

Does Religion Have a Future?

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A Margaret "Peggy" Kai Memorial Lecture
Tenney Theatre, St. Andrew's Cathedral
May 17, 1994

I need to point out at the start that I prepared three versions of my talk: I have a very short version, a somewhat longer version, and a yet longer version still--this latter being the one you, unfortunately, are going to get. No, in fact it's worse than that: I am going to give you all three versions.

Here is the first:

Version One:

I hope you all know that the title of my little talk today is, "Does religion have a future?" Well, the short answer to my question, "does religion have a future?" is probably the answer that is in your head and on your lips this very moment, namely, "Get real, Dator, for Chrissake: Of course religion has a future; a great future: as it was in the beginning is now and evermore shall be world without end--and hence religion without end--amen. So sit down and shut up."

Well, I won't. At least not for a while.

So on to Version Two. Here's another way one might answer the question, "does religion have a future?"

The second version starts out by our reflecting on the fact that God and religion are not the same thing. "Not everyone who saith unto me 'lord, lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven." In fact, maybe no one currently saying "lord, lord" will make it. The Hound of Heaven seems more interested in chasing sinners down the highways and byways of our mind than sitting around being petted and adored.

So religion may very well have no future, while God, in all her glory, keeps right on trucking. Or at least some religions or branches of religions, may have no future, while others may continue on from glory unto glory, while yet other, newer, religions which will prosper and flourish over the 21st Century and beyond, may be struggling at this very minute to be born.

Another way of saying it is that while religion may not have much of a future, spirituality just might.

I am struck by the fact that, like everything else in the world, no religion has existed forever. Like everything else in the world, each religion has come into existence at a particular point in time (some recently, some a very long time ago, but all at some point in time well after the Big Bang, you might say, when the Cosmic Egg was laid), then each religion has flourished more or less mightily and seemingly invincibly, some for a long time; and then many religions have either vanished away entirely, never to rise again, while

others have become quite feeble and obscure in comparison to their previously omnipotent presence and power.

To repeat, everything which exists, or has existed, or which will exist on this earth, at one time did not exist, then is born, lives, and eventually dies.

One of the things I do professionally as a futurist is to go around to organizations and say that, before I will help them deal with their future, they must tell me why they think their organization should have a future at all. Since it came into existence to serve certain needs at a particular point in time, why do they think it should continue to exist into the future?

You would be surprised how many people, once they have considered this question honestly, answer that there is in fact no reason why their organization should continue to exist. Its time has come and gone. Let it die, they say.

At the same time, no one has let me pull the plug on their organization. They all say: "Let it die--but only after I retire." And that is the rub since there is always somebody in line waiting to retire, and so clearly obsolete, and often dangerous, organizations and ways of behavior continue on long after they have outlived their usefulness.

So, I urge you to ask the same question about your organization, and here today, about your religion: why should your religious organization continue to live, in any form, much less in the form in which it presently exists? Even Jesus is said to have died, risen, and then ascended into heaven. Isn't it about time the church took the hint and kicked itself upstairs? Consider that question carefully and honestly before you answer NO!

When I consider religious organizations from a sociological or political perspective, rather than from the faith viewpoint of a believer, I am impressed by the fact that there seems to be a very close relationship, historically speaking (and with some exceptions), between political or cultural dominance on the one hand, and religious dominance on the other. That is to say, at any point in time the dominant religion and worldview of that time is almost certainly that of the dominant political and cultural group of that time. So when political and cultural dominance passes to a new political or cultural group, the religion and worldview of the newly dominant political group rises as well, and that of the old dominant group fades away to nothing, or at least to not much.

For the past two hundred years or so, arguably, the dominant culture and political force in the world has been found in and of Western civilization, and the dominant religious force around the world has been Christianity.

In my judgment, Western civilization does not have a bright future as the single globally- dominant culture. There are many reasons I say this, some of which I will hint at later. For now let me give only one reason, which is based in demographic changes going on in the world.

