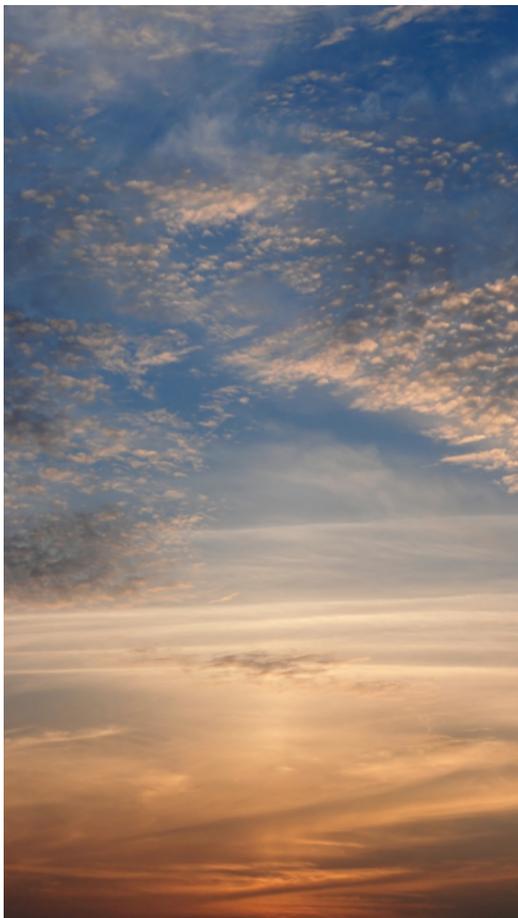




December 2014

Meaning, Religion, and a Great Transition

Michael Karlberg



Systems of meaning—including the semiotic codes, ontological assumptions, and interpretive frames all people employ to make sense of the world—play a central role in processes of collective action and social change. Despite early modern predictions to the contrary, religion continues to provide such codes, assumptions, and frames for large numbers of people on every continent. As a consequence, religious systems of meaning, and the collective practices that derive from them, will either resist or propel efforts to construct a more just and sustainable social order. In order to foster the latter, a critical normative discourse on the contemporary role of religion is urgently needed. This discourse will need to articulate a set of rational, cosmopolitan standards by which religious thought and practice can be assessed and held to account. Toward this end, it is possible to conceptualize religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice that, like science, entails a collective human endeavor to generate insights into reality and apply those insights to the betterment of the human condition. Indeed, modern science emerged only when a critical normative discourse began to clarify standards of legitimate scientific practice. A similar discourse is now needed regarding religious practice at this critical juncture in human history.

Major structural changes will occur only with the emergence of larger systems of meaning that render them imaginable, desirable, and feasible.

Introduction

The Great Transition Initiative recognizes that humanity is moving toward a planetary phase of civilization, driven by conditions of ever-increasing social and ecological interdependence. It accepts that the transitional period through which we are moving is characterized by two simultaneous processes: the gradual collapse of anachronistic social norms and institutions and the gradual emergence of new ones. In this context, it is promoting the emergence of a more just and sustainable social order characterized by human solidarity on a global scale. Toward this end, it envisions the need for a coherent global citizens movement as an essential systemic change agent. The core question before us is how to bring such a movement fully to life.¹

Previous dialogues about this question have offered rich insights into the structural and institutional dimensions of a great transition and have explored related policy and design questions. What has received less attention, however, is the role that shared systems of meaning—or semiotic systems—will need to play in this process. Major structural and political changes will occur only with the emergence of larger systems of meaning that render them imaginable, desirable, and feasible. This is not to suggest that semiotic change precedes structural change in processes of social evolution. Change on both levels is dialectical as each influences the other. Therefore, we have to factor both into our analyses and actions.

Today, systems of meaning are generated from a number of institutional domains including families, schools, commercial media, partisan politics, and religion. This essay will focus on religion for several key reasons. First, religion has proven to be an exceptionally powerful mobilizing force that can reach to the roots of human motivation by endowing human agency with a transcendent meaning and purpose. Second, throughout history, as modes of social organization have become increasingly expansive and complex, revolutions in religious thought have frequently contributed to the transition from one order of social complexity to the next. Finally, religion remains a powerful force in the world today—for better and for worse—and this force needs to be reckoned with on the path toward a great transition.

