

The Future of Religion and the Future of Humanity

David Frawley*

The future of religion is a crucial topic in this time of major technological and social changes that are reshaping our human associations, ambitions, and aspirations, including religion, though in ways that can be helpful or harmful.

Yet to examine the future of religion, we must first examine its present and its past, out of which its future will arise, either reforming or promoting what it has become today.

The Ancient Religion of Nature and the Cosmos

Religion of some type is as old as humanity going back before the dawn of history, starting with a worship of the forces of nature and a recognition of the sacred pervading the whole of life. This natural religion we still see in native and indigenous peoples, largely tribals, throughout the world, who are still struggling to survive the onslaught of our technological and media-based civilization.

This early stage of religion has long been deemed primitive, prehistoric, or simply uneducated and uncivilized, needing to be eradicated and replaced by the organized religions of recent centuries. Yet it has a more direct and mystical experience of the life around us than what modern people experience today. Native peoples much know nature, the plants and animals, months and seasons with much greater intimacy and respect than our current urban elite and its artificial way of life. They are at home in nature, not simply in an artificial urban environment.

Early humanity up to two thousand years ago had diverse religious, spiritual and cultural traditions strongly connected to nature and without distinct boundaries or conflicts. These included countries that had large

empires, massive monuments and long historical records like Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece, and Rome which Western history books still highlight.

India and China had even larger and more enduring rich ancient sacred traditions, temples and rituals as did Peru and Mexico which had comparable civilizations. This early religion of nature formed the matrix for the birth of civilization everywhere, which looked to the mountains and the stars, but strangely became discredited, if not demonized by new religious movements.

The Greeks and Romans with all their Gods and Goddesses, temples and rituals also had their philosophies, science, art, music, and architecture that became the basis of these cultural traditions in later Western civilization, particularly after they were rediscovered by the European Renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Our accounts of history, however, downplay the role of their pagan religions, as if these were no part of civilization, though these formed the foundation of all civilizations.

The Triumph of Exclusive Monotheism and the Monotheistic History of War

The idea of what religion is and should be changed radically along with an increase in religious intolerance and violence with the ascendancy of Christianity and monotheism beginning in Rome in the fourth century and spreading out from there. Monotheism became the official prototype of what true religion should be and all else, including magnificent ancient civilizational glories, became dismissed as irreligious and heretical, only fit to be destroyed.

Monotheism was very political and aggressive. Its call for one God, One Book and One King fueled conquest, conversion, and domination even of peaceful and refined pagan neighbors. The many pagan and native traditions within and nearby the Roman Empire resisted, but in a few centuries were largely conquered and often

*Well-known Vedacharya, a Padma Bhushan, author of many acclaimed books on Ayurveda, Indology, and comparative religion.

massacred in the name of the One God and his saviour son. This occurred along with the destruction of pagan arts, science, and philosophy, however profound, and the beginning of a new dark age in terms of civilization, science and spirituality that took a thousand years to begin to recover from.

Before these monotheistic wars of aggression, different countries and peoples had their wars, but only for outer power, not the supremacy of one belief. There was a tolerance of religious differences, such as we see in the Roman Empire before Christianity. For example, the Roman army took up the Persian religion of Mithra, though the Persians were their main enemies. Religion was regarded as a private matter and was left alone unless it challenged the ruling political powers at a political level.

Monotheistic conversion-based religious wars spread over time, going worldwide in the colonial era after the sixteenth century. These wars of conversion destroyed numerous cultures and brought about a genocide of many peoples in America, Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands and beyond. The denigration of non-monotheists as heathens or kafirs who needed to be converted or eliminated, targeted great ancient and sophisticated civilizations like India, China, and Mexico, and tried to destroy these as well, as if they were only religious savages.

While we may like to dismiss this aggression today in the post-colonial era as a thing of the past, its shadows continue today in subversive and insidious ways. Now in the 21st century the multinational, multibillion conversion business remains one of the largest in the world and remains religiously intolerant and exclusive, as well as politically motivated.

Monotheistic Islam did much the same as Christianity as it conquered various parts of Asia and Africa after it arose in the seventh century in Arabia. It also brutally attacked non-monotheistic civilizations like India and China trying to remove their wide cultural influence that had endured for many centuries, producing great art, philosophy and dharmic spirituality, including the great science of consciousness through mantra and meditation.

Wars Inside of Monotheistic Beliefs

Monotheistic religions also fought brutally with each other with jihads, holy wars, and crusades. Christianity and Islam had long wars between themselves, including in Spain, the Holy Land and throughout Eastern Europe even up to the twentieth century when the Balkans finally cast off Islam.

The monotheistic Jews, who did not engage in such conquest and conversion, were a common target for these exclusivist monotheistic beliefs along with the pagans and

kafirs and were often massacred like them. Monotheism did not bring any unity or peace to humanity.

In addition, monotheistic beliefs had their own internal wars, which could be quite brutal as well, like the Catholic and Protestant wars of the Reformation that devastated Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or the Shia-Sunni divide in Islam which continues today.

Religions Today

Today monotheistic Christianity is largely in decline, particularly the Roman Catholics and mainstream Protestants, even the Orthodox Eastern Christians in their own countries, though the Catholics have not given up conversion programs to replenish their diminished followers elsewhere. The more aggressive Evangelical Protestants are still expanding, trying to convert the Catholics and other Protestants. They still target non-European populations, countries, and cultures, including India with its large population, not only Hindus and Sikhs but its tribals as well. Indigenous peoples from Native Americans to Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands remain under siege by Christian missionaries.