Let me put it briefly, bluntly, and directly as follows: One hundred years ago (and probably for the first time in world history), the population of the

western world and of the nonwestern worlds was roughly equally split fifty-fifty, with about half a billion people in the west and another half billion in the nonwest. Or to confuse matters more, you can say that this was a division between the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere, and say that there were roughly a half-billion in the white and western North, and half a billion in the nonwhite and nonwestern South.

Because of many factors, primarily the spread of Northern (or if you prefer Western) sanitation, public health, and some very small extent, medical practices to the South (or non-west), on the one hand, and a radical drop in fertility (or, if you will, birth rates) in the North, while only death rates, and NOT birth rates, declined in the South, the nonwhite, nonwestern South presently (in 1994) has roughly 80% (more than 3.5 billion) of the now more than 5 billion people on the planet, while the mainly white and western North has only 20% (less than 1.5 billion) of that 5 billion-plus total.

Please note two things here: first of all, the population of the world has very rapidly grown from only one billion a hundred years ago to over five billion now. And while 100 years ago the white and nonwhite portions of the world were roughly equally balanced with 50% of the population in the white west and 50% in the nonwhite nonwest, now 80% of humanity is in the nonwhite nonwest.

Well, if these demographic trends continue--and there is absolutely nothing being done in terms of policy, technology, or behavior to suggest that they will not continue--so, assuming the likely scenario that these demographic trends will continue, then by the mid point of the 21st Century--only some fifty years from now--the western, white, Northern portion of the 10 to 15 billion people expected to occupy an extremely crowded and polluted planet will be only between one and five percent. Ninety-five to 99% of all humans struggling for existence on this fetid globe fifty years from now will be nonwhite, nonwestern Southerners.

So you think exaggerating? Well, consider this: in spite of having by far the most stringent population policy in the world, China's 1.2 billion present population is growing each year by the number of people now in Texas, and will add the equivalent of Japan's present population by the year 2000 [Earth Times, January 20, 1994].

Against such odds, what hope is there for Western Culture? And if Western culture becomes, in effect, only one tiny minority among many competing much larger cultures, what hope is there for Christianity as a world religion? Not much, in my view. And I say this in full awareness that some kinds of Christianity are experiencing an impressive spurt in popularity in some nonwestern regions--including China.

But given the continuation of the likely demographic changes I have been describing here alone, what might be the dominant religions of the future? Well, you can figure it out as well as I can: first (assuming the probable dominance of China and related cultures, then) Confucianism almost certainly and Buddhism possibly have rather bright futures.

Rivaling these--more likely rivaling Confucianism, in my view--will be Hinduism. That is to say, under these assumptions, the struggle for cultural (and political, economic, and religious) dominance in the 21st Century, will be waged between Chinese and Indian worldviews.

However, also almost certainly joining the fray will be Islam, as the existing Islamic cultures of South Asia (such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia) are joined with Indonesia (which will certainly be much more important in the 21st Century than it has been in the 20th), the Islamic portion of the Philippines, and very importantly the several Islamic republics along the southern portion of the former Soviet Union, and those in Africa. Notice I have not even mentioned the Islamic part of the world which is now very much at center stage in the Arab world, which will in all likelihood continue to be important, though perhaps not as vividly so, in the 21st Century.

Now, it is important to realize that not all of the competing cultures of the future will be old cultures revived to dominance. New cultures will also come into existence--are coming into existence. I am thinking here on the one hand of the cultures of poverty, violence and hopelessness being spawned by the ever-younger and ever-increasing ranks of the permanently unemployed in the South, as well as the North, and on the other hand, the new high tech, mobile, and perhaps New Age cultures of the jet-setting, global elites.

In all of this, I will be mightily surprised if Western Civilization, and thus Christianity, is very much a factor in the world from the mid 21st Century onward.

So that is my second, somewhat longer version, which I am sure most of you think is long enough. In it I am basically saying that while religion per se, and some religions specifically, may have bright futures, I am not so sure that the major religions of the immediate past and present, Christianity and Judaism, will be as important in the future as they have been in the past because there will simply be so few Christians and Jews around, comparatively, and the political and economic dominance of Western cultures--and hence, Western religions--can by no means be assumed.