Semiotic Codes, Assumptions, and Frames

Before grappling directly with the topic of religion, we should step back and examine the relevance that systems of meaning have to processes of social transformation. Take, for example, the concept of semiotic codes. Codes are rules of correspondence, or structured relationships, between elements in related systems or sets. For instance, the traditional Morse code used in early telegraphy determines which combinations of dots and dashes correspond to which letters of the alphabet. Linguistic codes determine which words correspond to which meanings in a given language. Similarly, genetic codes determine which combinations of nucleotides correspond to which amino acids in the production of proteins.

Most relevant to a great transition are assumptions about the nature, meaning, and purpose of human existence.

Codes are ubiquitous in human cultures. Indeed, all cultural systems can be analyzed in terms of their underlying codes.² Thus, we can speak of linguistic codes, behavioral codes, legal codes, traffic codes, dress codes, codes of ethics, and countless others that are embedded in diverse cultural systems. In turn, these cultural codes shape the consciousness of those who grow up within their matrix and internalize them, often unconsciously. In the process, they establish the rules of correspondence, or conventions, by which thought, talk, and action become mutually intelligible within a shared culture.

At a higher level of abstraction, all cultural codes can be viewed as rules of correspondence between signifiers (words, symbols, images, etc.), physical or social phenomena (things, behaviors, social practices, etc.), and the meanings we assign to them (thoughts, affective associations, value judgments, etc.).³ These semiotic codes—or codes of meaning—can be relatively fixed for generations but become fluid and adaptive under changing conditions. In this sense, semiotic codes are analogous to the DNA of a given culture. They serve as a substrate for processes of social evolution. Like genetic codes, semiotic codes that are relatively adaptive or sustainable under one set of conditions can become maladaptive or unsustainable as conditions change.

Semiotic codes influence, in turn, the formation of more complex aggregates of meaning, including the ontological assumptions and interpretive frames that inform our perceptions and guide our social practices. Among the ontological assumptions that are most relevant to a great transition are assumptions about the nature, meaning, and purpose of human existence. Such assumptions constitute core elements of the systems of meaning that give rise to diverse social norms and practices, structures and policies, movements and causes. The transition to a more just and sustainable global civilization must occur, in part, at the level of these assumptions, which tend to be deeply maladaptive today.

For instance, if humans are presumed to be nothing more than intelligent and egoistic animals seeking to satisfy their material interests and appetites in an environment of scarce resources, with the meaning and purpose of our lives defined by success or failure in this regard—then how does the construction of a more just and sustainable global civilization become imaginable or desirable? And what would motivate the struggle and sacrifice required to bring it about?

Likewise, if humans are presumed to be living out transitory lives en route to a destination of eternal salvation or damnation, and if this earthly existence is nothing more than a way of separating the saved from the damned, and if the entire process is about to reach an apocalyptic conclusion—then how does the construction of a more just and sustainable global civilization become imaginable or desirable? And what would motivate the struggle and sacrifice required to bring it about?

A great transition must also occur at the level of overarching interpretive frames.

Or if humans are presumed to be limitless in their capacity for technological innovation and rational in their application of that capacity, and if technological innovations can ultimately solve any problems humans will ever face, and if our continued existence as a species is little more than a set of social and ecological engineering problems that will be solved by an elite scientific class—then how does the construction of a more just and sustainable global civilization become imaginable or desirable? And what would motivate the struggle and sacrifice required to bring it about?

There are, of course, many other assumptions about the nature, meaning, and purpose of human life at play in the world today, including many that are more thoughtful than the thumbnail sketches above. But each of the widely held assumptions outlined illustrates the profound role that such assumptions play in systems of meaning that will either resist or propel any movement toward a more just and sustainable global order. Thus, a great transition entails, in part, a semiotic transition in underlying assumptions about human nature and the codes that inform them.

Similarly, a great transition must also occur at the level of overarching interpretive frames. Interpretive frames are mental structures that shape our perceptions of reality, organize our experience, and provide normative guides for our actions.⁴ They are, in effect, a form of conceptual scaffolding on which we rely to construct our understanding of the world. Like window frames, they determine what is included and excluded in our consideration. Like building frames, they organize and provide coherence to our movement through life.

