

The Technology-Empowered Cleric and the End of Religions as We Know Them

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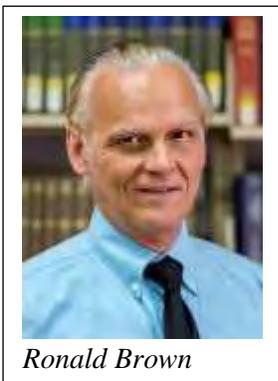


Thomas Friedman argued in *Longitudes and Attitudes: Exploring the World After September 11* (2002) that modern technology had given rise to "super-empowered individuals" such as George Soros, Mark Zuckerberg, Robert Murdoch, Oprah Winfrey, and Osama bin Laden, who have amassed more power than traditional presidents, kings, generals, and dictators.

I believe super-empowered clerics have joined Friedman's list of super-empowered individuals shaping the 21st century. These clerics are doing

religion in ways never before imagined, hastening the decline of historic religions, and pioneering the rise of new global religions. Super-empowered clerics are taking religions to places where no one has gone before.

Here, I analyze the six (sometimes conflicting) characteristics of emerging religious movements: 1) The centrality of super-empowered clerics, 2) the merging of past, present and future, 3) the transience of religion, 4) the globalization of religions, 5) the deification of humans, and, 6) the politicization of religions.



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Super-empowered clerics

The modern technological revolution is radically altering thousands-year-old systems of religious leadership. Super-empowered clerics such as Rev. Billy Graham, Menachem Schneerson of the Lubavitch Jewish sect, the Dalai Lama, Christian televangelists Robert H. Schuller and Joel Osteen, the Brazilian cleric Edir Macedo, ISIS caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Buddhist Dhammakaya Chandra Khonnokyoong, and bin Laden emerged as religious superstars. They preside over virtual congregations, even empires, that exploit the Internet, cheap air travel, mass communications, videos, neuroscience, and have at their disposal colossal financial resources made possible by the new global economy.

Brazilian pastor Macedo is a prime example of the cleric of the future. Unlike traditional religious leaders who received their authority from long-established institutions, Macedo claims he received his calling and empowerment directly from God. He did not consider himself bound by ancient tradition, long-decided dogmas, historical precedent, or hierarchical superiors.

Macedo was born to a poor family in 1945, broke with the Catholic Church, and founded the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in 1977. According to *Forbes'* world billionaires list, among pastors, by 2013 Macedo was on top with a reported \$1.24 billion for him and his family. Combining the modern quest for material riches with a return to the early Christian emphasis on exorcising evil spirits and other early Christian gifts of the Holy Spirit, he recognized that control of 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.

From his current corporate headquarters in New York City, the church controls 23 TV stations, 40 radio stations, two major newspapers, a real estate agency, a health insurance company, an airline, and claims a global membership of 15 million.

Macedo mastered online banking, exploited offshore havens, allegedly engaged in money laundering, and even crypto currencies that handled over \$2 billion between 2003 and 2008. Always one step ahead of the law in Brazil, in many Latin American, African, Asian, and European countries, as well as the USA, his mastery of modern banking technology made Macedo into what Friedman termed a "super-empowered individual."

Merging of past, present and future

One of the most empowering forces super-empowered clerics have mastered is the information revolution. Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, online magazines, blogs, and cable and satellite global news channels, have linked the most remote African tribal village with the great mega-cities of the globe into a virtual community. The overwhelming speed of technological change causes the past, present and

future to merge into one blurred experience. Unsure of the future, and troubled by the present, new religious movements plunge into the distant past. Movements as diverse as ISIS, religious Zionism, the Hindu BJP, militant Buddhism, and Pentecostal Christianity, labor to restore the former greatness of religious civilizations.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi founded ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in 1999 and elaborated a powerful future vision of restoring the Muslim world to the days of the Prophet Mohammed and first four caliphs. Overwhelmed by almost two millennia of Islamic history, culture, scholarship, and tradition, movements like ISIS found refuge in the Golden Age of the Prophet Mohammed. Islam is based on a series of divinely-inspired teachers including Adam, Moses, Abraham, and Jesus, plus a host of lesser-known "pagan" prophets. Unfortunately, from their perspective, a plethora of Jewish and Christian sects distorted and perverted the teachings of these prophets, as did a succession of Islamic theologians, kings, caliphs, and dictators.

When al-Baghdadi declared himself the new caliph in 2014, his followers believe he restored the central pillar of Islam founded by the Prophet himself. Islamic history allegedly regained its forward march into the 21st century.

Transience

The phenomenal success of the newest smartphone fades with the arrival of next year's even more advanced device. The latest supermodel enjoys a shelf life of mere months, the next Hollywood blockbuster dominates screens for mere days, and today's Washington political scandal blows over in hours. The speed of technological change has not only transformed the way we live but the way we think. Just as we easily dispose hardly worn sneakers when a new style hits an online shopping site, so we readily discard a superstar 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.

This breakneck evolution of technological change has likewise given rise to religious movements that briefly rise, flower and decline. Hare Krishna and Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (commonly called Rajneesh), took the USA by storm with his unique combination of 1960s cult fascination and astute sense of business, only to fade away and be replaced by the next religious fashion with its own hierarchies, institutions, denominations, clergy, theology, rituals, and scriptures.