By the way, you will notice that I have been talking about global population trends. I haven't even mentioned some possible consequences of generational shifts happening within, for example, the US itself. Dean Knight recently very kindly called my attention to some comments made during a Lenten retreat for the Diocese of Spokane by Tom Sine, who was called [quote] "a well-known futurist [who] shared his vision of 'a church for the 21st century.'" Dr. Sine notes that the generation of people born after the numerous and all powerful postwar generation of "baby boomers"--the so-called "generation X" we have been hearing so much about recently which was born between 1964 and 1983--this new rising generation of "baby busters" are [quote] "characterized by cynicism and deep mistrust of the authenticity of institutions and their leadership, including churches. This character [is derived from their] childhood experiences of family disintegration, abuse, and addiction, and will very likely lead our society into an even more disordered future. In combination with already familiar secularization, ethnic diversity, and erosion of common values, the effects of this generation will be very destabilizing. For churches, current debates about prayer book, ordination of

women, the gender of God, and the place of homosexuals will pale in the face of survival issues. Sine says that Christians will have to dissociate the Gospel message from the fulfillment of a consumer-driven American dream and focus rather on the more modest but fulfilling values of the Kingdom of God."

"Likely during the first part of the next century, denominations as we know them will die out..." [unquote]

I have been quoting here the words of Dean John Buenz as contained in the newsletter, "The Cathedral Chimes," March 30, 1994, of The Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, in Spokane, Washington.

I can't resist telling you something about Tom Sine too. Tom was Dean of Students at Maui Community College in the late 1960s and early 70s. According to what he told me some years ago, Tom heard me speak at Maui Community College at the first Earth Day celebration in 1970. As a consequence of hearing my expression of concern about the future of the earth, Tom quit his job, went to divinity school, got a doctor of divinity degree, wrote a very important book about the future of religion, called WILD HOPE (Word Publishing, 1991), and has been tirelessly traveling around the world trying to convince various religious organizations that they ought to be more concerned about the future of the planet than about the comparatively trivial matters of personal morality which consume most of their time and attention now.

I regret to say he appears to be no more successful in what he has devoted his life to than in what I have devoted mine.

But are we discouraged? Hell no!

Version Three

So I move on and now will give you a bit of my third, longer answer to the question, "Does religion have a future?" Because here I really do think the answer is very uncertain.

Some of you may remember the name of Gerald O. Barney, who, in the latter days of the administration of President Jimmy Carter, prepared a massive document, called GLOBAL 2000, which summarized the then current thinking of people around the world about the future of humanity, given population and environmental problems identified at that time.

The document was so honest, and so frightening, that when Ronald Reagan became president, he refused to allow it to be published by the US government, as President Carter originally intended.

The information in Global 2000 was subsequently published privately, but, given the climate of denial and greed of the 1980s, it failed to have the impact that Barney, and many others, hoped it would have on US and other policy. Indeed, US policies at the time generally went against those recommended in Global 2000 and have thus made the problems identified in it even more pressing and urgent.

Gerald Barney was invited to review the findings of his Global 2000 report, and present them to the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions which brought

together many religious leaders from most of the world's religions in Chicago last summer.

I will not review all of the extremely dreary findings about our future that Barney presented in his 1993 update. I will simply quote two paragraphs which contain the essence of his conclusions, and then follow that with several of the many questions which he posed to the world's religious leaders assembled in Chicago--questions which I want you to consider about your religious beliefs and actions today.

Barney said:

"If present beliefs and policies continue, the world in the 21st Century will be more crowded, more polluted, less stable economically and ecologically, and more vulnerable to violent disruption than the world we live in now.... For more than a billion desperately poor, the outlook for food and other necessities will be...far worse. Life for most people on Earth will be more precarious in the 21st Century than it is now--unless the faith traditions of the world lead the nations and peoples of Earth to act decisively to alter current beliefs and policies"--most of which beliefs and policies, Gerald Barney did NOT add, but probably should have, derive directly from continuing, but dangerously obsolete, religious traditions themselves.