For instance, one of the dominant macro-social interpretive frames today builds on the aforementioned assumption that human nature is fundamentally self-interested and that the purpose of our lives is to pursue our material interests in an environment of scarce resources. Society, within this frame, is a competitive arena in which individuals or groups vie for material goods, social status, and power. The best way to organize society, its logic suggests, is to harness everyone's self-interested energy and direct it toward the maximum social benefit. This goal is pursued by organizing virtually every social institution as a contest in which truth, excellence, innovation, efficiency, or productivity will prevail. Thus, a culture of contest is prescribed for our classrooms, cultivated in our markets, reinforced in our congresses and parliaments, re-asserted in our courtrooms, and even embodied in many systems of recreation and leisure. Although such contests inevitably produce winners and losers, the logic of this frame suggests that, in the long run, (surviving) populations will be better off.

The historical dynamic of this social-contest frame is now playing out on a global stage in relations among nation-states and other global actors such as powerful multinational corporations. Whatever its viability in the past, or whatever advantages it has conferred on some social classes, this frame is becoming deeply maladaptive and unsustainable under conditions of rapidly increasing social and ecological

interdependence across the planet.⁵ Humanity cannot solve the problems it now faces within the same logic that gave rise to these problems.

The Question of Religion

Religion has been a primary cause of semiotic stasis in many populations for extended periods of time throughout history. Yet it has also been one of the primary drivers of semiotic transformation at critical moments in history. This is, in part, because religion has the power to recode systems of meaning that have prevailed for centuries, and, in the process, it can establish ontological assumptions and interpretive frames that give new meaning and purpose to human agency. Therefore, if our efforts to effect a great transition are to be informed by an analysis of the semiotic dimensions of this transition, we need to wrestle with both the negative and positive contributions that religion might make.

For generations, modernist thinkers have tended to view religion as an anachronistic social construct that would inevitably be replaced with purely secular belief systems with the advance of modernity. However, this “secularization thesis” is now being challenged by mounting evidence to the contrary.⁶ Religion remains a potent force in human affairs on every continent—shaping semiotic codes, influencing assumptions about human nature, and framing conceptions of society and progress. Indeed, the vast majority of the earth’s inhabitants continue to draw meaning and inspiration from religion, and any movement with global aspirations needs to consider this relatively universal human impulse.

Moreover, despite the resurgence of religious fanaticism in the news today, religion has made vital contributions to many progressive social movements in the past two centuries. Religious concepts, ideals, commitments, and organizational capacities have been major drivers of the abolition movements, suffrage movements, labor movements, independence movements, civil rights and anti-apartheid movements, peace movements, humanitarian assistance movements, solidarity movements, and truth and reconciliation movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷ And, today, they are increasingly being allied to environmental causes.⁸ They have also been a primary source, for centuries, of non-violent strategies to overcome oppression.⁹ We are thus seeing the emergence of a growing body of “post-secular” scholarship that is taking a more nuanced look at the complex and ongoing role of religion at this critical juncture in history.¹⁰

At the same time, organized religion has all too frequently been corrupted and abused by political and economic interests that pervert its accomplishments and distort its ends, foster superstition and blind imitation, set religion at odds with science and reason, and breed sectarian conflict and violence. In addition, religious belief and practice has frequently been characterized by the uncritical transmission of inherited cultural prejudices and oppressive social norms. Therefore, the concept of religion is, itself, in need of a great transition. As with every social institution, our

Any movement with global aspirations needs to consider this relatively universal human impulse.

understanding and practice of religion must evolve in order for it to make an ongoing contribution to the advancement of civilization.

Reconceptualizing Religion

With this understanding in mind, let us explore a series of critical normative questions regarding the nature and role of religion in the contemporary world. How can religion contribute to the emergence of a global citizens movement and the construction of a more just and sustainable global order? How can it contribute to the semiotic transition this implies? How can religion, itself, be understood and practiced in a progressive and evolving manner that aligns with these ends? And how might such an approach to religion be fostered, as widely as possible, at this critical juncture in human history?

It is possible to conceptualize religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice.

From a normative standpoint, it is possible to conceptualize religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice that, much like science, embodies a collective human endeavor to generate insights regarding significant dimensions of reality and apply those insights to the betterment of the human condition.¹¹ There are, of course, significant differences between the two systems. For instance, science explores aspects of the material universe such as the laws of physics or the process and products of biological evolution. Religion, on the other hand, explores less tangible aspects of reality such as the purpose and meaning of human life, the values and ideals that might guide individual and collective human agency, the latent potentialities of the human spirit, and the means by which we might actualize those potentialities on both individual and collective levels.

