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The Future of Religion in a Post-Industrial Society

by Ted Peters

Western society is so preoccupied with the consumption of goods and services that even religion may become just another commodity, like the packaged tour to an exotic island. If so, the world may lose a possible solution to its great crises.

What is to become of religion as our society moves further and further into the post-industrial period? Certain trends are fairly easy to identify. For example, we expect an extension of Islamic influence due primarily to the sudden expansion of wealth in Muslim hands. But I would like to bypass trends of this type and focus on something else, namely, the potential interaction between religion and the current understanding of the human self which has developed during the now passing industrial period.

My thesis is that as our civilization becomes increasingly post-industrial, our preoccupation with consuming goods and services will most likely commoditize religion. There is now a strong trend—which I believe will continue—toward treating the moral and spiritual dimensions of life as commodities to be acquired and disposed of according to the tastes and whims of shoppers in the religious marketplace.

Excessive consumption, however, whether it be consumption of material goods or spiritual values, is the root of the crisis we call the "world problematique." In addition, as long as the consumer mentality prevails, we will be condemned to a prostitution of the essential religious vision, a vision of the transcendent unity of all things which requires a sacrifice of the human ego. It is just

such a vision, however, that holds the greatest promise for resolving the world problematique.

The Post-Industrial Consumer Mentality

The term "post-industrial society," as employed by futurists such as Daniel Bell and Herman Kahn, is to be contrasted with *pre-industrial society*, i.e., one still preoccupied with its battle to extract a living from nature through agriculture, fishing, and mining, and which is relatively low in its production of wealth; and to be contrasted also with *industrial society*, i.e., one centered on human-machine relationships, using natural sources of energy and material to manufacture and distribute goods. *Post-industrial society* is the next phase. By the year 2000, less than one out of ten U.S. workers will be engaged in extraction or production.

The post-industrial stage centers on relationships between persons: education, communication, and service-oriented professions. It will be the age of full technology. With the battle for survival and dominance over nature behind us, we will be able to concentrate on the "higher things" in life and enjoy more fully what it means to be human. At the risk of over-generalization, we might describe most of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as pre-industrial; Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as industrial; and the United States, Canada, Japan, and Western Europe as emerging post-industrial.

The central cultural characteristic of our present late stage in industrial development is the consumer mentality, which I believe derives from an excessive reverence for the autonomous human self. We used to call it "liberty"; sociologist Daniel Bell labels it "antinomianism"; and still others tag it with "egoism" or "narcissism."

It began with the Enlightenment and culminated in the revolutions of

the eighteenth century, wherein we in the West rejected two kinds of authority: we rejected the authority of the king to tell us what to do, and we rejected the authority of the church to tell us how to think. Freedom came to be understood in *laissez-faire* terms as the absence of external constraint. Added impetus was given in the twentieth century by the all-pervasive influence of Sigmund Freud, so that not only external constraints, but also the internal constraints of inhibiting moral codes are now seen as illicit restrictions upon the freedom of the self.

Shopping Center Freedom

Anything that blocks the satisfaction of our desires is viewed as a restriction, as an oppressive force. Thus, as we move into the post-industrial era, we do so with loyalty to a concept of the human being as an autonomous and independent self, responsible for creating its own values and priorities, subject to no external authority, and charged only with the task of freely fulfilling its own self-defined potential for living. Should there arise no countervailing cultural tendencies, such unbridled egoism will eventually plunge society into uncontrolled anarchy.

What has thus far prevented us from falling into total anarchy? My hypothesis is that the powers of industrial production have been removed from the masses of people, leaving the autonomous self the opportunity for free expansion only in the realm of consumption.

On the assembly line the average worker can perform his or her task in only one way: the assigned way. It is at the shopping center, then, where we experience the freedom we revere. None of us can doubt that we are free, because while racing from store to store we are stimulated by choice if not overchoice. We create our own self-identities

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through choosing what to buy; how we consume determines who we are. Whether it is illusion or reality, we consumers believe that we are the captains of our own souls and masters of our own fates.