"The task before us," Barney said, "is fundamentally spiritual in nature: to discover who we humans are, how we are to relate to each other and to the whole community of life, and what we are to do, individually and collectively, here on Earth. So we turn our questions to you, our spiritual leaders," Barney said.

Here are some of the more than one hundred questions Barney asked the spiritual leaders of the world. Please consider them carefully. What is your answer? How does your religious tradition, and current faith, answer them?

"What are the traditional teachings within your faith on how to meet the legitimate needs of the growing human community without destroying the ability of Earth to support the community of all life?"

"The origin stories of many faith traditions provide a basis for the human community valuing the whole community of life. How does the origin story of your faith tradition place the human species relative to the whole community of life?"

"In addition to stories about the origins of life, there are stories about the continuation of life, about fertility. How do the fertility stories of your faith relate to its teachings on human procreation? How are its teachings to be understood today in light of the rapidly growing human population and the threat that even the present human population poses to the whole community of life? What norms are to be applied to the stewardship of the gift of human fertility?"

"What does your tradition teach about humans killing members of other species--animals, plants? What teachings of your tradition might bear on the killing of all members of a species, the extinction of a species? What wisdom

can you offer on the ethics of our species genetically modifying other species to create new races or even new species?

"How do we value the future in decisions we make today? What ethical and moral standards should be brought into discounting the interests of future generations in economic and other decisions made by us today? What does your faith tradition tell us about issues of intergenerational equity?" (that is to say, the responsibility of the present more for the needs of the future and less towards the reverence of the past).

"What dreams and hopes does your tradition inspire in young people?

"What does your faith tradition offer as a vision of the future of Earth? For example, is the future of Earth viewed as a glorious climax, or a terrifying catastrophe, or something else entirely?

"What does your tradition have to say about the scope of legitimate power of the nation-state. For example, is sovereignty a valid concept? Is any nation, institution, or group of people truly independent, subject to no other power on Earth?

"What does your faith tradition have to say about consumerism, about the manipulation and stimulation of desire, about advertising? Under what circumstances does one have enough?

"In your tradition, how long ago were the roles, rights, and responsibilities of men and women defined? What role did women have in the defining?

"How does your faith tradition characterize the teachings and followers of other faiths? Do some adherents of your tradition hold that the teachings and followers of other faiths are evil, dangerous, misguided? Is there any possibility that your faith tradition can derive wisdom, truth, or insight from the teachings of another faith (or of none)?

"Does your divine truth allow or encourage followers of your faith tradition to kill others who know a different divine truth?

"Does your faith tradition envision and provide for the criticism, correction, reinterpretation, and even rejection of ancient traditional assumptions and truth in light of new understandings or revelations?"

Now, I suppose that for some of you, these are easy questions to which you, or your religious tradition, can give a quick and satisfying answer--some of which might even satisfy me--or more importantly, satisfy the needs of the future.

But I suspect there are some questions which, if you took them seriously--by which I mean, if you were to consider them in the light of the concerns about the future expressed in the Global 2000 report--you might find more difficult to answer. Or you might begin to wonder whether the answer you do arrive at is sufficient for the challenges which the Global 2000 report, and many others like it, presents us.

Now, I know there are many religious people who are disturbed by the irresponsibility towards the future which their religious tradition permits--or perhaps even requires-- (and some religious traditions might somehow be considered to give "better" or "worse" answers to these questions). For example, just yesterday, I received a pamphlet from my Alma Mater, Virginia Theological Seminary, concerning an interactive radio discussion broadcast on April 30 which included my old professor of Systematic Theology--well, he was young at the time--Charles Price, who is now also a member of the Virginia Diocesan Commission on the Stewardship of Creation.

According to the pamphlet, among the questions discussed were these four:

"Is the biblical understanding of the dominion of men and women over living things (Genesis 1:26-29) responsible for the despoiling of creation?"

"Are there resources in Christian tradition for dealing with the environment in a positive way?"

"Does an appreciation of the interrelatedness of human life demand a reformulation of our conception of God?"

and, somewhat ominously,

"Can Christians attach any religious significance to the earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters of recent times?"