Of course, some of these latter questions are also explored in various branches of philosophy, literature, and the arts—all of which have made significant contributions to human progress over the centuries. What distinguishes religion, however, is faith in a set of underlying ontological premises and commitment to acting on them in various ways.¹² These tend to include variations on several key themes. There is a spiritual dimension to reality that cannot be investigated through purely empirical or philosophical methodologies. Reality, in both its material and spiritual dimensions, has a Source, a First Cause, a Supreme Animating Will or Power that embodies a pre-ontological level of being from which every aspect of the reality we experience emanates. The principle of causality can, itself, be understood as an emanation of this pre-ontological Essence—as can all of the governing dynamics, or underlying laws, of the known universe.

In this framework, science and religion can be seen as systems of knowledge and practice by which we can gradually gain deeper insights into the governing dynamics of the reality that emanates from this Animating Will. Among these governing dynamics are highly tangible mechanical forces that have been well understood for centuries as well as relatively intangible material forces, such as electromagnetic forces, which humans have only begun to comprehend and harness in recent

We need a critical normative discourse about what constitutes the progressive and constructive practice of religion.

centuries. These governing dynamics also include highly intangible spiritual forces, such as the powers of love, compassion, and justice, of which we have only a dim understanding at present, and which we still have much to learn about harnessing for the betterment of humanity. Nonetheless, the essence of human nature—the human spirit or the rational soul—responds to these spiritual forces even if we do not adequately understand them, just as human bodies have always responded to forces such as gravity, regardless of whether we understood those forces. We can, of course, try to ignore such forces, but we do so at our own peril.

Within this perspective, religion, as a system of knowledge and practice, can be understood as a major means by which humanity has explored and learned to harness these spiritual forces and understand their implications for the meaning and purpose of human life. There are, of course, other ways to view religion in the world today—ranging from dismissal of it as an anachronistic social construct to insistence that one religious community possesses the exclusive and final truth. However, such polarizing and triumphalist conceptions are incompatible with the transition to a global order characterized by inclusivity and solidarity. What is needed, then, is a constructive conception of religion that provides normative standards of religious practice in relation to the emergence of a more just and sustainable global civilization.

The normative conception of religion alluded to above is, of course, an ideal to foster rather than a description of all that has occurred in the name of religion. Much religious practice has fallen far short of this ideal. But so has the practice of science fallen short of contemporary scientific standards. The history of science includes naive assertions, cultural prejudices, theoretical biases, spurious claims, self-interested corruptions, and perverted abuses. At this moment in history, however, what distinguishes science is an ongoing, rigorous, global, evolving discourse about what constitutes science, along with an evolving set of standards and rules of conduct that are applied, however imperfectly at times, to all who claim to be engaged in science. Based on those standards and requirements, valid science is, over time, increasingly distinguished from what we now view as pseudoscience or junk science.

If we look at religion in a somewhat analogous manner, we see the urgent need at this pivotal moment in history for a critical normative discourse about what constitutes the progressive and constructive practice of religion—or how religious practice can best be aligned with the transition to a more just and sustainable global order. Only through such discourse can we articulate standards that can be applied to all those who claim to be engaged in religion. Only thus can religion become a consistent force of social progress as spurious claims to religion are exposed for what they are: the prejudices, corruptions, and abuses of ignorant or self-interested actors invoking the name of religion in order to satisfy their egos or support their desire for power and privilege.

This is not, it should be noted, a sectarian argument that seeks to exalt any one religious tradition over others. On the contrary, all of the world's great religious

There is value in focusing on religion as a singular, universal, trans-historical phenomenon.

traditions contain within them spiritual principles, humanitarian ideals, and altruistic commitments that can align with, and support, the transition to a global civilization. In this regard, there is value in focusing, for analytical purposes, on *religion* as a singular, universal, trans-historical phenomenon rather than *religions* as competing traditions or frameworks. Indeed, this is similar to the way we now think of *science* as a singular analytical construct that encompasses the many disciplinary frameworks, or *sciences*, within it.

