



A reflection by Sara Robinson, NSUC Congregant

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THE GOD THAT IS TO BE

Remarks as prepared (and, more or less, as given)

This sermon was hard to get a handle on. I've been picking at it for weeks, making notes about what I wanted to say, trying to distill it all down to something simple and clear I could put across in twenty minutes. A couple days ago, overwhelmed by it all, I decided to give God a call and get his thoughts. (Yes, we're still on speaking terms. Don't look so shocked.)

So I dug out his card and dialed his private line, and was surprised to get his answering machine. Who knew? And the message said, -- in God's voice, which some of you have heard -- "I may be omnipresent, but I'm not here right now. And I may be omniscient -- but leave your name and number anyway."

I take this as proof that God isn't what he used to be. And, since one of the first assumptions of futurism is that the future won't be like the past, he's probably not what he's going to be, either. And that's what I want to talk about today: the way our old ideas about divinity and reality are changing, and some of the directions those changes might take in this new century.

To that end, I want to cut you in on some shop talk, and share with you some of the things social and religious futurists talk about when we get together -- specifically, ten emerging trends that are affecting the global religious landscape, and will likely shape our ideas about faith over the next several decades.

1. Reports of the death of religion are greatly exaggerated. For most of the 20th century, the smart people in North America and Europe kept telling us, with smug certainty and probably more wishful thinking than they'd be willing to

admit, that religion was on its way out.

In fact, for a while back there in the 1960s it was widely announced that God was already dead. Of course, being God, that didn't stop him from staging a major comeback. Looking around now, eight years into the 21st century, we find him alive and well and living, well, almost everywhere except Europe and Canada. Which is probably why I got his answering machine.

We know this because last year, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life -- a very reputable research firm that tracks religious trends worldwide -- went around the world asking people a basic yes-or-no question: Yes or no: "Religion is very important to me."

The numbers in Europe and Canada were low to middling. In Great Britain, 33 percent of those polled said religion was "very important" in their lives. It was 27 percent in Italy, 21 percent in Germany and 11 percent in France. In Poland, the number was 36 percent, with Russia at 14 percent and the Czech Republic at 11 percent. The numbers in Canada were pretty much like those in England. In the US, you will not be surprised to learn, the numbers were about twice as high as they were in Europe: about six out of ten respondents said that religion was very important in their lives.

But when Pew went to Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the numbers were even higher yet. In Guatemala, 80 percent of those polled said religion was "very important" in their lives. That number was 77 percent in Brazil and 72 percent in Honduras, but only 39 percent in Argentina. In Asia, the "yes" total was 95 percent in Indonesia, 92 percent in India, 91 percent in the Philippines, but only 12 percent in Japan. And in Africa, Senegal checks in at 97 percent, Nigeria is 92 percent. By comparison, Angola is positively secular, coming in at just 80 percent.

So the world is still a very religious place indeed, though the Pew researchers are still scratching their heads about why Europe should be such a secular anomaly. They're also now exploring other questions raised by this data, too. For example, the most secular parts of the world also have the lowest fertility rates; and the most religious parts have the highest. Why is this so? And what does it mean for the future of secular

societies around the world? And what will happen as Europe tries to assimilate large numbers of religious believers, including Muslims and eastern European Christians?

It's clear that modernism didn't kill religion; and postmodernism isn't likely to, either. Faith may be on the wane in the northern tier of the planet, but it's still kicking hard everywhere else.

2. A second trend, related to the first one, is that the center of gravity for the Christian world is moving south.

Latin America is going Pentecostal at such a furious rate that the traditional Catholic churches have absorbed many Pentecostal practices, like speaking in tongues and ecstatic worship, in order to keep their members from drifting away. Observers say that Protestants may outnumber Catholics as early as 2025 -- it's happening that fast.

In Africa, Christian and Muslim missionaries are squaring off in turf battles; and the Pew researchers are frankly worried that conflict and competition between the two conversion-oriented faiths could eventually lead to political disruptions and military confrontations.

North American Catholics are noticing that a growing number of the priests serving their churches are coming in from the global south -- and these priests are often far more traditional than their fairly liberal American and Canadian congregations. As these priests move up through the church hierarchy in the years ahead, this southern traditionalism may make the church even more conservative as the century rolls on.

And there's a risk that might further alienate North Americans and Europeans, to the point where the Catholic Church becomes largely a phenomenon of the southern hemisphere in another generation or two.

3. Here in North America, we've got two trends that are going to really shake things up for a while. Our third trend is the rise of the Millennial generation -- the cohort of kids born between 1980 and 2002 (give or take a couple years). Generational theorists have been writing about these kids since they were in diapers -- but now a critical mass of them has reached young adulthood, and in the past few years, they've started to have a huge impact on the way this

continent does religion.