I don't know what the answers to these questions were as they emerged during the discussion. I hope the answer to the first three was a resounding "Yes." And while I don't know a single Christian worth her salt who can't find some religious significance in anything, I hope the answer to the fourth question was "no".

In spite of my hope that this radio roundtable is but one among many indicators that some people in the Episcopal Church, at least, are beginning to worry about the future effectively, I nonetheless must conclude that most religious traditions, and religious believers, are at best obstacles to attitudes and behaviors appropriate for addressing the future, and more likely are catalysts of ecological, economic, and political catastrophe.

Do you see it otherwise?

The Coming Anarchy?

One of the most important articles published recently in an American magazine was written by Robert Kaplan for the February 1994 issue of The Atlantic Monthly. It was titled, "The coming anarchy." It has created quite a stir in the semi-circles in which I travel. I certainly think it comes closer to telling the truth about the immediate future than anything I've read recently.

Kaplan starts the article by describing the horrifying anarchy and nauseating brutality he has personally witnessed recently in West Africa. Nothing to bother us here. That is Africa. The Dark Continent. Clearly a place to avoid. Nothing of relevance to us in Hawaii, or the rest of the United States.

But then Kaplan says, [quote] "West Africa is becoming the symbol of worldwide demographic, environmental, and societal stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real 'strategic' danger [in contrast to the strategic danger of, say, North Korea which the military would have us worry about instead]. [The rapidly approaching dangers of] Disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, scarcity of resources, refugee migrations, the increasing erosion of nation-states and international borders, and the empowerment of private armies, security firms, and international drug cartels are now most tellingly demonstrated through a West African prism. West Africa provides an appropriate introduction to the issues, often extremely unpleasant to discuss, that will soon confront our civilization." (p. 46)

Kaplan then goes on to describe in convincing detail how overpopulation, and environmental collapse, coupled with a global and national economic system which grossly enriches the very few and progressively emmiserates the very, very many, adds up to what appears to be a coming anarchy for us all, including every one in this room--or at least your children or grandchildren.

In this light, I ask you again to reflect on the questions Gerald Barney placed before the leaders of the world's religions.

Now, of course you might feel that there is nothing new in the future Kaplan foresees. As undesirable and truly regrettable as it might be, the collapse of our world into barbarism would merely be a return to the way the world has been for millennia; it would merely demonstrate that the past two or three hundred years of so-called "progress" was in fact nothing more than a temporary and now-bursting bubble. It would clearly demonstrate how abnormal, as well as how immoral, the pretensions of industrialism, growth, and development--and of Western civilization generally--are.

Rather than portending the end of religion, the coming anarchy might also bring with it a revival of religion beyond anything imaginable in our present, highly secular world. Seldom has the future of religion seemed brighter than now, when the future of humanity seems so bleak, you might well conclude.

Alternative Futures.

One of the most important things I have learned about the future over the thirty or so years I have been in futures studies is that it is impossible to predict the future, and unwise to assume that you know for certain what The Future Will Be.

Instead of predicting The Future, futurists try to discern the major alternative futures, and see how life might be different for individuals and institutions within each of these alternatives.

If you have been listening carefully, you might have discerned that I have so far been discussing two major alternative futures. One, which in fact I have barely mentioned, but which has been the subtext underlying everything I have said, is the future which most of you--and most humans everywhere--seem to assume: that the future will be pretty much like the present; maybe a

little better, maybe a little worse, but nothing fundamentally different from the way it is now.

The future I have been emphasizing, in contrast, is pretty much a doom and gloom scenario which indicates we are all going to hell in a handbasket which thus, as I said, suggests a pretty rosy future for religion, having, as it does, a vested interest in weaving the handbaskets for hell or heaven.

Let me now suggest a third alternative future for us which questions whether what Kaplan calls the coming anarchy will in fact come. There may be forces at operation now which not only will forestall anarchy but also might indeed usher in a new and more truly golden age for humanity and all of life.

Many of the best-known futurists seem to believe this is--or could be--the case: Alvin Toffler, Buckminster Fuller, Teilhard de Chardin, Hazel Henderson, Marilyn Ferguson, Barbara Marx Hubbard, and, if I may immodestly say so: me.

