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The Future of Mainstream and Non-Traditional Religion

by Dave Stein

We're living in the "how to" age! One can readily find "how to" books on almost any subject these days, at least in the USA. (Readers from other parts of the world, please educate me on this point.) At the same time, many people are searching for something at a deeper level, as evidenced by the proliferation of New Age religious and spiritual paths, with a number of people trying one after another in their quest for personal and spiritual fulfillment. In this, they are aided by the availability of information – perhaps information overload (sound familiar?) – and in many parts of the world, societies that support religious freedom. What does this era of rapid change hold for this quest – that is, for one's search for meaning and fulfillment?

SCENARIO-BASED ANALYSIS

To address this question, a scenario-based methodology involving alternative future worlds may be a useful starting point. For now, it is useful to consider six hypothetical alternative future worlds, roughly akin to the alternative worlds considered in *Air Force 2025*¹:

- "Business as Usual"
- "Overdrive"
- "Nation Be Gone!"
- "Zero Sum"
- "King No More"
- "Autonomous Villages"

(all my own names). The first five worlds are roughly akin to, and draw inspiration from, the *Air Force 2025* worlds "2015 Crossroads," "Digital Cacophony," "Zaibatsu," "Halves and Half-Naughts," and "King Khan" respectively.² "Autonomous Villages" is roughly akin to "Byte!," another alternative future world

¹ Although numerous people including warfighters, scientists, acquisition professionals, logistics officers, and futurists pioneered the methodology, full details can be found in the following two references:

- a. J. A. Jackson et.al., "Air Force 2024 Operational Analysis," *Military Operations Research* V3, N4, 1997, pp. 5-21.
- b. *Air Force 2025 Final Report* Homepage, www.au.af.mil/au/2025, accessed November 8, 1996.

² *Ibid.*

considered in *Air Force 2025* but not used in the final study.³ It is important to note that these worlds are not mutually exclusive and that elements from more than one of these worlds can coexist in the future that eventually emerges.

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

“Business as Usual” represents a comparatively evolutionary world, in which technology and the economy are the key drivers and operative “deities,” reinforced by an “instant gratification” mindset at least in some parts of the world. If socioeconomic polarization is disregarded for now (that is, deferred to “Zero Sum”), this seemingly benign world offers continued satisfaction from material prosperity, possessions, consumerism, diversion, entertainment, and other trappings of mainstream success such as status. In this world, various people will at some point experience an emptiness that the “good things in life” cannot fulfill, and this emptiness will set them on a search for fulfillment beyond the material world and physical senses. However, many others will have less of an interest in – or at least will place less priority on – personal and spiritual growth above and beyond that which serves their material, career, and related life goals, especially given the “instant gratification” mindset and the “chronological challenge” of living in a not-enough-hours-in-the-day society with its working lunch, eat-at-your-desk, and even uncompensated overtime routines to boot. Contrast this with the hunter-gatherer days, in which people allegedly had more time to gaze at fires or at stars in contemplation!

Of those who do seek personal and spiritual growth, the temptation to try several paths in succession, without giving any one of them a fair chance to yield results, will be strong in the “instant gratification” or “quarterly earnings statement” cultures. On the average, they will be drawn to paths (and in some cases, cults) that promise quick results as opposed to slow, steady growth. In like manner, this behavior is presently found in other areas of human activity, for example, when one jumps from one weight loss plan to another without giving any one of them a fair chance. Yet, there are those who will make a commitment to a particular spiritual path, be it a mainstream religion or a non-traditional one.

THE ONLY THING THAT DOESN'T CHANGE IS ...

“Overdrive,” like “Business as Usual,” represents a world of general prosperity. To the extent that people experience this prosperity, the analysis for “Business as Usual” is applicable. In “Overdrive,” however, the explosive rate of change puts at risk one’s safety nets, underpinnings, and even identity in ways that lead to discontent for many. Economic growth is at an explosive pace and is accompanied by rapid growth and proliferation of technology – for example, pervasive information technology (IT), biotech, and nanotech. This exponential growth and proliferation of technology empowers the individual as well as small groups, good and bad. Even if one disregards individuals and groups with malevolent intentions, the empowerment leads to decreasing order and authority. Additional possible consequences include social isolation as well as a surveillance society that trades some privacy for safety and security.