Liberated from the past, superstar clerics are free to reinterpret or even reject ancient scriptures, elaborate new rituals, sever any denominational affiliations, and invent new theologies. Freed from any roots, they can confront and hopefully resolve the challenges of climate change, sexism, racism, the arrival of artificial intelligence and robots, globalization, pandemics, same-sex relationships, and other current issues.



A replica of the Temple of Solomon, built by Brazilian televangelist Edir Macedo's "Universal Church of the Kingdom of God" in Sao Paulo.

Globalization

All of today's major world religions, from Catholicism to Islam, from Protestantism to Mormonism, spread around the globe by successfully exploiting the latest technology. Saints Peter and Paul took to the Roman road system, Islam and Buddhism mastered the global trading routes, Luther embraced the printing press, and the Anglicans were one step behind the British army in transforming the Church of England into a global religion.

Rabbi Schneur Salzman founded the Jewish Chasidic sect, the Lubavitchers, in Russia in 1775 as just another of many sects established by charismatic rabbis. Like most Chasidic and Orthodox rabbis at the time, Rabbi Shmuel Schneerson counseled his followers to remain in Russia rather than flee to America to escape the ravages of pogroms and religious persecution. The result was the virtual extermination of Russian Chasidic sects by the Czar, the Bolsheviks, and later Stalin and Hitler's Gestapo.

Unusual for Orthodox rabbis at the time, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-94) graduated from the ESTP (France's leading engineering university) in Paris with a degree in mechanics and electrical engineering in 1937. During the Second World War, he found refuge in Brooklyn, NY, where he gathered the few surviving followers. Convinced the teachings of the sect must be preserved, he transformed the traditional geographic ghetto into a modern technological ghetto by exploiting every advance in modern technology. From a handful of survivors, the movement claims 200,000 members today in 3,600 institutions, in 1,000 cities and in 100 countries. Its mammoth online Chanukah celebration of 2015 reached an audience of over 8 million.

Mourid, Jain, Sikh, Voodoo, Santeria, Zen Buddhist, Wicca, and Dervish places of worship, study, and association have spread worldwide, along with web sites, email, online magazines, DVDs, chat sites, and even online seminaries and colleges in the global language, English, other major languages, and the home language of the movement.

The deification of humanity

For thousands of years, humans have worshipped deities who 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.

From the classic novel, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, to the 1989 martial arts film, *Cyborg*, scientists have taken the lead in fearlessly granting humans the attributes of the gods. Beginning with cardiac pacemakers, cochlear implants, hearing aids, contact lenses, to artificial hips and knees, humans are merging with machines. Soon neural implants will upload every memory, every word ever spoken, and every thought a person ever had, making humans virtually all knowing. In the film *Transcendence*, Johnny Depp achieves immortality by uploading his mind to a computer and even recreating a physical self.

In *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*, Ray Kurzweil argues that not only will humans be enhanced by machine implants, but machines will become humanized and even spiritualized. Machines will not only have prodigious memories, he argues, but 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 human supervision.

Science and technology are achieving the age-old goal of religion -- the creation of the perfect human being. In a very telling comment in *Transcendence*, Depp proclaims he had become god. He was all-knowing, eternal, and all-powerful. He had transcended the constraints of physical existence and become a spiritual being. *TIME* magazine even wrote in a cover story that man would become immortal in the year 2045.

The politicization of religions

In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996), Samuel P. Huntington recognized that the 21st century would be marked by the triumph of religious-based civilizations. Nine religion-based civilizations are rapidly replacing the nation-state and the secular ideal of the modern nation-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 Confucianism in China are eroding the secular ideal and erasing national boundaries.

Unlike Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism that contain clearly elaborated principles for a religious-based state, Buddha vehemently rejected any notion of a Buddhist state. He even went so far as to list the state as one of the many illusions that impeded the human path toward enlightenment.

However, confronted by Muslim invaders, Christian missionaries, Marxist and socialist reformers, and more recently, American Evangelical Christians, the ancient kingdoms of South Asia have elaborated an ideal of a Theravada Buddhist state.

In Myanmar (Burma), the monk Ashin Wirathu founded the Ma Ba Tha (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion) and the 969 Movement to resist Muslim and Christian influences and construct a Theravada Empire. In cooperation with Buddhist militants in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and in the diaspora, he founded a Great Sangha Alliance uniting monks and laity that hold conferences, coordinate military training, and pressure governments to institutionalize Buddhism. He organized monks into military formations called *tahanphra*, fortified monasteries, and according to critics, launched a campaign of terrorism against Christian churches and missionaries, Muslim mosques and communities, and the Rohingya minority in western Myanmar.

Wirathu has mastered YouTube, Facebook and other social media. Two 2017 documentary films on Wirathu, "The Venerable W" and "Sittwe," attracted global attention and resulted in numerous interviews by the world press. 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.

Conclusion

The products of modern technology are taking religions into universes where no one has gone before. Super-empowered clerics are doing religion in ways never before imagined, hastening the decline of historic religions, and pioneering the rise of new global religions.

No one can predict the future but hopefully this brief excursion into the religious future of humanity indicates some of the trends that will shape the future of our species.

Adapted from the author's paper delivered in April at the New England-Maritimes Regional Group of the American Academy of Religion's annual conference at the Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston.

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Photo at top: *Monk Wirathu speaks by video to a Ma Ba Tha conference last year in Yangon, Myanmar.*