These futurists--and many more worldwide--argue that while it is true that industrialism and modernity--in all of its institutions, values, and actors--is collapsing, it is a collapse that is necessary in order for a new post-industrial--some say postmodern--world to be born. If we can keep our eye on this possible and preferable future, and not be transfixed by the temporary horrors which may--but need not--precede it, then the future of humanity in the 21st century may be very, very bright indeed.

This possibility has recently been eloquently expressed by a futurist, a former President of the American Association for Humanistic Psychology, Maureen O'Hara, in an article titled, "Future Mind: Are we headed for breakdown or breakthrough in the era of globalization?"

O'Hara starts out by repeating all of the very good evidence for impending doom and gloom that I have subjected you to so far. [Quote] "There seems to be a consensus, at least among educated people," she says, "that planet earth--its peoples, its flora and fauna, its climate and its institutions--is in the midst of a period of massive turbulence." "The changes now irreversibly in motion all over the planet will transform the whole world and the people who inhabit it perhaps beyond recognition--forever," she states.

What O'Hara brings to this discussion however is relatively unusual. She is not an environmentalist, or an economist, or a political scientist. She is a psychologist, and as such, she wants to know whether or not humans are psychologically--mentally and emotionally--capable of living in and through the present turbulence and the coming anarchy, and then breaking on through to the other side, whole and well and human.

She feels that much of the social chaos already prevalent around us, both here in Hawaii, on the mainland, and world wide, may be evidence that humanity is already experiencing a nervous breakdown. In order to understand why this might be the case, she reminds us that the central nervous system of humans today is the same as that of our ancestors 40,000 years ago. Physiologically, each of us is supposed to be living in small hunting and gathering bands of no more than a few hundred people. And until very recently, most humans did live in such communities--or at least in small, stable agricultural settlements.

True enough, some humans have lived for centuries in urban areas of several thousand people, or even tens of thousands. But no humans have lived in urban settlements of millions of people until very recently. At the beginning of the 19th Century, the largest city in the Western world was London with just under a million people--about the size of Honolulu today. The largest city in the world at that time, Tokyo, had just over one million. Yet, only one hundred years later, at the onset of the 20th century, there were eleven cities worldwide with more than a million inhabitants, most of them in Europe and North America. By the year 2000--six years away--there will be a total of 24 cities around with globe with populations in excess of ten million. Eighteen of these 24 mega-cities will be in the third world.

No one has ever lived in a city as big as Mexico City is today--Mexico City now being the world's largest city, and growing at such a rate that it is expected to reach twenty-six million by the year 2000. By comparison, the population of all of Canada now is about 26 million. Other gigantic urban centers are ballooning elsewhere in the world as global urbanization continues apace.

It was not until 1960 that about one-third of the population of the world lived in cities. By 1980, that figure reached 40%. By the end of this decade, it will be fifty percent. By 2025, 65% of the world will live in massive urban areas. At the same time, the world itself is being knit together by the electronic network of Vice President Gore's Information Superhighway into a global village of over 5 billion--soon ten billion, then twenty billion, then....well, where will it end?

My point here is to ask, can our puny human brains, devised for hunting and gathering in lush savannas, cope with this much change, so quickly, so massively?

Are we, as Maureen O'Hara asks, headed for a global nervous breakdown or psychic breakthrough?

The answer is by no means certain, she says. First of all, O'Hara makes it clear that there is more to mind than brain. While we may be hardwired to be hunters and gathers, our culture--the web of values and meaning constructed and reconstructed around us each day by our selves and our fellow humans--our culture determines more of our mental health and agility than does our physiological brain and central nervous system.

We can indeed survive the chaos, avoid global nervous breakdown, and achieve psychic breakthrough if--and it is a huge IF--we can get rid of the cultural weights and chains that tie us to beliefs and actions plainly fit for earlier times, and not for the present or future.

The challenge before us, in other words, is cultural reconstruction--indeed spiritual reconstruction. We need myths, beliefs, leaders and institutions which can help us cope with--indeed, enjoy--the chaos, anarchy, and uncertainty; and to see it as good: not threatening, not frightening, not evil. But good, enjoyable, positive--and inevitable.