Then there is explosive change itself – change that puts at risk the stable reference points to which many people are generally accustomed. Taken to the extreme, nothing can be counted on anymore – one’s employment, retirement, financial security, lifestyles, friends (personal relationships), national boundaries, and alliances. Indeed, elements of this alternative future world (and of the others postulated herein) are present even today. Even the possibility of electronic democracy (direct voting by citizens on all matters) can be envisioned in “Overdrive,” such that government itself becomes as fickle as the polls! For its part, technology itself might lose its place in the pantheon of *de facto* gods if it fails to solve social problems – or worse yet, if it is perceived as creating more problems than it solves. A Luddite backlash, anyone?

³ *Ibid.*

In “Overdrive,” empowerment might at some point lead to disempowerment or to empty, non-fulfilling empowerment. This, plus social isolation and the fear and anxiety resulting from the lack of a stable reference point, will tend to cultivate fatalism among some and a survivalist mindset among many more, even though some will prosper initially. As more people find themselves living lives of maintenance, there are correspondingly fewer opportunities for self-actualization, and “instant gratification.” In “Overdrive,” many will search for any stable reference point and identity that they can find (assuming that humans themselves do not change beyond a need for stability and identity), perhaps starting with one’s family (assuming that families as we know them still existed), one’s “tribe” (ethnicity), or one’s country (again, provided that the nation-state still existed). Even today, the “tribe” provides an identity that puts a value-based veneer on interest-based conflicts and that in some cases is itself a basis for conflict, and extreme identification with one’s tribe typically leads to rampant nationalism, racism, and xenophobia. Likewise for religion when it serves as a label or identity in an “us-them” sense.

However, some will turn to religion and to spiritual paths for reasons transcending identity, specifically to seek meaning, fulfillment, and inner peace beyond everyday life. With some of the mainstream religions themselves being tested by rapid change even today, there will be considerable interest in the non-traditional ones, although a resurgence of some of the traditional religions is not beyond possibility. Of course, cults also tend to capitalize on discontent and disillusionment with everyday life.

The third hypothetical world, “Nation Be Gone,” presents similar challenges. In this world, the nation-state, heretofore a relatively stable reference point, becomes less relevant, primarily as the result of new geostrategic actors – alliances, trade blocs, multinational corporations, transnational ethnic groups, transnational cause-oriented groups (benevolent as well as malevolent), and the media – themselves empowered by new technology. Here, too, a feeling of marginalization as well as powerlessness becomes pervasive, possibly accompanied by a loss of confidence in governments in general. One might envision the search for meaning, fulfillment, and a stable reference point to proceed as in “Overdrive.”

IT ALL ADDS TO NOTHING

“Zero-Sum” represents a world that is highly polarized (haves vs. have-nots), in which the polarization is exacerbated by ethnic, cultural, religious, or other demographic clashes. The rampant resentment leads to war, revolution, and terrorism – challenging enough – and this strife and conflict in turn will displace large numbers of people into refugee camps that lead to further challenges including nationalistic backlashes as well as disease spread risk. Accompanying the conflict and displacement will be ethnic strife, tribalism, and xenophobia.

In this “Zero-Sum” world, one will find interest-based conflicts – that is, conflicts over habitable land, food, water, healthcare, and the other necessities of life – as the have-nots struggle to survive. A value- (identity-) based conflict component will also manifest because of resentment. The competition for resources and rampant conflict itself will stress the environment to its limits, resulting in further loss of habitable land and (at least, for the have-nots) access to the necessities of life, reinforcing the zero-sum mindset. Resource conflict feeds on itself, leading to more refugees and in turn more conflict in a vicious circle sense. Even some of the haves see a lower standard of living. In the extreme, the environmental degradation assumes proportions that are more ominous, such as a loss of biodiversity (with its own further consequences to the environment and the availability of foods and herbs), a “neo-Atlantis” (that is, submergence of coastal regions), and increased incidence of skin cancer if the ozone layer is compromised.

