside the ashram he founded in Puna with a bumper sticker that read, “Jesus Saves. Moses Invests. Bhagwan Spends.”<sup>[27]</sup>

Various scandals, fierce opposition from Oregon authorities and residents, and criticism of his unorthodox teachings on sexuality, forced him to flee the United States. He returned to Pune in 1981, where he remained until his death on January 19, 1990 at the age of 58. His Puna ashram is today the OSHO International Meditation Resort.

On a recent visit to India (January 2018) I spent time in the city of Pune where Rajneesh settled after his expulsion from the United States. During my stay at the Pune Backpacker Panda hostel, which was only a couple of blocks from Osho, I met two distinct types of followers: current followers of the institutionalized Osho, and former followers who had experienced the glory days of the Oregon Ashram but then gone on in search of other peak experiences and other gurus. Every morning, current followers of the late Rajneesh would gather in the hostel public area, clad in their regulation saffron robes eager for another day at the “resort.” With evident pride, they displayed their membership passes, described their daily rituals, and even showed me their regulation and very expensive swimming suits, orange robes for daily lectures, and white robes for evening events. When I suggested that I might accompany them for day visit, they handed me a slick brochure from the Welcome Center that listed the necessary documents, fees, and passes the resort required. With the passing of Rajneesh, the ashram had joined the legions of established Indian religious centers.

The second group of Rajneesh followers, the former disciples of Rajneesh, many of whom had spent time at the Oregon community, continued on their spiritual quests following the death of their guru. Most of these veterans admitted that Rajneesh had had his defects but averred that his passing had in fact liberated them from the need for any guru, ashram, church, temple, or movement. The Rajneesh experience had profoundly marked their lives and spiritual evolution.

Among the ample literature on Rajneesh at the common room of the hostel was an article in the *DailyO* by Vikram Zutshi titled, “Sex, Spirituality and Lies – What I Learnt about Rajneesh inside Osho Ashram,” that detailed her complex and contradictory experiences. Summarizing her experiences with Rajneesh she wrote, “Surrender to a higher power, a guru or spiritual organizations may feel liberating at first but can quickly turn into a means of bypassing the realities of the human condition.”<sup>[28]</sup> Her experience of liberation from the chaos and uncertainty of this world and the challenge of confronting her own imperfections were so terrifying that she fled the ashram and returned to the world. Not every person could bear freedom and liberation that the “new man” would experience. Most humans were fated to remain the blind followers of an established spiritual organization.

Tim Guest wrote another personal account of life with Rajneesh, *My Life in Orange: Growing Up with the Guru*.<sup>[29]</sup> His mother took him to Oregon at the age of six, and he recounts his mother’s rapid rise in the organization, her ever-deepening involvement in the movement, and her eventual abandonment of him. His account gives a dramatic insight into the cult experience and dramatically illustrates Maslow’s “peak experience.”

Guest highlights the all-encompassing nature of cult membership. Rodney Stark in *The Churching of America* describes such experiences as “costly religions” as opposed to cheap religions.<sup>[30]</sup> Stark wrote, “when the cost of membership increases the net gains of membership increase too.” The classical “cheap religion,” according to Stark, is the Episcopal Church. An interview with the pastor, a signature on a membership form, a significant contribution to the congregation, and maybe attendance at a church service once or twice a year suffices to make one an Episcopalian in good standing. A costly religion, on the other hand, is Orthodox Jewry. This religion dictates what a member in good standing may or may not eat, what to wear, how to celebrate the obligatory Sabbath, who to marry, who to shun, what to believe, in what language to pray, and a host of other restrictions and obligations. An individual must pay a heavy price in time, energy,

dedication, and finances to remain an Orthodox Jew or a follower of Rajneesh in good standing. But according to Stark, the benefits of such costly sacrifices are immeasurable for the member.

Stark argues that the distinguishing features of American religion following the Second World War was the rise and flourishing of cults, sects, new religious movements, Evangelical, Charismatic, and Pentecostal Christians. I would add to this list the global rise of “radical” Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist movements. Tired of nominal religion of the Episcopal variety, young people worldwide are seeking a total experience of religion, one that is all encompassing, global, and as Stark would describe it, “costly.”

Constant global travel, the founding of new communes ( a total of 575 in 32 countries by 1982), the rigorous spiritual training of the movement, and even the charges of tax evasion, murder, crimes, and schisms within the movement, only served to reinforce Tim’s mother’s dedication to Rajneesh and strengthen her commitment to the movement.

The phenomenal success of the newest smartphone fades with the arrival of another even more powerful device; the latest super model enjoys a shelf life of mere months; the newest Hollywood blockbuster dominates screens for mere days; and the current Washington political scandal blows over in hours. Likewise, we readily discard a super-star preacher, virtual congregation, or cherished religious newsfeed when we stumble upon a newer model. Even more strikingly, we no longer expect to remain a follower, a member, or a believer for long. Planned, and expected, obsolescence affects religions as much as it does smartphones. After savoring (or enduring) one real experience, it is quickly replaced by the next religious fashion with its own costly demands, obligations, hierarchies, institutions, denominations, clergy, theology, rituals, and scriptures.<sup>[31]</sup>

Tim Guest is but one of many ex-Rajneeshees who described their experiences in books, articles, and films. Another such book was *Breaking the Spell: My Life as a Rajneeshee and the Long Journey Back to Freedom* by Jane Stork.<sup>[32]</sup> Toward the end of his book Guest underscored the transient nature of modern cults when he wrote, “Bhagwan always said that once the spiritual leader was gone, the followers should leave.” He made no attempt to appoint a successor or establish a denomination according to Max Weber’s pattern of cults becoming churches. “Do not make a religion of me,” Rajneesh said. “Do not allow my words to become a scripture that represses... When I am gone, forget me.”<sup>[33]</sup> Life is a journey, and when one ceases to move forward, the journey comes to an end.

Against his teachings, a group of Rajneeshee’s followers took control of the center in Puna, India, renamed it the OSHO International Meditation Center, and institutionalized his teachings. The followers I met during my visit were a few of the 200,000 annual visitors. Some of them seemed to have happily settled into remaining disciples of the late Rajneesh and the current OSHO movement. However, the majority of the people I met in Pune impressed me as spiritual seekers on a never-ending journey. For those who had spent time in Oregon or in Pune, this experience was but another episode in their eternal search.