Anarchy is avoided because self-oriented freedom is relatively harmless when it is restricted to the realm of consumption. It is harmless, that is, to those *within* the post-industrial society. But to those *outside*—to those Third World citizens who are still struggling to survive in pre-industrial economies—the unbridled consumption of the affluent world is seen as a threat. The industrial and post-industrial economies are siphoning off the natural resources of the pre-industrial peoples; and many futurists look ahead with anxiety to the day when all of mother nature will be denuded of her life-nourishing potential.

Religion: Just Another Commodity?

How will the advancing post-industrial culture influence the course of religion? It is my forecast that religion will become increasingly treated as a consumer item.

Because our economy produces so much wealth, we are free to consume and consume beyond the point of satiation. There is a limit to what we can consume in the way of material goods—new homes, new cars, new electronic gadgets, new brands of beer, new restaurants, and so on. So we go beyond material wants to consume new personal experiences—such as broader travel, exotic vacations, continuing education, exciting conventions, psychotherapy, and sky diving.

What will come next and is al-

ready on the horizon is the consumption of spiritual experiences—personal growth cults, drug-induced ecstasy, world traveling gurus, training in mystical meditation to make you feel better, etc. Once aware of this trend, religious entrepreneurs and mainline denominations alike will take to pandering their wares, advertising how much spiritual realities “can do for you.” It will be subtle, and it will be cloaked in the noble language of personal growth, but nevertheless the pressure will be on between now and the year 2000 to treat religious experience as a commodity for consumption.

The Electronic Church

Mass media religion today may be signaling the consumerist religion of tomorrow. Because the television viewer is allegedly free to turn the on-off switch—though it is probably more accurate to say free to turn the channel selector than the off button—each TV preacher must sell his product fast.

It must be a simple, attractively packaged, hard-hitting, religious message that appeals to the already established wants and desires of the viewers. Ambitious status seekers who are achieving less than they wish in life will want to buy “possibility thinking.” The lonely person who lacks intimate friendship will want to become a “partner in faith” with the dynamic personality who is directing an important worldwide ministry.

The 1980s will bring a new stage in the development of television, namely, two-way or “interactive” cable television. Whether it will be done by mainline denominations, independent revivalists, or confederations of religious groups, we can forecast advances in the techniques of the electronic church.

Members of the viewing public will soon be able to sit at home and watch the religion of their choice; and in addition, by pushing buttons on a hand-held console, they will be able to order a book being recommended or make a financial pledge. It will be religion without geographical proximity, without eye-to-eye contact, without personal commitment, without fellowship. It will be religion totally at the consumer's disposal.

Today's Churches: Tomorrow's Museums

As another example of things to come, let me compare touring a church today with how it might be done tomorrow.

Increased secularization of social institutions combined with increased demand for holistic personal growth may produce a new form of museum—the living museum. Entrepreneurs in the tourist industry will further develop and refine the ability to create the worlds of past eras.

To walk through the British Museum today is to view statues and friezes from the ancient Parthenon sitting atop plain unadorned tables in a room that could just as well hold metal lathes or dirty laundry. The great pieces of art have been ripped out of their original context of meaning and placed in the sterile atmosphere of detached or objectivist sightseeing.

“There is now a strong trend toward treating the moral and spiritual dimensions of life as commodities to be acquired and disposed of according to the tastes and whims of shoppers in the religious marketplace.”

To a large extent this has happened to churches as well. While living in Europe my wife and I visited the cathedrals of Germany and Italy. During Sunday morning *Gottesdienst*, a sign was posted on the cathedral doors in Cologne forbidding the taking of photographs during worship. There were so few actually worshipping the day we visited, however, that camera flashbulbs could disturb only a handful of pious souls. Some tourists sneaked in, knelt down, and then unabashedly turned their eyes and craned their necks and nudged their neighbors and whispered loudly while examining the cathedral's art work.