O'Hara shows that there is ample evidence that there are many people in many western and indeed nonwestern cities who possess the attributes of mind and

will to thrive in the coming chaos. These might be called "postmodern" people--people who understand that society, in all its values and institutions--including religion--is a human invention, and that we must and can invent new values, new institutions, and new religions if we are to survive and thrive in the chaotic future.

But, O'Hara says, there are many, many more people who are still living in the modern world, where truth is believed to exist with a capital T. This is often the Truth thought to lie in science, in progress, in development--in modernity. And it is also the Truth of almost all religions. The Truth of God: eternal, unchanging, and knowable through certain rituals or intermediaries.

According to O'Hara, there are substantially more modern people in the world (in other words, people who persist in believing in obsolete capital "T" Truth) than there are postmodern ones, thus making the chances of breakdown somewhat greater than breakthrough, given what she--and I--feel are the major challenges from the future, and given the thought patterns of modern people in contrast to postmodern folks.

But that's not all! Not only are there many modern people in the world, there are, especially in the underclass of the so-called developed nations, and among the growing middle class of the developing world, people who O'Hara calls "aspirants"--would-be-moderns (modern wannabes). And they outnumber even those people who have already achieved a modern lifestyle and worldview.

Yet by far the largest number of people on earth now--proportionately even larger in the future--are the premodern people still living in (largely third world) tribal and agrarian communities.

And almost as large, and clearly the fastest growing group on the planet, are the destitute, dislocated, permanently poor for whom the major daily occupation is finding a bit of food and water, and hanging on to life for one more day.

Given those statistics and proportions, even though there is evidence of hope for a successful transition to psychic breakthrough in postmodern humanity, because they represent no more than 4 or 5% of humans presently, and probably only 1% in the future, is there any reason to be hopeful for humanity at all?

Of course, in this analysis, religion, as currently oriented, stands as a gigantic obstacle to a successful transformation. Certainly this is the situation for all the various kinds of religious fundamentalism, which continues to grow as a major piece of evidence that the world is experiencing a global nervous breakdown and not a psychic breakthrough.

Wait a minute! I said this was going to be my optimistic alternative future, so let me try again.

Technological optimism.

Over the years that I have been concerned about the future, I have become convinced that, while there are many "causes" of social change, none is more important than technology. Technological inventions, and their diffusion, in the 19th and 20th Centuries are largely responsible for all of the problems (and most of the benefits) of the present and the future I have been focusing on so far--all the way from overpopulation, to the Greenhouse effect, to the Information Superhighway.

But if technological change in the past has brought us the problems and possibilities of the present and the immediate future, what new technologies might bring us a still different future?

This is where I get truly optimistic.

First of all, it is clear, at least to me, that electronic communication technology will change, is changing, indeed, has changed (though some of us haven't noticed it) the nature of work, and indeed, the need for work, in all advanced countries.

For years, I have said that if I were to run for governor of this state, or President of the US, I would run on a platform promising full UNemployment.

Now, I can guarantee it. While many people are speaking of downsizing, rightsizing, massive and permanent unemployment, generations of families on welfare as though those were all bad things, which they are not, or need not be, I can assure you that they will be permanent aspects of the future of all post industrial societies IF the coming anarchy doesn't destroy the technology and the infrastructure needed to make it operate, AND if we can overthrow our current obsolete economic beliefs and practices--and, more challengingly, if we can overthrow the blinding power of those few who profit so much from the present inequitable and unnecessary economic system.

But even though it may be difficult for most of us to realize that "work" is over, and that very few humans are needed any more to provide everyone with all of the goods and services they could possibly want, much less need, this technologically-induced change is nothing compared to what lies almost immediately ahead with the evolution of artificial intelligence, the rapid emergence of biological engineering in all phases of life, including human life, and the continuing development of molecular engineering--called nanotechnology--which means that self-replicating machines, constructed out of basic molecules and operating on the energy of life rather than the energy of fossil fuels--that all of these technologies are about to burst into view around us with such speed that our old ideas and institutions will be smashed and paved-over by the white-hot oozing asphalt of the Information Superhighway.