On a recent visit to one of the few bricks and mortar bookstores in New York City, I perused the religion section and was impressed by the preponderance of works on the spiritual search. Ursula King’s *The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life*, Victor L. Wooten’s *The Music Lesson: A Spiritual Search for Growth through Music*, and James Emery White’s *A Search for the Spiritual: Exploring Real Christianity* are just a few of recent works that stress religion as an ongoing, never-ending search. What kid would wear last year’s sneakers to school in September, and what spiritually seeking soul would sing the praises of last year’s Super-Empowered guru?

#### 4. Globalized

The virtually global free movement of migrants, workers, and refugees; a planet-wide network of communications and information flows; the transfer of resources and finished products; and the virtually unhindered transfer of capital have transformed the world into one giant marketplace. This is the brave new world that awaits us according to Thomas Friedman in *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (2005). Although Friedman does not focus on the implications a flat world will have on religions, a short walk through a residential district of any major world city will prove that even the most obscure tribal religion has been catapulted to global religion status by the forces of economic, social, cultural, and product globalization.

Christianity spread across the globe because of its de facto alliance with the Roman, Byzantine, Holy Roman, and later Spanish, Portuguese, British, French, and now American empires. Islam founded its own empire and spread the teachings of the Prophet from Morocco to Indonesia and Kazan to Nigeria. Powered by the financial resources, military might, industrial backing, and governmental support, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam each became the dominant world religions. Today, however, aspirants to global religious influence no longer have to rely on state or imperial sponsorship to achieve global status. Today, almost any remote cult, sect, or religious movement can leap aboard the forces that have flattened the planet and become a “major” world religion.

I have researched, lectured, and written about many of these new members of the list of world religions. During a visit to Salt Lake City, I was fascinated by the phenomenal growth of the Mormons from a pre-eminently American faith to a global religious superpower. From a membership of around one million predominately Americans following the Second World War, the church has grown to 16 million today, with

half non-Americans.<sup>[34]</sup> Among the other once obscure and local religious movements that have now become global presences that I have researched are the Dhammakaya Buddhist movement in Thailand, the Muslim Mourids in central Senegal, the American Evangelical and Pentecostal movements, Haitian Voodoo, OSHO in India, and many others.

One of the most dramatic examples of a local and isolated religious movement that managed to master the social, economic, technological, and cultural forces that are levelling the planet is the Lubavitch Chasidic Jewish sect. Chasidic movements (the pious ones) emerged as a reaction against the rather formalistic, unemotional, and scholarly Orthodox Judaism that prevailed in the Russian Empire in the 17th and 18th centuries. The father of Chasidism was Yisroel ben Eliezer (1700-1760) commonly known as the Baal Shem Tov.

The Lubavitch branch of this diverse movement was founded in czarist Russia by Rabbi Schneur Salman in 1775. The movement took the name of the Belorussian city of Lyubovichi, to distinguish it from Chasidic sects that had sprung up in other towns and cities of the Russian Pale of Settlement where the Jews of Eastern Europe were required to live. Chasidic groups identified themselves by the town they were from: the Satmar sect was from Satu Mare in present-day Hungary, the Bobover sect was from the Polish city of Bobova, and the Lubavitch sect came from Lyubovichi. In addition each sect has its dynasty of “Rebbes,” as they called their rabbis. The Lubavitch sect pledges obedience to the Schneerson (Schneerson) dynasty.

As long as the group remained in Lyubovichi, it remained but one of the many Chasidic sects, and one of the least important. The population of the town in 1880, for example was only 1,516, of which 978 were Jews.<sup>[35]</sup> Like most Chasidic and Orthodox rabbis at the time, Rabbi Shmuel Schneerson counselled his followers to remain in Russia rather than fleeing to America to escape the ravages of poverty, pogroms and religious persecution. Life may be difficult in czarist Russia, he taught, but at least they lived and died as Jews. In America, on the other hand, the good life of material success tempted many to abandon their faith and people, assimilate, or be tempted by the modern Western watered-down version of Judaism called Reform Judaism. The common slogan then was “The Cossacks might kill your bodies, but America will kill your souls.”

The First World War reduced the number of Lubavitch Jews and during the holocaust approximately two million Russian Jews were killed out of a total of nearly three million. That, combined with the anti-religious campaigns of the Communist government under Lenin and Stalin, caused the Orthodox and Chasidic communities to scatter throughout the USSR, Berlin, Paris, and New York.

Menachem Schneerson was born in 1902 in the Black Sea town of Mykolaiv, Ukraine, and followed his rabbi father to many cities in Russia, Warsaw and Berlin. With the rise of the Nazis in Germany, he settled in Paris. Unusual for Orthodox rabbis at the time, Schneerson graduated from the ESTP (France’s leading engineering university) in Paris with a degree in mechanics and electrical engineering in 1937. In 1941, he settled in Brooklyn, where he gathered the few surviving followers and purchased a building at 770 Eastern Parkway in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn which became the movement’s international headquarters. The building has become a center of pilgrimage for Lubavitchers, and followers have built exact copies of the building in Argentina, Israel, and elsewhere.

Upon his arrival in the United States, Schneerson launched his campaign to develop the sect into a global religious movement. In 1942, he launched the Merkos Shlichus (emissary program) program, sending pairs of yeshiva students to remote locations across the country and later around the world during their summer vacations to locate and teach Jews in distant communities about their heritage. Unlike Eastern Europe where intermarriage was rare, he realized that assimilation was the rule rather than the exception in the United States and the rest of the world. Half Jews, quarter Jews, secularized Jews, and even Jews practicing other religions were still Jews in the eyes of the Lubavitchers.<sup>[36]</sup>

Unlike the Catholic Church that relied on ordained priests to spearhead missionary activities, Schneerson adopted the Mormon and Protestant strategy of sending young lay people and even married couples into the missionary field. Fired by youthful enthusiasm, *schlichim* (emissaries) competed to find the most “lost Jews,” establish the most synagogues, and attract the largest number of visitors to their free Friday Sabbath evening meals. At the annual gathering at 770 Eastern Parkway, *schlichim* literally competed for assignments to the most isolated places on the planet where nobody in their right mind would expect to find a Jew. The mission to the oil fields of north Alaska became legendary when two *schlichim* not only found some lost Jews but built a synagogue. This handful of saved souls achieved legendary status as God’s “Frozen Chosen.” Today there are about 6,000 practicing Jews in Alaska.<sup>[37]</sup> On November 20, 2017, the Jewish Telegraph Agency published an article celebrating the 100th Lubavitch center, this one in Uganda.<sup>[38]</sup>