Moreover, this shift in how we understand religion requires us to start separating religion, conceptually, from the cultural milieus in which specific religions emerged—in the same way we now do for science.¹³ Today, we no longer speak in terms of European sciences, or Islamic sciences, or Chinese sciences because we understand that the physical universe is one reality and, therefore, science—the means by which we systematically investigate that reality—must be understood as one global enterprise. Similarly, if there is a transcendent spiritual reality, then it, too, must be one reality. Therefore, religion, if it is understood as the means by which we systematically investigate that reality, must be understood as one global enterprise. Stated another way, science reached a stage of relative maturity only when it began to free itself from culturally inherited biases and limitations. Why should religion be any different? And how can the transition to a more peaceful, just, and sustainable global order be possible unless and until the vast majority of human beings on this planet, who remain religious, begin to redefine their understanding of religion in this way?

Holding Religion to Account

Fortunately, if one listens to religious discourse with discerning ears, one can hear that the process of redefinition has already begun, is gathering momentum, and needs to be strongly encouraged and systematically advanced as an essential contribution to a great transition. With this in mind, what are some of the standards and requirements we might begin to apply to the understanding and practice of religion?

First, if religion is understood as a system of knowledge and practice that seeks insight into spiritual reality and applies that insight to improving the human condition, then one condition it would need to satisfy is that it be practiced in a thoughtful, intelligent, and rational manner complementary to and harmonious with science. Religion must grow beyond dogmatic and narrow-minded assertions of truth and adopt instead a posture of systematic learning. This is not to deny the profound body of insights, often expressed in rich metaphorical language, which can be gleaned from diverse religious traditions. Rather, it suggests the need for humility in the interpretation of religious texts, coupled with rational methods for the ongoing generation of knowledge regarding how to apply spiritual insights to the betterment of humanity. These rational methods might include, for instance, a dialogical and reflective approach to inquiry, grounded in constructive social action, which draws on diverse perspectives and experiences within evolving frameworks of understanding built upon ethical commitments and altruistic ideals.

Religion can recognize and promote the systemic unity and interdependence of humanity.

Another condition religion would need to satisfy at this moment in history is suggested by the increasing global interdependence humanity is experiencing, along with the increasing fragility of social and ecological systems under mounting stress from our recent reproductive and technological course as a species. In this context, religion can recognize and promote the systemic unity and interdependence—the organic oneness—of humanity. Indeed, the Latin root of the word religion—*ligare*—implies binding or connecting people in community. At this critical juncture in history, this must begin to occur at the level of our global human community. Such a conception of religion provides an overarching interpretive frame within which the nature of human society and the trajectory of social evolution can be understood—and within which the generation of practical knowledge regarding the betterment of the human condition can occur.

A closely related condition religion would need to satisfy is that the generation of knowledge be premised on a normative conception of human nature that is compatible with a just and sustainable global order, or with the promotion of the organic oneness of humanity. In this regard, it is possible to conceive of the human being as having a twofold purpose: to develop one's latent individual capacity as a means to, and in the process of, contributing to the advancement of civilization. Such a conception imbues human nature, and human agency, with a meaning that is coherent with the exigencies of the age in which we live while, at the same time, reinforcing the noblest insights and commitments of all religious traditions.

This underlying premise regarding the twofold purpose of human life, understood within the overarching social frame of organic oneness, offers a basis for the semiotic transition alluded to at the outset of this essay. Together, they offer a holistic view of the individual and society, co-evolving in a dialectical manner, with individual and collective well-being inextricably linked. Within this framework, normative concepts such as progress, justice, prosperity, sustainability, education, and empowerment—and all other normative concepts—begin to take on new meanings that reflect the needs of the age in which we live.¹⁴ Stated another way, within this framework, a more adaptive semiotic code begins to emerge, as familiar concepts are recoded with new meaning from which new social practices emerge.

A Response to Skeptics

Skeptics might still ask why religion should have any role. What about the religious fanaticism that we see in the news today or that we read about in our history books? Is secular humanism not the only rational way to bring about a great transition?

In response, it is important to acknowledge that religious violence and fanaticism are very real. At the same time, it is equally important to acknowledge that today's news media tend to amplify the most dramatic, disturbing, and polarizing expressions of religion while obscuring the way the vast majority of religious people live, practice their faith, and quietly contribute to the betterment of society. The stories we tend to

The positive development of science has been spurred on by an ongoing discourse regarding the legitimate practice of science.

tell in our history books likewise focus disproportionately on the drama and conflict of history rather than the quiet contributions to progress that countless thoughtful people—including religious people—have made. So the contemporary perception and historical memory of religion created by these sources tends to be deeply biased toward the corruptions and abuses of religion.