What is important to a tourist in a German church is its romanesque or gothic architecture, its high vaulted ceilings, its friezes and statuary; it is

About the Author

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Evangelicals hold hands while worshipping. Religion is losing the close proximity and fellowship of church worship as the "electronic church" takes hold and people view TV preachers in the isolation of their own homes.



Old San Xavier mission at Tucson, Arizona. This church is now a prime tourist attraction. Peters predicts that by the end of this century churches will function only as "live-in museums."

not the fact that it was built to glorify God. Our industrial and objective mentality—aimed at satisfying the aesthetic tastes of the consumer—removes the church from the body of tradition in which it once nourished the life of a culture.

What will happen in the future? Our tastes are becoming much more complicated. The present drive to get beyond secular and objectivist thinking to consume personal holism, I forecast, will have its effect on religious institutions—institutions that have been objectifying their past. Now, personal growth is not the same thing as worshipping God, to be sure, but it will lead to a much more holistic approach to religion.

I believe that the trend to turn churches into museums will continue, but that a new twist will be added sometime before the end of this century. An attempt will be made to retrieve and recapture the original world of meaning in which the Church had its life. The churches will become live-in museums, perhaps for weekends or two-week summer retreats.

Marketing Spiritual Experiences

The more highly educated and historically sophisticated will come to experience just what it was like to sit at the feet of teaching rabbis at Jamnia, to chant as a medieval monk, to receive the spirit while listening to the preaching of John Wesley, or to pray like a Quaker at



Stone carvings on the wall beside the cathedral in Cologne, Germany. Worshipers there are often outnumbered by tourists interested in the aesthetic aspects rather than the spiritual atmosphere.

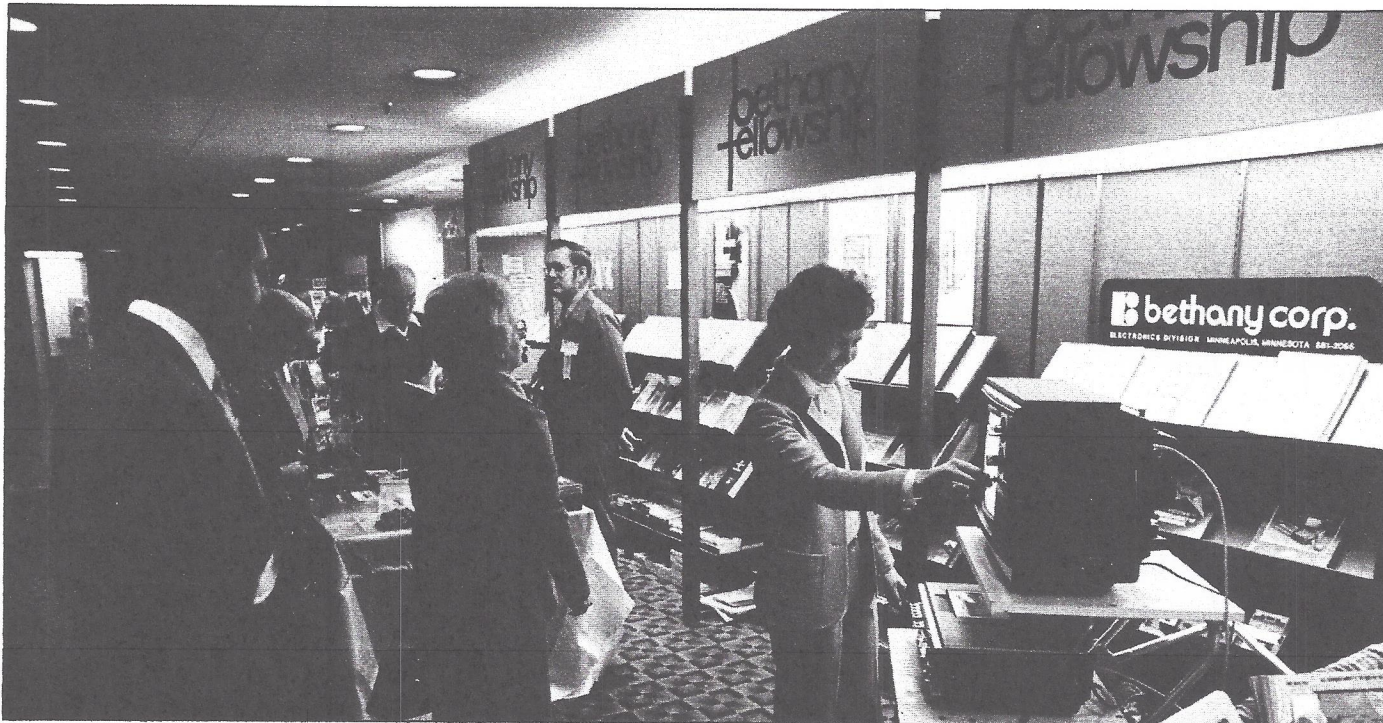
meeting. But the motivation will not derive from pure antiquarian curiosity about the past. This will not be an uninvolved looking from the outside. Rather, it will derive from that desire of the individual to enhance his or her own personal being through a deep experience with the spiritual world of our forebears.