Rebbe Schneerson recognized that America did not “destroy” the Jewish soul, but rather it slowly and systematically nibbled away at it until there was nothing left. American Jews easily Anglicized their names, moved to non-Jewish neighborhoods, eliminated any Jewish symbols from their home, and hosted the annual office Christmas party. They easily drifted from the Orthodox Judaism of their grandparents, to the Reform Judaism of their parents, to the Unitarian Church of their friends, and finally to the total secularism of most Americans. Rodney Stark describes such experiences as the drift from “costly religions” to “cheap religions” and finally to no religion in his book *The Churching of America*.<sup>[39]</sup>

A large number of the “lost” Jews that the Lubavitchers found were highly educated, highly secularized, and often well-to-do individuals. These converts, *baalei teshuvah* (returning Jews) as they were called in Lubavitch circles, were attracted by the growing notion that many young Americans, Europeans, and Israelis were tired of

the prevailing American culture of “cheap” religions that made no demands on followers. They were thirsting for some form of “costly” religion that would, Stark argued, offer immeasurable spiritual, social, and intellectual benefits.

Attracting and retaining these new followers demanded a novel form of 21st century Judaism. The cheap forms of Judaism that prevailed in the USA, in Israel, and around the world modernized the Jewish rituals and ceremonies and diluted fundamental teachings. One Lubavitcher quipped to me in a conversation that for most modern Jews the Ten Commandments had become the Ten Suggestions. The Rebbe, on the other hand, viewed it a duty to keep all the mitzvahs—God’s commandments in the Torah elaborated by Maimonides in the 12th Century into the famous 613 commandments. Judaism was not a cheap membership in a club but a costly commitment to a strict and demanding way of life.

The word “mitzvah” became central to the Lubavitch brand. It features prominently in all Lubavitch literature and publicity. Converts were required to adhere to the strict Orthodox kosher laws, observe the rules of daily and Sabbath prayers, celebrate Jewish holidays, sever ties with non-Jews and even secular family members, and often accept the obligation of becoming an emissary.

Central to his public strategy of attracting lost Jews were groups of young Lubavitchers beside folding tables on major streets asking people if they were Jewish. If the response was “yes,” no matter how hesitant, they asked them to don *tefillin*, the set of small black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah that are worn by observant adult Jews during weekday morning prayers. Such a declaration of one’s Jewishness is significant for the individual, but its street-side location is a virtual public declaration of one’s Jewishness.

In addition to donning *tefillin*, Lubavitchers invite passersby to a free Friday evening Sabbath dinner to meet other Jews and partake of a strictly kosher meal. The author had the pleasure of joining the Lubavitchers in Thailand when a passing rickshaw mounted speaker announced that the Sabbath would begin at a certain time and a free Sabbath dinner was available. Being neither a half or even hundredth Jewish did not deter the author from a free kosher meal.

Many Orthodox Jews opposed such public displays of Jewish rituals and feared that the Jews who became observant were attracted by an empty public display of religion along the lines of the then popular Hare Krishna dancers. Other critics opposed the almost cult-like status of the Rebbe among his followers, and in particular the cult of the messiah that surrounds him.<sup>[40]</sup> Such opposition did not deter Schneerson from his commitment to his unique brand of costly religion.

Another form of public religion that the movement encouraged was the demand that a Jewish menorah stand alongside any display of a Christmas tree in public spaces. In 1973, Schneerson started a Chanukah campaign to encourage all Jews worldwide to light their own menorah. In 1974, he organized a dramatic and public lighting of a Chanukah menorah beside the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, later at the 59th Street entrance to Central Park, and in cities worldwide. Legal challenges to the lightings on public grounds reached the Supreme Court, but the court ruled that public lightings did not violate the Constitution. The Lubavitcher Online Chanukah celebration of 2015 reached an audience of over 8 million.<sup>[41]</sup>

In 1951, Schneerson established a Chabad women's and girl's organization and a youth organization to engage in outreach directed to women and teens. In 1953, he opened branches in New York, London and Toronto. In a marked break with traditional Orthodox tradition, Schneerson addressed his teachings equally to both genders. Schneerson described the increase in Torah study by women as one of the “positive innovations of the later generations.”<sup>[42]</sup>

Schneerson sent many emissaries on covert missions to sustain Judaism under Communist regimes and to provide them with their religious and material needs. Many Jews from behind the iron curtain corresponded with Schneerson, sending their letters to him via secret messenger and addressing Schneerson in code. Schneerson intervened with American political and religious figures, and photos of him and leading American and international figures were widely diffused as evidence of his growing stature as a global religious personality.

With university degrees in engineering and mathematics, the Rebbe recognized the importance of the modern media in forging his newfound Jews into a strong Jewish community. Converts with advanced education in computers, or who had worked in banking and advertising, brought these skills to the movement. They organized rock concerts with Jewish themes and Lubavitch singers, established university campus Chabad Houses, had a strong outreach to the neglected Sephardic Jewish community, and instituted a list of uniquely Lubavitch holidays, such as the birthdays, anniversaries of deaths, and “Days of Liberation.”<sup>[43]</sup> His followers have established an elaborate network of web sites, online newspapers, video conferencing locations, news services, YouTube films, recorded speeches and religious services, as well as an online clearinghouse for activities, Chabad.org.<sup>[44]</sup> Critics of the movement argue that the Lubavitch universe has become a virtual ghetto with an electronic ghetto wall replacing the stone ghetto walls of Eastern Europe.

One of the most controversial activities of his followers emerged from the Rebbe’s passion and desire to raise awareness of the imminent coming of the Messiah. He composed children's songs with the words “We want *moshiach* (the messiah) now / We don't want to wait.”<sup>[45]</sup> Schneerson recognized that the universal belief in the imminent coming of a Messiah has been a dramatic instrument for mobilizing the masses in all religions. Orthodox Judaism introduced the unique notion that there was a person in every generation who is worthy of being a messiah, and many of the Rebbe’s followers eagerly embraced the notion that the Rebbe was

in fact the messiah of his generation. Posters, fliers, and handouts advertising this claim were common in homes, synagogues, streets, stores, and telephone polls in Lubavitch neighborhoods; and while the Rebbe objected to such talk, his followers noted that he never flatly denied the possibility. Since his death in 1994, his most fervent of disciples continue to gather at his tomb in expectation of his resurrection and public proclamation of his messiahhood. His failure to appoint a successor further fueled the belief that he was in fact the expected one.<sup>[46]</sup>

Convinced that the teachings of the sect must be preserved and contained the hope of a universal renaissance of Orthodox Judaism, the Rebbe transformed a three-century old local cult into a modern, technologically savvy, global religious movement. From a handful of survivors in exile in Brooklyn, today the movement claims 200,000 members in 3,600 institutions, in 1,000 cities in 100 countries. Orthodox Judaism became trendy, popular, young, and vibrant. Even the death of the Rebbe did not halt the growth of the movement. Many observers interpreted his failure to designate an heir as a sign that the movement itself was the Messiah.