What does this mean for the people, especially the have-nots? Anxiety and fear. A sense of powerlessness, fatalism, despair, and marginalization. Among haves and have-nots alike, a survivalist mentality – indeed, a zero-sum mindset – coupled with a general loss of confidence in governments to preserve order. On the one hand, the survivalist mentality will tend to keep people focused on the lowest levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, and in any event, one might expect to find fewer opportunities for self-actualization outside of conflict and demagoguery. At the same time, there are those who seek meaning, fulfillment, and contentment beyond the physical realm of “everyday life” (if one can call it living). Furthermore, in this world, like “Overdrive” and “Nation Be Gone,” there will be the tendency for people to search for a stability and identity reference point, be it the family, the tribe (ethnic group), the nation, one’s culture, or a religion or spiritual path. To this end, the tribe, culture, or nation – or even a mainstream religion – might initially be attractive to large numbers of people, but over-identification therewith will fan the flames of conflict. At some point, there is the possibility that those who survive are drawn to a “non-binary” spiritual path (that is, a path that recognizes and accepts other paths, as opposed to one that is based on us-versus-them duality).

“King No More,” roughly akin to “King Khan” of *Air Force 2025*,⁴ is a world characterized by the loss of US superpower status and Western cultural preeminence. This loss of superpower status is coupled with a weakening economy, in a vicious circle sense, as well as with a loss of *de facto* linguistic dominance. In this world, individual and organizational (corporate) survival might necessitate the mastery of other languages and the capability to adapt to those cultures on the rise. Simultaneously, there is a decline in the relatively high standard of living declines in various nations. This standard of living decline will motivate a search for fulfillment beyond the everyday world. Additional factors include, as before, fewer opportunities for self-actualization and fulfillment, the possible loss of confidence in the government (which is actually a reflection of its people), and the search for a stable reference point.

The final world considered is “Autonomous Villages,” a relatively benign world in which there is at least the possibility of lifestyles that are relatively balanced as well as interpersonal relationships that are more meaningful – as one might infer by comparing small, mid-size, and large cities in the contemporary US. In this sense, perhaps there is a tribal mindset in nearly all of us, as it is generally easier to relate to small groups than to larger, impersonal ones. In this world, there is correspondingly less marginalization and alienation. But this world itself has two possible trajectories. On one, “Autonomous Villages” provides material happiness and diversion similar to that available in “Business as Usual,” in which case the analysis of that world is applicable. The other trajectory leads to a world in which meaningful personal relationships provide a dimension beyond contemporary cut-throat, fast-paced mainstream life and where balanced lifestyles motivate and provide more time for introspection.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

While neither this mini-analysis nor the set of alternative future worlds used therein is exhaustive, it identifies phenomena that can influence the general interest in spirituality and religion. They are as follows. First, for many people, material fulfillment, material success, and diversion tend to lessen interest in introspection, religion, and spirituality. The countervailing factor is that at least for some people, the material-and-diversion (“MAD”?) happiness eventually proves empty, at which point they seek fulfillment beyond their next promotion, next major purchase, or entertainment.

Secondly, an “instant gratification” culture tends to weaken the concept of long-term commitment to anything, including a religion or a spiritual path, on the average.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Third, in this era of rapid change, one can readily lose his/her underpinnings, and there is then the tendency to seek a stable reference point. Some of these “stable” reference points can themselves lose their stability, while others (for example, one’s ethnicity, culture, religious label, or other “us-them” descriptor) can ignite or exacerbate conflict. However, a truly spiritual path can provide a stable reference point that (at least, for its follower) is above and beyond the storms of “everyday life.”

Furthermore, a survivalist mindset tends to shift one’s focus to the lower levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Although many people will focus there, there are those who will seek meaning, fulfillment, and inner peace beyond the material world.

For their part, alienation and marginalization can lead in two directions – one the one hand, toward strife and conflict, and on the other, to a search for a new source of meaning and identity.

Finally, for people who have only a lukewarm interest in introspection, the pace of life (among several other factors beyond the present scope) can itself be a diversion or an inhibitor.

These preliminary conclusions notwithstanding, there are people who make the commitment to follow a particular religion or spiritual path, irrespective of the pace of life or other external circumstances.

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