The psychic and emotional investment in our religious past will be genuine—at least for the short time one is in attendance. After the weekend is concluded or the two-week vacation is over, everyone will go home and return to the rou-

tine of post-industrial life. It will be sort of like the Monday-after-Sunday syndrome of our churches today.

This will not be an authentic expression of religious faith, however, because in this case the autonomous individual is still in control. Religion will be bought and sold to satisfy our desires for exciting experiences, just as conventions, continuing education, psychotherapy, summer camps, and amusement parks are today.

This religious scenario alerts us to two rather serious problems, however. First, it is the consumption mentality of the wealthier nations that is usually designated as the primary source of the world problematique. Second, the consumer attitude toward religion fails to apprehend the true essence of the religious reality in life. We will look at these two problems in turn.



Delegates to a National Association of Evangelicals convention browse among exhibits of materials and services. Religion itself may soon be "marketed" to satisfy Western society's obsession with consuming exciting experiences, just as adventure parks and personal growth movements are promoted today.

The World Problematique

The post-industrial societies are not the only societies in the world. And understanding the relationship between the various societies and economies is crucial for recognizing that future post-industrial nations will not be able to go it alone. All our destinies are tied together.

This has led the Club of Rome in its best-selling book *The Limits to Growth* and its other publications to examine the list of common predicaments that threaten humanity everywhere on earth: poverty in the midst of plenty; degradation of the environment; loss of faith in institutions; alienation of youth; rejection of traditional values; runaway inflation; and global insecurity. This combination constitutes the "world problematique."

The shadowy clouds of the future get darker and darker as the gap between rich and poor continues to widen. And because there are limits—limits to how much wealth we can extract from nature, to how much food we can grow, to how many mouths we can feed, to how much longer our machines can run on diminishing supplies of energy, to how much pollution we can toler-

ate—the consumer-dominated post-industrial economies cannot continue indefinitely to leach wealth from their industrial and pre-industrial neighbors.