Of course, not all converts accepted the movement as the end station in their spiritual search. Such notable ex-Lubavitchers as Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, the feminist rabbi, Shlomo Carlebach, “The Singing Rabbi,” and Leah Lax, the lesbian activist and writer, are among those who “grew through” the Lubavitch experience and continued on in other capacities.

The Lubavitch movement is but one of many once local and even obscure religious groups that emerged as global actors on the religious stage. Mourid, Jain, Sikh, Voodoo, Santeria, Zen Buddhist, Wicca, and Dervish places of worship, study, and association have spread worldwide, each with its web sites, email, online magazines, DVDs, chat sites, and even online seminaries and colleges.

## 5. Human Deification

For thousands of years humans have created and worshipped deities whom they described as omniscient, eternal, perfect, and omnipotent. In short, the gods were humans stripped of their imperfections. Humans spent years in educational pursuits, but the gods were omniscient. Humans entered life, lived, and faced eventual decline and death while the gods were eternal. Humans are born in pain, suffer a host of diseases, and die when their bodies finally give out, while the gods enjoy eternal perfect health. Humans continually struggle merely to survive while the gods are omnipotent. The gods did not create humans in his own image and likeness, humans created the gods as perfected images and likenesses of themselves.

Human perfection is the quest that makes us human. Jesus instructed his followers in Matthew 5:48, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” One of the first examples of a religious group accepting the contributions of science to further the goals of religions was Mary Baker Eddy’s, appropriately named, Church of Christ, Scientist. In 1879, Eddy wrote that the goal of the new church was to “reinstate primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing.”<sup>[47]</sup> Physical illnesses were but a manifestation of a spiritual illness that the spiritual practices elaborated by Eddy could overcome. .

Exploiting the latest advances in psychology, psychotherapy, and the study of the human brain, L. Ron Hubbard concluded that psychological imperfections hindered humans from realizing their fullest potential. In 1950, he published *Dianetics: The Evolution of a Science*, which introduced his unique counselling technique known as auditing. The goal of this technique was to enable individuals to recall past traumatic events, confront them, and free themselves from their influence. He named this process, “clearing.”<sup>[48]</sup>

Eddy and Hubbard were among the many who recognized that the advances in modern science were having a profound impact on traditional religions and welcomed the contributions of science to the perfectibility of humanity. In recent decades, scientists have gone beyond using the fruits of modern science to improve human nature to the dramatic transformation of humanity, and even freeing humans from their bodily prisons entirely and achieving immortality for the sons and daughters of Adam.

Literature and Hollywood films such as the classic *Island of Doctor Moreau*, Mary Shelley’s *Victor Frankenstein*, the 1989 martial-arts cyberpunk film *Cyborg*, starring Jean-Claude Van Damme, Christopher Reeve’s portrayal of *Superman*, and Gal Gadot in *Wonderwoman* have all portrayed the perfect human being. In *Transcendence* (2004), Johnny Depp achieves immortality by uploading his mind to a computer and even manages to recreate a physical perfect self. As if the deified human did not stretch the powers of modern technology far enough, Hans Moravec argues in *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind* that soon humans will be able to “inspirit” complex machines and have them join humans in the land of the living “however upsetting that may be to our traditional categories.”<sup>[49]</sup>

In recent times, scientists have taken the lead in fearlessly granting human beings attributes hitherto reserved for the gods. Today cardiac pacemakers, cochlear implants, hearing aids, contact lenses, and artificial hips and knees are gradually merging humans with machines. It is only a question of time until neural implants will record and make accessible every memory, every word ever spoken, and every thought a person ever had. The human life span increases yearly, new drugs effectively cure old and new diseases, and agricultural advances make obesity one of the major causes of death.

It was only inevitable that as humans slowly usurp the qualities hitherto reserved for the gods, religions both old and new take notice. The leading prophet of this brave new human future is Dr. Ray Kurzweil. Kurzweil was born in Queens, New York in 1948 and educated at MIT. Awarded many honors for his work as author,

computer scientist, inventor and futurist, his major inventions include advances in optical character recognition, speech recognition technology and artificial intelligence.

In a preview of his 2005 book, *The Singularity is Near*, *Bloomberg Businessweek* hailed Kurzweil as the prophet of the perfect human.<sup>[50]</sup> His term, “Transhumanism” has entered the lexicon of science, philosophy, literature, film, and even religion. Futurist Max Moore defined Transhumanism as “a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology.”<sup>[51]</sup>

Kurzweil does not hesitate to speculate freely on how the merging of humans and machines is going to shape the future and impact the traditions and values humanity has held sacred for millennia.

Currently, humanity is witnessing the exponential advance of the capacities of the computer. The computer began as a mere storage facility for knowledge but rapidly achieved computational capacity that turned it into a virtual thinking machine. Kurzweil estimates that the computer will rival the raw computing power of the human brain “by around 2020.”<sup>[52]</sup> The human mind will remain limited by its biological limitations, but the artificial mind will continue to expand exponentially.

Kurzweil also argues that gradually the human and the electronic minds will merge. At first they will periodically interact, as they do today when a student consults Wikipedia to find the exact population of New York City. But, gradually, biological and electronic minds will merge through neural implants. At that point a student will not have “to learn” a language, she will simply access the language implant and immediately speak fluent Chinese. By the year 2040 “uploading” the human brain into a computer will be commonplace.<sup>[53]</sup> It is estimated that 100 million megabytes would suffice to capture the human mind.<sup>[54]</sup>

The super-empowered individual of the near future will not only have the accumulated knowledge of thousands of years of human history at their fingertips, but advances in genetics, nanotechnology, and robotics will make it possible to maintain the body indefinitely. Aging, cancer, heart disease, and other illnesses will become a part of history.<sup>[55]</sup> Kurzweil fully expects that many of the baby boomers will actually live to see this day; and has often written that he himself will be among these lucky pioneers.