After forty years of Baby Boomers and Generation X, these kids are truly something new under the sun. The last two groups -- which includes most of us in this room -- tended to be inner-directed. Making some gross generalizations -- I know a lot of us here were exceptions -- Boomers and Xers weren't big joiners. We preferred individual "spirituality" over group-oriented "religion". Our first impulse was to question authority -- especially religious authority. By and large -- and especially as we grew older -- we were content to focus on personal salvation instead of changing the world.

All those people who claimed God was dead back there in the 1900s? They were looking at the religious habits of us Boomers and Xers, and extrapolating that trend forward. Extrapolating trends is always a risky business, and in this case, it led to the grossest possible errors. Those extrapolations didn't count on the Millennials, who, as it turns out, are going completely the opposite direction.

There's a lot that really distinctive about these kids. First of all, they were raised from birth -- by us -- to be mindful and kind to others, and excellent team players. Their strong group identification is reinforced by the fact that they grew up with computers and cell phones in their hands. There's not a moment of the day these kids aren't wired up to a worldwide network of friends. If you're looking for rugged individualists, don't look here: one exasperated market researcher said that "These kids have to call their friends first thing in the morning and just to find out how they feel."

By the time they graduate from high school, Millennials have put in more community service hours by far than any generation that preceded them (though back in my day, I have to say, nobody was actually counting). That's instilled in them a strong sense of social justice, huge confidence in their own ability to make a difference, and an outward-facing view of religion that's all about serving others instead of perfecting yourself.

As are the most ethnically diverse generation in North American history, they slip across racial and ethnic barriers without a thought. Because of this, their sense of "tribe" is extraordinarily expansive and inclusive. In a real sense, they're our first truly global generation.

Religious leaders of every faith are having to make big changes to reach these kids. The biggest story of all right now is how they're rocking the foundations of Christian fundamentalism. A Barna Research study earlier this year found that 80% of Evangelicals under 30 said they found their churches' assaults on gay rights "hateful." That's the word they used, completely unbidden by the researchers. They don't like the right-wing culture war. They grew up with it, they're tired of it, and they want their elders to knock it off.

They want their churches to work on the stuff that really matters -- stuff like social justice, poverty, and the environment. If they can't get that in the megachurches, they'll join the Emergent Church movement and create a close-knit, tribal religious family of their own.

Right now, the upshot is a generational battle royal that's just now getting underway -- but by the time it's over, it will probably completely remake the religious right as we've known it. And can I say: It's about time?

4. And at the same time all this is happening, we're also seeing a resurgence of atheism. This may be old news in Canada, but the discovery that they have atheists!!! in their midst is creating quite a stir south of the border.

Much to the surprise of both the very religious and the entirely irreligious, non-theism consistently shows up as the second or third most popular belief across most of the states in the US. According to a recent survey by the City University of New York, atheism is the number one religion (by proportion of adherents) in Washington and Idaho; and number two or three in almost all the other states.

Nationwide, atheists ranks #3 overall, just behind the Catholics and the Baptists. And what I find most odd about this is that it's not just a phenomenon of the liberal coasts. Non-religious people make up a higher percentage of the populations of Idaho, Montana, and Nevada than they do of those of California, Massachusetts or New York. It turns out that rural may not directly equate to religious after all.

Despite these huge numbers, though, Americans still don't tolerate atheists very well. Very few elected officials in the US are willing to admit to a lack of religious faith, which is smart, because a significant plurality of US voters say that they'd never vote for a

non-believer. Recently, though, I've been seeing the early stirrings of a small movement afoot to make a secular life an acceptable choice -- not the militant media posturings of Madelyn Murray O'Hair, but a quiet campaign to put it out there that we're here, we're perfectly moral, get over it. I wish them well.

5. Most of the mainstream religions are getting serious about embedding environmental ethics into their theology, their rituals, and their teachings. The global inter-religious dialogue on this has been going on for about fifteen years now, which is long enough that it's soaked through an entire generation of young clergy, and is now being absorbed into their congregations.

The idea that the living earth and its vast matrix of interlocking systems are inherently sacred was a heretical idea just twenty-five years ago. But when even a far-right kook like Pat Robertson goes on TV and tells his flock that climate change is serious and real and Jesus wants them to fix it, you know that there's some real change afoot in the way people are assessing their relationship to the planet. As we look ahead to solving some of our big problems, it's good to note that some of the most important memetic shifts of all have already been made. Religion has taken up the task of teaching people what's required, and priming them to act.

6. The marketplace of spiritual ideas is going global. You may have noticed that it's a small world, and it keeps getting smaller. We've got twice as many people now than we did when I was born. But we've also got far more access to all those people, through trade and the Internet and social networks, than we could have even imagined a decade ago. And that interconnectivity has important implications for the future religious life of the planet.