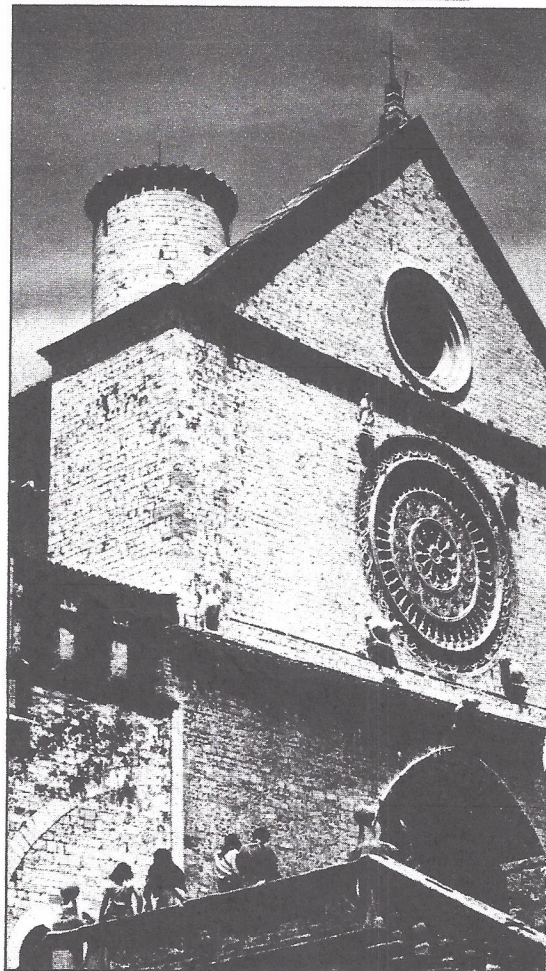
The cultural mind-set that lives for unrestrained consumption is blind to the realities of life; it fails to perceive its own self-destructive course. It just may, in the final analysis, produce the anarchy entailed in the doctrine of radical autonomy.

Beyond Independence: Self-Sacrifice

Neither the consumer mentality nor the doctrine of the autonomous human self which underlies it apprehends the essence of religion. In all of the higher religions, at least two important things are taught that fly in the face of industrial narcissism.

First, the self is not as autonomous or independent as we believe. Each one of us is part and parcel of something greater. We do not belong to ourselves alone. Somehow our very being is tied to the being of the divine, to the all. The meaning of our lives is not determined by the things we choose to buy, but rather it is determined by our role in the cosmic drama. Whether it be Dharma, Tao, the Great Spirit, or the will of Yahweh, who we are is determined by our relationship to a purpose greater than ourselves.

Second, the road to salvation sooner or later requires self-sacri-



Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi, Italy, which was built in memory of the saint whose famous prayer urges man to give so that he may ultimately receive. Author Ted Peters urges an end to selfish, unrestrained consumption and a return to the self-sacrifice of all authentic religions in order to halt the progression of cultural breakdown and global anarchy.

fice, the turning of oneself over to that which is greater. In Hinduism, for example, true liberation (*Moksha*) is found only when we surrender our separate and distinct selfhood (*Atman*) to the transcendent unity of all things (*Brahman*).