Kurzweil holds that scientists will develop artificial brains that will eventually achieve all the attributes of consciousness. He insists that there is “no objective test that can conclusively determine” the presence of consciousness in either a machine or a biological being. A telling scene in the film *Transcendence* pits a mega-computer against a human. The human asks the computer to “prove” that it is conscious. The computer responds “And can you prove you are conscious?” Non-biological intelligences will claim to have consciousness and experience “the full range of emotional and spiritual experiences that humans claim to have,” Kurzweil argues.<sup>[56]</sup>

The evolution of non-biological intelligences, their potential for experiencing the full range of human emotions and consciousness, the growing interface with the human mind, and the indefinite maintenance of the human body, will ultimately result in the Transcendent Man. Kurzweil invented the term “Singularity” for the moment when artificial and human mind will merge. Humans will shed their human bodies—“their biological shells”—and merge with computers. Computers will also evolve, eventually to shed their own “metal and plastic shells” by harnessing the energy of the sun, and exchange circuit boards for strands of DNA.

Kurzweil presented his ideas of the growing power of computers in *The Age of Intelligent Machines* (1990). He wrote about their dramatic impact on religion in his 1999 book, *The Age of Spiritual Machines*. Kurzweil argues that machines will become humanized and even spiritualized. They will not only have prodigious memories, they will “claim” to have consciousness, self-awareness, free will, and even spiritual experiences. Even more exciting, he continues, machines will begin building other more powerful machines without any human supervision.

Numerous observers have noted the religious implications of Kurzweil’s writings. Daniel Lyons quoted the biologist P.Z. Myers in *Newsweek* that Kurzweil’s Singularity theories were more a “deluded religious movement” than serious science.” “It’s a New Age spiritualism—that’s all it is.” The article continued, “Even geeks want to find God somewhere, and Kurzweil provides it for them.”<sup>[57]</sup>

He argues that the essence of every religious experience is “a feeling of transcending one’s everyday physical and mortal bounds.” During such spiritual states, one senses “a deeper reality.” In the future, computers will claim to be conscious, and thus to be spiritual” who will go to church, meditate, and pray.”<sup>[58]</sup> He further developed his ideas in *Fantastic Voyage: The Science behind Radical Life Extension* (2004), *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (2005), and *Transcend: Nine Steps to Living Well Forever* (2009).

For years Kurzweil was relegated to the eccentric intellectual fringe of academia, despite being respected for his many inventions. However, he began to attract the attention of a broader public with the release of a star-studded television documentary, “Transcendent Man” on February 3, 2011. Kurzweil summarized his theories and then took them to their logical conclusion: technological advances would give humans control of further evolution and usher in a kind of earthly nirvana. The film took Kurzweil’s theories mainstream. Some critics derided Kurzweil as “a modern-day prophet.”<sup>[59]</sup>

Shortly after the airing of the documentary, *Time* magazine published an article with the title, “2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal.” The article presented a highly sensational version of Kurzweil by questioning what the concrete implications of his theories might be. “Maybe we’ll scan our consciousnesses into computers and live inside them as software, forever, virtually.” Reviewing his theories, it posited “the transformation of our

species into something that is no longer recognizable as such to humanity circa 2011” and speculated that by freeing ourselves from our pitiful and illness-prone bodies we could become immortal and “light our for the edges of space as intergalactic godlings.”<sup>[60]</sup>

The author of a *Scientific American* review of the film titled “The Immortal Ambitions of Ray Kurzweil,” John Rennie, praised Kurzweil not only as a “celebrated inventor and futurist,” but noted that in the film Kurzweil was referred to as a prophet. Equipped with immortality, infinite resources, and boundless intelligence, humans were becoming something divine. In answer to the rhetorical question, “Does God exist?” Kurzweil answered, “I would say, ‘Not yet.’”<sup>[61]</sup>

If Kurzweil’s promise of human immortality is realized, it may seriously undermine traditional religions. Shortly after he became Google’s director of engineering in 2012, Kurzweil said in an interview that the merging of humans with computers would constitute a serious attack on world religions. He argued that the normal human reaction to death is sadness, while “one of the major goals of religion is to come up with some story that says death is really a good thing”; hence, religions invent heavens, nirvana, reincarnation, and a host of other stories. With unlimited life extension possible, all that would become superfluous.<sup>[62]</sup>

The growing possibility of a perfect human being has forced scholars and practitioners of religion to take notice. Since 2009, the American Academy of Religion has held an annual “Transhumanism and Religion” consultation. Newsweek reported in 2018 that Google scientist and inventor Anthony Levandowski had founded the Way of the Future church to “help educate people about this exciting future and prepare a smooth transition.”<sup>[63]</sup>

## 6. Politicized

In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (1996) Samuel P. Huntington recognized that the 21st century will be marked by the triumph of religion-based civilizations. Such civilizations are rapidly replacing the nation-state and the secular ideal of the modern state as the principal actors on the world stage. Evangelical Christianity in the USA, Islam in the Muslim World, Orthodoxy in Russia, Hinduism in India, Judaism in Israel and the Diaspora, and Confucianism in China are eroding the secular ideal and erasing national boundaries.

Since the emergence of the first major religions in ancient Egypt, Babylon, China, Iran, Israel, Greece, and Rome, religion and nationhood constituted one seamless garment. In the Jewish Bible, God’s covenant with Abraham stipulated that in exchange for worshipping only the Almighty Jehovah, the descendants of Abraham would become a great nation and inhabit the Promised Land of Canaan. If they failed to worship Jehovah, they would be punished by exile and slavery. In Japan, the emperor was worshipped as a deity, the descendent of the Sun God. The Prophet Mohammed united religious and political authority in one person. The Chinese emperors ruled with the Mandate of Heaven. When the kings, emperors, and caliphs marched into war, they did so with the blessing of their respective gods.

Christianity attempted to sever this ancient unity between religion and politics. Jesus stated, “My kingdom is not of this world” and “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”<sup>[64]</sup> Jesus emerged from the apocalyptic branch of first century Judaism and eagerly preached and expected the end times. With the much-promised Jewish Messianic Age about to begin, Jesus rejected the Jewish laws regarding diet, clothing, the Sabbath, holidays, government, and economics. However, the generation that had been repeatedly promised that it would not pass away until all these things had come to pass, did in fact pass away (Matthew 24:34). This “delayed parousia” no doubt came as a shock for the early Christians, and many abandoned the Jesus sect. Unlike Judaism, Hinduism, and Confucianism, which had elaborated rules regulating every aspect of daily life from food to worship, holidays to clothing, the early Christians had no blueprint for living the ever-growing gap between the death and resurrection of Jesus and the promised Second Coming.