The Resurgence of Islam

Islam came under European Christian domination in the nineteenth century after years of struggle, as European powers, mainly Britain, France, and Russia, turned them into their colonies as well. Islam declined in power by the twentieth century and later reformed itself after WWII in a more modern manner as in Turkey under Ataturk after World War I and the United Arab Republic after World War II. But this trend failed.

Pakistan, formed by the partition of Hindu India in favour of its Islamic minority in 1947, became an Islamic religious state, though with the military support of Great Britain and the United States.

In recent decades Islam has experienced a new resurgence at religious and political levels. It has formed a large migrant population, particularly in Europe, not honouring European culture or its Christian background, but as a hostile minority seeking its power if not territory, an extension of the medieval Christian and Islamic wars. This conflict is likely to increase for years or even decades to come, though some parts of the older Islamic world like Saudi Arabia and UAE are trying to reform, modernize and be more accepting of other religions.

Future of Pagan and Native Traditions

Older non-monotheistic pagan traditions are also rising again as Europe has moved away from its Christian

exclusivism. However, these neo-pagan groups still do not have equal respect. They remain few and limited in influence. Still, they have survived for the future and their Greco-Roman connections to European civilization are becoming more prominent. They will likely increase but slowly.

Native and indigenous traditions worldwide are also gaining prominence like Native American traditions, though their culture is often made merely commercial, not deeply respected, and native reservations are still targeted by missionaries. Similar situations exist in Africa, the last area to be colonized in the nineteenth even into the twentieth centuries, and the Pacific Islands.

The New Politics of Religion

European countries tried to eliminate the nexus of Church and State, particularly in Catholic countries, which process they called "secularism". Yet today so-called democratic countries still must consider the religious vote and cater to it at election time. Specifically, minority religions, like those of recent migrants and immigrants, have become vote banks. Not offending minority religious sentiments has become a problem for democracies, which as with the Israel and Palestine war creates political divides in European and American countries.

This means that religions have made a political comeback in modern democracies, even though religious terrorism was initially discredited, which tries to create and benefit from these religious vote banks. They have done the same with ethnicity, class, and identity politics overall. Vote banks, not simply the freedom to vote as an individual wishes, have become the new political order.

Political assertion of religion including aggression, protests, riots, and terrorism has become a global political force, notably for radical Islam, which is using migration to spread their religion as their new army.

Future of Buddhism

Buddhism has had a mixed future. Buddhist teachings and meditation practice have gained respect in intellectual circles in many countries, including at the university level.

Yet at a political level, Buddhism does not have much power either in terms of diplomatic influence, economics, or diplomacy. There are no Buddhist superpowers, as China has become communist and nationalist not Buddhist. Japan though an economic power has not tried to represent Buddhism globally at a political level, though has given it some support. The many small Buddhist countries of South and East Asia from Sri Lanka

to Cambodia do not have the power to defend Buddhism and have no real voice in global diplomacy.

Certainly, the Dalai Lama is popular worldwide, but he has not been able to save his own country of Tibet. Even the Buddhist teachings that have gained recognition at an academic and scientific level have not yielded any real political support for their countries and cultures.

Revival of Hindu India

Hindu India is perhaps surprisingly the main non-monotheistic religion that is experiencing a great revival, not only as a religion but as a culture and a civilization. Its Yoga teachings and Vedantic philosophy of self-realization and religious pluralism have been spreading worldwide, though not so much at a political level as that of culture and lifestyle. This revival has occurred after a long period of Islamic domination, colonial rule, and anti-Hindu Nehruvian socialism.

This Hindu religious revival is that of the oldest religion in the world and will likely continue for the foreseeable future. Without a religious voice or Hindu identity and Hindu vote, Hindus previously had little power and seemed in decline. But Hindus have learned their lessons today and the need for a political, media and academic voice, their assertion, independence, and confidence.

We can observe this in the Narendra Modi era who has made being a proud Hindu a mark of India's greatness and power for the future and our new planetary era. This is very different from the old Gandhian model of Hinduism which was passive, apologetic, and easily conquered or compromised by more aggressive traditions.

Some Sikhs in India continue to call for their own state in Punjab, but their numbers are small, their birth rate is low and their susceptibility to conversion, particularly to Evangelical Christianity is high.

Beyond Organized Religion to Experiential Spirituality

Many people today claim to be spiritual but not religious. This usually means that they reject organized religion and religious sectarianism but still seek a deeper consciousness and connection to the world of nature and the universe. Such experiential spirituality does not rely on belief but more so on meditation, contemplation, chanting, pilgrimage, and ritual, and often honours indigenous and native traditions. It relates to the revival of many ancient spiritual and mystical traditions.

This movement towards experiential spirituality at an individual level favours dharmic traditions like Hindu and Buddhist and their diverse Yoga and meditation

traditions, with special practices designed for each person, and an honouring of the sacred in all life and existence, a true unity of consciousness, not a mere uniformity of belief.

However, new religious wars are likely to develop, and old religious wars are likely to linger, particularly when religious aggression remains a path to political power, as is the case with radical Islam, and when exclusivist organized religions are still aiming to conquer and convert all humanity.

The real question is not just the future of religion, but the future of humanity and the Earth overall, for which religious aggression, largely born of exclusive monotheism, is one of the greatest dangers, particularly

if allied with a new weaponized technology and mass media.

We need to return to our original spiritual aspiration as a species, looking at the universe with wonder, awe, and respect. We need to go back to our ancient sages, rishis, yogis, and gurus, who can teach us to directly realize the Divine within ourselves beyond all beliefs, as our true Self that is one with all existence. That is the real eternal future of religion, but we require a vision of the eternal and the infinite to create it.

Yoga and Vedanta show the way, but we must bring these teachings into both our individual lives and our cultures as a whole, as a dharmic civilization for the entire world.