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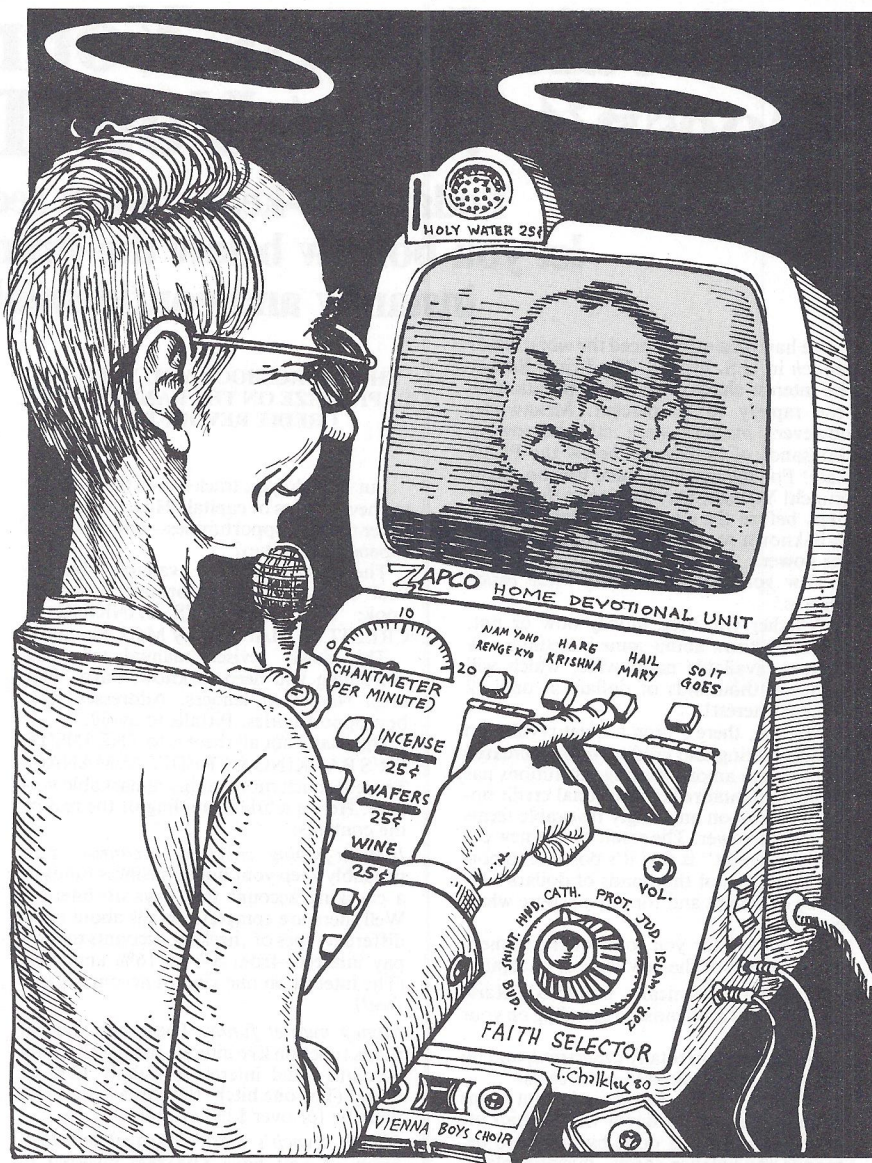
In Buddhism, we find the principle of "letting go." The very word *Islam* means "surrender." In Christianity, Jesus says the Kingdom of God is for those who give away everything to take up their cross and follow him; even God sacrifices. St. Francis closes his famous prayer: "Help me to learn that in giving I may receive; in forgetting myself I may find life eternal."

If we hold tenaciously to the belief in the autonomy of the human self, that the purpose of life is to satisfy one's desires, and that freedom consists of unconstrained consumption of goods and experiences, then the depths of the religious insight will elude us. At best we will have a pseudo-religion, one we have fabricated and not one revealed to us by the divine.

Needed: A Global "Central Project"

If we allow our religious impulses the freedom to surface and take control of our lives, then we may find ourselves on the track toward resolving the world problematique. What is needed now is not anarchy of autonomous individuals consuming whatever their hearts desire; rather, we need a sense of the unity of all things, a commitment to a destiny that is larger than our own private growth goals. The authentic religious vision can draw us out and beyond ourselves.

Futurists themselves—whether religious or non-religious—see the need for unity and are trying to cultivate a sense of global community. Georgetown University political scientist Victor Ferkiss advocates what he calls "ecological humanism," an "ism" that testifies to the



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unity we share with one another and with all of nature (*The Future of Technological Civilization*, George Braziller, 1974).

Willis Harman of SRI International says that what our society requires now is a single "central project" to pull us together, to unify our goals, and to enlist worldwide cooperation in facing the challenges of the transindustrial era (*An Incomplete Guide to the Future*, Norton, 1976). Can religion in our advancing post-industrial society prompt us to seek out and support such a central project? A religion that is co-opted and prostituted by the consumer mentality cannot. Authentic religion just might be able to.

Anarchy or Unity?

In conclusion, two scenarios seem apparent. If, on the one hand, the

unbridled egoism bequeathed to us from the industrial era continues unabated into the post-industrial stage, religion will become one more consumer item among others. By itself, this could be harmless. But should there be no challenge or check upon accelerating First World consumption, then we will continue down a track toward cultural breakdown and global anarchy.

If, on the other hand, the transcendent unity of all things makes itself definitively felt through authentic religious encounter, and if enough people surrender themselves in response, then our civilization may discover a new unifying heart, a new purpose, a renewed vitality, and we will find ourselves pulling together to write the next exciting chapter of our planet's ever more unified history.