From the time the Roman Emperor Constantine took over the floundering Christian community and made it the official religion of his empire in 312 AD, Christians have elaborated countless stopgap measures as they wait for the long-delayed return of their Messiah. Some of these creations include the Byzantine Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, Catholic Spain, Anglican England, Christian Democratic parties, the Oneida utopian community, Jonestown, and a host of others. With the failure of Jesus to return and with no Messianic Age on the horizon, the age-old pattern of church and state, religion and government, god and king, reasserted itself throughout the Christendom.

The Buddha likewise taught a strictly otherworldly message. He did not expect the imminent arrival of a messiah but rather preached the goal of enlightenment. The parallels between the otherworldly teachings of Jesus and those of the Buddha are striking. Not only did both teachers attempt to break the age-old bond between religion and state, but both religions that resulted from these teachings were eventually co-opted by earthly rulers who enshrined their otherworldly teachings in this-worldly empires.

The first earthly ruler to establish Buddhism as the official religion of state was Emperor Ashoka of the Indian Maurya dynasty (268-232 BC), a century and a half after the death of the Buddha. The reign of Buddhism was short lived in India. After the death of Ashoka most Indians returned to Hinduism, and Buddhism all but died out in its homeland. Like Christianity that all but disappeared in its homeland, but prospered throughout the world, Buddhist missionaries spread the new religion outward and it took deep roots from Afghanistan to

Indonesia, and from Japan to Sri Lanka. With a few short-lived exceptions, the new faith remained loyal to the Buddha's otherworldly teachings.

Even as monasteries cultivated the Eight-Fold Path toward enlightenment, the diverse kings and emperors of these nations relied on distinctively this-worldly religions to buttress and legitimize their thrones and maintain social order. In China, Vietnam, and Korea, Confucianism remained the religion of state. In Japan the emperor relied on Shinto, and in South Asia (Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka) Hinduism remained the cement of society and gave legitimacy to the ruler. While the rulers also venerated Buddhism, constructed temples, and supported monasteries, the teachings of the Buddha remained restricted to temples and private homes.

On a January 2017 visit to Thailand, the author of this article had the opportunity to observe part of the year-long funeral ceremonies for the late King Rama IX who died on October 13, 2016. The ruling dynasty of Thailand was devoutly Buddhist, but continued to base its legitimacy on the ancient belief that they were avatars of the Hindu god Rama. The kings were crowned and buried with Hindu-inspired coronation and funeral rites and believed that deceased kings returned to the sacred abode of the god Rama on Mount Kailash in India. However, this did not inhibit the presence of scores of Buddhist monks and dignitaries from attending every ceremony the author had the honor of witnessing.<sup>[65]</sup>

In spite of the great love the Thai people had for their late king, many Thai Buddhists believe that he did little to further Buddhist interests, defend Buddhists against foreign influences, or cultivate ties with the broader Buddhist world. A recent Pew Research Center report noted the overall decline of the global Buddhist population compared with the rise of all other major world religions. According to the report, Islam is by far the most successful of contemporary religions, with a projected 70% increase between 2015 and 2060, followed by an increase of 34% for Christians, 27% for Hindus, and 15% for Jews. Buddhists are projected to decline by 7%.<sup>[66]</sup>

Among the many Buddhist leaders who have assumed the herculean task of not only saving but restoring Buddhism to its former greatness is the Myanmar (Burmese) monk, Ashin Wirathu. Wirathu was born in 1968 in Mandalay, the former royal capital of Myanmar. He left school at the age of 14 to become a monk, and at the age of 33 joined and later took over the little known Myanmar Buddhist political movement, 969, that was established in the 1990s.

969 began as a Buddhist movement to resist the expansion of Islam in Myanmar, but under the leadership of Wirathu it expanded its scope to include resistance against all the forces assailing Buddhism, including Marxism, Western culture, Christian missionaries, secularism, Hollywood movies, and the English language. Buddhist nationalist movements like 969 harkened back to the golden age of Emperor Ashoka, to an empire that included most of modern India and Nepal as well as Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to the glories of the subsequent expansion of Buddhism to Indonesia and Malaysia.

Wirathu attributed the catastrophic decline of Buddhism to the arrival of Islam beginning in the year 711, when the Umayyad rulers of modern Syria sent a Muslim army led by Muhammad bin Qasim against the Hindu kingdom of Sindh in modern Pakistan and India. In rapid succession the Muslims conquered Afghanistan, Central Asia, western China, Bangladesh, and India. Later Islamic expansion continued into South East Asia where Muslim kingdoms ruled in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar, as well as Indonesia and Malaysia. Many of these areas were permanently lost to Buddhism.

For Wirathu and other Buddhist leaders, the war against Buddhism continued with British, Dutch, and French colonialism and later American and Soviet domination. European Christian missionaries founded schools and hospitals, constructed churches, furthered European languages and cultures, and discriminated against Buddhists. Americans continued this campaign and added the secular state and separation of church and state while the Soviet Union added militant atheism to the onslaught.

Wirathu was arrested by Myanmar authorities in 2003 and sentenced to 25 years in prison for inciting anti-Muslim pogroms.<sup>[67]</sup> He was released in 2012 and intensified his campaign to transform Myanmar into a Buddhist state. "Now is not the time for calm" he preached, "Now is the time to rise up, to make your blood boil." Targeting the three million Muslims of Myanmar he continued, "[Muslims are breeding so fast, and they are stealing our women, raping them. ... They would like to occupy our country, but I won't let them. We must keep Myanmar Buddhist." He even declared holy war against the Christians tribes in the far north as enemies of Buddhist Myanmar.

This dramatic evolution of the traditional Western image of the saffron-robed solitary monk deep in meditation on his quest for enlightenment into the rifle and bomb wielding militant monk deeply involved in the political, economic, and military affairs of Myanmar both disturbed and captivated the imagination of the world. *Time* magazine featured Wirathu on its front cover on July 1, 2013 with the caption, "The Face of Buddhist Terror: How Militant Monks are Fueling Anti-Muslim Violence in Asia."<sup>[68]</sup>

In his evolution from solitary monk to Buddhist super-empowered individual, Wirathu quickly realized that modern technology was a powerful instrument. Mastering what is today known as "fake news," he flooded the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat with rumors and propaganda. Going global, he targeted the large Myanmar population of migrant workers in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Middle East for support, both moral and financial. When several Myanmar migrants were killed by Muslims in Malaysia, he called on Buddhists to retaliate. He condemned American President Obama as being "tainted by black Muslim blood," preached that Arabs had hijacked the UN, and even took delight in being called "The Burmese bin Laden."