For one thing, we're all becoming far more aware of each other -- both our similarities and our differences -- as the planet shrinks. And this is opening up a wildly rich and exotic marketplace, a sort of global souk of religious ideas. Last year, I went online and downloaded the PDF of an 80-year-old book that was the only account in English of life among the traditional Yezidi tribes of Kurdistan. They're almost extinct now, since their remote homeland has been a war zone for the past 30 years. But if you're

interested in their unique folkways -- or in Apache girls' coming of age rites, or what goes on in Mormon temples, or reading comparable translations of the Kama Sutra -- well, there's a vast feast of amazing material just a quick Google search away.

And the cross-pollination that results from this is equally boggling. My thesis advisor pointed out to me a couple of weeks ago that historically, Islam never had an apocalyptic end-times story like the one Christians find in the Book of Revelation. In fact, such stories have been widely rejected as heresy by even the most conservative ayatollahs.

It's only been in the past few decades that fundamentalist Muslims have become obsessed with the return of the Twelfth Imam -- an end-times story that's justifying a considerable amount of Islamic terrorism. The myth of the Hidden Imam has always been part of the Shia belief system, but it's the whole narrative has been blown up with resounding apocalyptic fervor among the jihadi crowd in recent years.

The crazy thing is: it turns out that this new Muslim end-times scenario was lifted, almost whole, from the Rapture stories told by American Protestant fundamentalists. They took the 19th century ravings of American preacher John Nelson Darby -- who first dreamed up the Rapture idea -- and just changed the names to suit their own eschatology. I did not say that this sharing of religious ideas would always have constructive results, but you have to admit that some of the mutations are interesting.

7. Of course, for every action, there's a reaction. All this syncretic sharing and blending may yield some weird and wonderful things; but there's a counter-trend here we also need to be aware of. In the developing world, there are a lot of former colonies that are still struggling to define their national culture and identities after generations of colonial oppression.

In a lot of these countries, people are tapping back into their pre-colonial religious roots, reclaiming old customs, beliefs, and practices as they try to cobble together a new national identity. Precisely because these cultural identities are so new and fragile, these revived religious aspects may be exaggerated -- and people can get a little defensive about them. As UUs, we try hard to be respectful about appropriating

customs from other faith traditions. The need to respect people who are working hard to rebuild lost cultural identity is an important reason for us to keep being careful about that.

- .8, It's a historical truth that religions tend to spread and grow right alongside rising economic and political powers. In this century, the world's two up-and-comers are India and China.

As they become bigger players on the world stage, we can expect that those countries' dominant religions -- Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism in particular -- will become far more visible and influential on the global religious scene. Watch for it!

- .9, The hardest truth is: We are not going to get rid of fundamentalism. The best we're ever going to do is contain it. And, fortunately, we're starting to understand something about how to do that.

Authoritarian religion, like authoritarian politics, is a social pathology that takes root wherever people feel like they're losing control over their traditional ways of life --- particularly where work and family are concerned. They thrive on confusion, and this is why fundamentalists are taught in their churches to look for potential converts who are going through important life transitions, or have just sustained some kind of heavy emotional loss. They know those people are vulnerable, and may be very receptive to the idea of having someone else make their decisions for them.

Unfortunately, there are going to be a lot more of these vulnerable souls in the world as we go through wrenching process of moving off of carbon fuels, rebuilding our economy and our infrastructure, and coping with the dislocations caused by climate change. A lot of people's well-ordered lives are likely to be devastated by events; and in the aftermath, they may be willing to follow anyone who promises to restore structure and meaning to their lives. □ One of my biggest worries as a futurist is that these movements could become far more prevalent in the transitional years ahead of us; and that they could even become big and powerful enough to slow the transition process down, or stop it altogether.

The best protection against authoritarianism is a good education. We also need to plan the transition responsibly and intelligently, so that the transition will be as smooth as possible for as many of us as possible. As long as people see themselves moving toward a better future, we'll probably be able to keep the religious and political authoritarians at bay. But the risk is real, and we need to be thinking about it now.

. 10. You know I had to get around to this one. Technology.

Technology is already challenging our ideas of what it means to be human, to be alive, to be a spiritual being. Genetic engineering, cloning, nanotechnology, bionics, and computers that can outsmart us have been the stuff of science fiction for sixty years now; but that future is now here; and it's going to be interesting to watch our current crop of religions wrestle with the new ethical and theological questions these technologies raise.

Personally, I think this is going to be the biggest religious challenge of all in the coming century -- but if we do the job well, I think we may end up with a far more expansive and inclusive sense of the sacred than we can possibly imagine right now.

Everybody wants to know what's going to be different in the future - how things are likely to change, and how we can be ready for those changes. But we often forget to ask the corollary question: What stays the same? What will we be taking forward with us to build on?

Religion changes, and will continue to change. But if the last century didn't knock the religious impulse out of us, it may be time to accept that it's here to stay. And one of the best things about being a UU is that our faith is built on the things most likely to have enduring human value: compassion, justice, friendship, community, and celebrating the wonder of our lives. Those are the things we will carry forward -- the unchanging things that will sustain us through this century, and (we hope) many more to come.