Let me just give you one tiny example out of the thousands which lie around of a possible technological development about to overtake us and our old values, beliefs, and behaviors. The following comes from an article written by Bart Kosko in the magazine Datamation of February 15, 1994.

Kosko is writing, not about artificial intelligence, but about technologically-augmented human intelligence. He asks, "How big a computer chip do you need to replace your brain?" His answer is, "Right now it would be the size of a house or an office building." "But," he goes on to say, "the density of circuits on a chip doubles every two years or faster." "Assuming that doubling time continues, by the year 2020 your brain will fit in a chip the size of a sugar cube. Since [the density of circuits is increasing], the year may be more like 2010. Most young people today will see that day come to pass," Kosko reminds us. "A good crystal chip could last for thousands or millions of years. In the best case, it could last most of the 20 billion years or so until the universe falls in on itself and ends in the Big Crunch.

"That long life in a chip might be as close as we can come to heaven.... There will be no need to work or to be governed. There will be no sickness, pain or death. The virtual will be real and the real will be virtual. Will and mind will live in the same stream of electrons and photons," Kosko says.

But he goes on to say this, which is why I chose it as my one example out of thousands: [quote] "Religion holds no monopoly on the concept of heaven." "Heaven in a chip completes the rival world view of science. The Creation myth gives way to the Big Bang or a whole sequence of Big Bangs if the universe oscillates." "The soul gives way to complex information processing. The Resurrection myth gives way to cryonics and cell repair with nanocomputers, or to the gentle sleep that takes you from brain to chip.

"Biology is not destiny," Kosko concludes, "It was never more than tendency. It was just nature's first quick and dirty way to compute with meat. Chips are destiny."

In other words, the Word was made Flesh. Indeed. Now it is silicon.

This is a very significant challenge, one, as I say, of thousands which electronic and biological technology is bringing to religion, to humanity and everything about our future. However, I must make it clear that I strongly disagree with Kosko when he implies that scientific truth will replace religious myth. That is nothing but typical modernistic hubris.

It seems to me both science and religion are being challenged by the rapid emergence of a Brave New World which is at least as difficult to comprehend by modern science (though clearly it is emerging in part from the creations of science), as it is beyond the dogmas of any religion--though the mystic traditions of any world religion--as well as the postmodern perspectives of quantum physics--should feel right at home in the virtual realities of robots, cyborgs, and your brain in a chip.

For better or worse, humans have recently arrived at a place we never intended; a place where no one has ever been before. It is the most gigantic crossroads in human history. And we are on it. Now.

One road leads to human extinction in the 21st Century.

Maybe it is just as well we took it. It could be that humans are an evolutionary experiment which is just not working out. The serpent clearly warned Adam

not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But he did, and we are Adam's ants, long ago evicted from the Garden of Eden, endlessly, restlessly trying to find how to reenter the safety and abundance and blissful ignorance of our lost, lush Eden. Always trying to go back to the basics--to the fundamentals; to the Rock--we so long ago rejected, and so fearful of the world, that, in our puny reason and robust sin, we have nonetheless created; so lacking, as Tillich said now quite some time ago, so lacking the Courage to Be, in spite of, he would say, the triumph of the Resurrection.

Failing all that, we have decided to pave paradise and put up a parking lot.

But consider the other road. Could it be--could it be?--as Kosko says, that we humans are merely nature's first quick and dirty way to compute with meat, and that we are now in the process of creating our own, truly intelligent silicon successors? Is that the meaning of the Eden story? That having eaten the apple, we have inevitably had to go down the garden path to the present moment of profound transformation from humans to robots, cyborgs and your brain in a chip?

That is certainly my conclusion. That is the road I have chosen, and that I urge each of you to consider. And if you do, then you may next need to ask, do cyborgs have souls? Should chips be saved? Who will be the first to baptize a robot? And of course, will you let your daughter marry one?

I guess there is a bright future for religion after all, whatever in the world our future might be.