In 2014 he founded the MaBaTha (Association of Protection of Race and Religion). This even more militant organization was dedicated to expelling Muslims and Christians from the country, transforming the country into a Buddhist nation, uniting the Buddhists of South Asia into a Great Sangha Alliance, and eventually to unifying the Buddhist world. He forged alliances with other politicized Buddhist movements throughout South Asia, and participated in a “Great Sangha Conference” in Colombo, Sri Lanka in September 2014 organized by a similar Buddhist political organization, the Sri Lankan Bodu Bala Sena (Army of Buddhist Power). This conference brought together representatives from most major Buddhist countries, except China and North Korea, as well as representatives from the Americas and Europe. Having mastered YouTube, Snapchat, and Facebook, he and his associates even popularized a unique militant Buddhist ringtone that can be heard throughout the country.

Wirathu is an example of a radical new way of “doing religion.” Going to temple on a regular basis, studying the holy books, and performing the prescribed rituals in the privacy of the home or house of worship no longer characterize a religious person in this brave new 21st century world. In this new age the faithful emerge from their homes and houses of worship, take up their arms, and battle for the survival and growth of their religion-civilizations. Wirathu “does Buddhism” by building militarily fortified Buddhist temples, shrines and statues in Muslim and Christian areas. He calls upon Buddhists to boycott Muslim stores and businesses, to outlaw the selling of meat as an affront to Buddhist vegetarian rules, and to ban public calls to Muslim prayers and the ringing of church bells. He calls for restrictions on the chador, the wearing of Christian medals, the nationalization of Muslim and Christian schools, and marriages between Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Finally, he calls for a new constitution that legally recognizes Buddhism as the official state religion.<sup>[69]</sup>

In supporting his call to avoid all Muslim-owned businesses, Wirathu argued, the money spent at a Muslim-owned establishment “will be used to get a Buddhist-Burmese woman and she will very soon be coerced or even forced to convert to Islam.” The children will be Muslims and will pose “the ultimate danger to our Buddhist nation,” overwhelm the Buddhists, and “eventually destroy our race and our religion.” The result will be the transformation of Burma from a Buddhist nation into “an evil Islamic Nation.”<sup>[70]</sup> The government forced the MaBaTha to disband in 2017 but members simply reorganized as the PAB (Dhamma Vamsānurakkhita).<sup>[71]</sup>

In the face of fierce foreign human rights organizations, American and European liberal groups, and the UN, Wirathu has called for limiting the citizenship rights to Buddhists, limiting minority rights to non-Buddhists, the secularization of schools, the obligatory teaching of Buddhism in all schools. The concluding memorandum of understanding that was signed at the Colombo conference stated that the signees pledged to resist the “subtle incursions taking place under the guise of secular, multicultural, and other liberal notions” that were “funded from overseas.”

Two Western films capitalized on the image of the Kalashnikov-wielding saffron-clad Buddhist monk and further propelled Wirathu into super-power status. “The Venerable W” premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2017, and “Sittwe” attracted global attention to the Buddhist campaign against the Rohingya Muslims and further solidified Wirathu’s image as the foremost fighter for Buddhism. The stereotypical image of the serene Buddhist monk lost in meditation has been replaced by the militant armed monk fighting to build a Buddhist global empire. He achieved virtual super-power status among Buddhists in Myanmar and throughout the Buddhist world, as well as among the growing millions of diaspora Buddhists in North America, the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe.

In his 1993 article “The Clash of Civilizations?” Samuel P. Huntington wrote, “It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation-states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.”<sup>[72]</sup> He carefully inserted a question mark after the title of his 1993 article, but it vanished in his 1996 book by the same title. Politicized religions had become the major force in world politics.

## **A Case Study of 21st Century Religions: The Unification Movement**

As humanity moves into the 21st century, as with every century past, old religions and gods fade away and struggle to remain relevant as new prophets emerge with new teachings. Will the great religions of the 20th century, the Catholic Church, Reform Judaism, Lutheranism, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, and Saudi Wahhabism linger, decline, or flourish? Or will Pentecostalism, Lubavitcher Judaism, ISIS, militant Buddhism, Voodoo, and yet unnoticed movements become the dominant religions of the future? As I constantly remind my students of World Religions at UTS, there are more religions and gods in the garbage can of history that there are living today.

The six characteristics 21st century religion identified in this article have presented the outlines of the religion(s) that will dominate the 21st century. They can serve as a template to evaluate the many movements currently contending for leadership.

### **1. A Super-Empowered Cleric**

In *The Clash of Civilizations* Samuel P. Huntington predicts that the major world religions of the past will continue to prevail but in an altered civilizational form. On the other hand, Thomas Friedman hints in *Longitudes and Attitudes* that the phenomenal advances in modern technology have opened the playing field to a plethora of super-empowered individuals who will found new movements that will battle for mastery of humanity in the new century. From this perspective, we will analyze one of the contenders for global prominence in the 21st Century, the Unification Movement.

Reverend Sun Myung Moon was born in what is today North Korea in 1920 and survived the chaos of Japanese colonialism, the Second World War, and the Korean War. An astute businessman, he was in the forefront of the Korean economic miracle and amassed a fortune that placed him among the super-empowered clerics of the world. *The Washington Post*, the rival of Rev. Moon's *Washington Times*, recognized the importance of the solid economic base in furthering the mission of Unificationism: "The corporate section is understood to be the engine that funds the mission of the [Unification] church." The article continues that "Moon Inc." is in fact a vast and bewildering multinational, including

... nonprofit foundations and for-profit holding companies whose global operations include computers and religious icons in Japan, seafood in Alaska, weapons and ginseng in Korea, huge tracts of land in South America, a university in Bridgeport, Conn., a recording studio and travel agency in Manhattan, a horse farm in Texas and a golf course in California.<sup>[73]</sup>

The above article is one of many voices that recognized that a solid economic base is essential in the success of new religious movements. In an article titled, "Financing the Millennium" David Bromley wrote, "The Unification Movement is most unusual in its creation of a corporate conglomerate to underwrite its theological agenda,"<sup>[74]</sup> which he estimated at around \$4 billion. Bromley argues that throughout history religious movements have amassed phenomenal economic wealth. The Catholic and various Protestant churches, the Mormons, the American Christian Right, Scientologists, Transcendental Meditation, televangelists, and many others are examples. But, he continues, what was unique in the case of the Unificationists is that Rev. Moon established his international financial empire first as an instrument to "propel the movement." The economic super-empowered individual was a prerequisite for the establishment of the religious movement.

### **2. Future Focus**

The second characteristic of 21st century religion is its intense future focus. Central to the Unification theology is the doctrine of indemnity, the process by which human beings and the world are restored to God's ideal.<sup>[75]</sup> That ideal is a farsighted and insightful religious future vision that aims at the reunification of the divided races, peoples, and religions of the world. The world of Adam and Eve is not a world to be found in the hereafter, but a concrete project for the here and now. His unique marriage blessing ceremonies bridged ancient hostilities between Japanese and Koreans, Blacks and Whites, Jews and Muslims, Christians and Jews, and Muslims and Buddhists aimed to restore humanity to its original state.

### **3. Globalized**

The movement's future orientation is inherently global. Rather than founding still another church, Rev. Moon characterized it as a 'movement' that would ultimately reunite the divided religions of the world. The use of the name "Unification" is more an ongoing process than the establishment of a new church. His vision of a theological seminary was a meeting place where the gifts of all the religions of the world would join in a common journey into the 21st century. For instance, in a sermon titled, "The Ultimate Purpose of Twenty-First Century Religion," Rev. Moon stated,

The days have ended when one country stands at the forefront and leads humanity. The era of nationalism has also ended... If we continue the era of people congregating together only by religion or race, then humanity cannot avoid a repetition of war.<sup>[76]</sup>

### **4. Transient**

This sense of an ongoing movement toward the reunification of humanity underscores another characteristic of religion in the 21st century: all religions are inherently transient. Young Oon Kim writes in *Unification Theology*, "When someone is chosen to carry out God's special will and he fails, his role is given to another." He cites the examples of Moses replaced by Joshua to lead the Hebrew into the Promised Land. When Saul failed, his throne was given to David. When Jesus was rejected by the religious authorities of his land, the Apostle Paul looked to the Gentile world "for the right place to plant the Christian faith." Likewise, when Jesus was crucified, God turned to Rev. Moon as his new Messiah.<sup>[77]</sup>

Furthermore, in spite of his elaborate and detailed theological writings, and his founding of a theological seminary, Rev. Moon did not establish a hierarchy, clergy, rituals, or institutions to carry his movement into the new century. Rather, he accepted the transience and impermanence of all human creations. Who could possibly imagine the economic, technological, cultural, biological, and religious changes that the next century

and millennium will bring? Bromley noted the apparent reluctance for Unificationism to make the transition from a charismatic movement to an established church.<sup>[78]</sup> The current conflict between Rev. Moon's children, widow, and other leaders of the Movement further underscore its transience, a characteristic of many 21st century religious movements.

### **5. Human Deification**

The Unification Movement would no doubt balk at employing the phrase “deification of humanity” to describe the end goal of the movement. Young Oon Kim wrote in *Unification Theology* that according to St. Paul, “Jesus was to be the new Adam restoring the lost Garden of Eden.” The goal of Jesus was “to subjugate Satan, cleanse men of original sin and free them from the power of evil.” Christ's ultimate mission was “raising mankind to the perfection stage.”

In a speech titled, “Human Responsibility” Rev. Moon stated, “Simply put, God's will is to fulfill the purpose of creation -- the completion or perfection of the universe and the perfection of human beings. When men and women are perfected, the universe will also be perfected. Thus the completion of the ideal of creation is the completion of the heavenly four position foundation.”<sup>[79]</sup>

Unificationism shares with many of the 20th century new religions movements the belief that humanity need not wait for heavenly bliss to enjoy perfection. The Mormons even went so far as to believe that the ultimate goal of humanity is to become gods. Whether through scientific or technological means, modern religions view human perfectibility as a realistic goal.

### **6. Politicized**

Finally, the Unification movement fits the last characteristic of 21st century religions: its active involvement in politics. The division of Korea, the Korean War, and the global conflict between the capitalist and Marxist worlds marked Rev. Moon's early years. His personal involvement in Korean politics, support for President Nixon, advocacy of the UN, and other political campaigns was often criticized and controversial, but he argued that believers should not relegate their faith to the individual soul, houses of worship, or silent prayer.

At a time when the division of humanity into hostile nations, ideologies, races, and religions risks plunging humanity into 21st century warfare, he made it his purpose to bring about the kingdom of heaven in our world with the help of righteous women and men who would take responsibility for its problems.

One of those problems, which loomed large in his ministry, was communism. In a speech on May 17, 1973, Rev. Moon declared, “I desire to create a Christian political party centering on our Unification Church in each country, gathering all Catholics, Protestants and non-religious people from throughout the world.” The movement in its first decades engaged in a life and death battle against atheistic communism; that orientation continues to influence it today. Rev. Moon made common cause with Christians and non-religious people who engaged in that battle, a fight that was political as well as spiritual.

Certain “anti-cultists” accused him of calling for the overthrow of the existing political order and the establishment of a virtual “theocracy” to rule the world. But Rev. Moon's emphasis was on the inseparability between church and state, the spiritual and the political. “So,” he concluded, “we cannot separate the political field from the religious. Democracy was born because people ruled the world, like the Pope does. Then, we come to the conclusion that God has to rule the world, and God loving people have to rule the world — and that is logical. We have to purge the corrupted politicians, and the sons of God must rule the world. The separation between religion and politics is what Satan likes most.”<sup>[80]</sup>

To celebrate his 90th birthday two years before his death on September 3, 2012, Rev. Moon published his autobiography titled, *As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen*, in which he reaffirmed his this-worldly project. In a section called, “The Ultimate Purpose of Twenty-first-Century Religion” he asks,

What is the purpose of religion? ... It is to bring about God's ideal world... If everyone were to live under God's sovereignty, we would have a world of peace where there would be no war or division. The ultimate destination of the path followed by religions should be world peace.... The ultimate goal of Unificationism and all religions is a world in which the diverse peoples, nations, races, and religions live in peace.”<sup>[81]</sup>

Thus, the Unification Movement generally corresponds to the six characteristics of religion in the 21st century outlined in this article.

## **Conclusion**

The products of modern technology are taking religions into worlds where no man has gone before. Super-empowered clerics are doing religion in ways never before imagined, future earthly paradises are replacing heavens above, the shelf-life of new religions is short, obscure religions emerge into global powers, humans and even machines achieve divine powers, and achieving political power replaces individual salvation as the goal of religions. No one can predict the future, but this brief excursion into the religious future of humanity has indicated some of the trends that will shape the future of our species.

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