In contrast, these same institutional sources of contemporary perception and historical memory frequently ignore corruptions and abuses of science. For instance, in just the last century, the natural sciences have given us eugenics, apocalyptic weapons of mass destruction, the toxification of every landscape on the planet, the enclosure of genetic resources, the engineering of suicide genes, and the destabilization of global climatic systems. Meanwhile, the social and behavioral sciences have provided a theoretical bulwark for growing economic disparities destabilizing the global economy, along with sophisticated methods of mass manipulation that have fostered an unsustainable consumer culture and a dysfunctional political culture. Science has also created its own modern priesthood that has alienated the masses of humanity from participating in meaningful ways in the enterprise of knowledge generation. Children are sorted, from primary school, into a small fraction who are allegedly capable of contributing to the generation of knowledge, and a vast majority who will be mere consumers of that knowledge and who should trust science's priestly class to look after their interests. And that priestly scientific class even has its own gender hierarchies and sexual abuse scandals which are systemic and widespread.

The point here is not to diminish the importance of science or its central contribution to human progress. But the positive development of science has been spurred on by an ongoing normative discourse regarding the legitimate practice of science. That discourse needs to be taken to the next level because science is in a relative state of systemic crisis—even though this is seldom recognized by scientists. The examples cited above are only part of the problem. The crisis can also be seen in the underlying political economy of science today. It can be seen, for instance, in the ways scientists obtain funding and receive promotions; in the basic questions they ask or do not ask as a result; in the increasingly reductionist nature of most scientific research; in the privatization of much scientific knowledge; in the systemic biases built into peer-reviewed scientific publishing; and in the ways most scientific training focuses narrowly on methodological technique while ignoring deeper questions and concerns that pertain to the scientific enterprise.

There are, of course, many excellent scientists who conduct their work in ethical and thoughtful ways, and there is much excellent science contributing to the advancement of civilization. But contemporary science, as a system influenced by powerful social forces, often lacks critical reflexivity, and is often uninformed by a wider social and ecological consciousness. Furthermore, as the brief sketch above illustrates, these problems play out not merely at the level of the applied sciences

and technologies. The contemporary crisis of science as-a-whole is inseparable from the global crises with which so many thoughtful people are concerned today. This is because the crisis in science reflects its increasing privatization, industrialization, and commercialization into a self-serving system inextricably tied to the political economy of today's maladaptive social order.

Clearly, both religion and science, as systems of inquiry and practice, are susceptible to ignorance, bias, corruption, and abuse. This is because both systems are practiced by human beings within social contexts. Moreover, if we could conduct a complete accounting for all of the problems we face in the world today, it might even be the case that science has greater culpability in terms of its ultimate effect—given its increasingly deleterious impact on the global ecosystems that sustain human life itself. But this is not an argument for less science. It is an argument for more critical normative discourse regarding the practice of science, and religion, at this critical juncture in history when all inherited social institutions and practices urgently need to be re-examined.

Both religion and science, as systems of inquiry and practice, are susceptible to ignorance, bias, corruption, and abuse.

Another important answer can be found in the post-secular scholarship mentioned at the outset of this essay. Assessed according to its own predictions, the secularization thesis has clearly failed. Religion is not disappearing in the modern age, and it has actually made central contributions to the project of modernity at every stage—despite the fanaticism that also occurs in its name.¹⁵ One reason for the continued vitality of religion is that, at its best, religion enables humans to grapple in meaningful ways with universal and existential questions that cannot be ignored but are beyond the scope of science. Moreover, in the process, religion can reach the roots of human motivation and prompt the will to struggle—and the willingness to make personal sacrifices—for the betterment of the human condition. These capacities, along with the recoding of normative concepts with new meanings, lie outside the domain of science. For most people living today, religion continues to be a major source of normative understanding and commitment. Thus, it appears to have a significant role to play in a great transition. The question is whether that role will be progressive or regressive – and what we can do to foster the former.

This does not mean, of course, that the advancement of civilization—or a great transition—is coterminous with the development of religion itself. Systemic transition is a complex process in which the most thoughtful approaches to science and the most thoughtful approaches to religion each have a role and in which people who identify as secular and people who identify as religious can and must work shoulder to shoulder to achieve common ends.

Is this a plausible scenario? Yes. All of the developments described above can already be discerned in the contemporary world, where many intelligent and productive scientists hold thoughtful religious commitments; where countless people from diverse secular and religious backgrounds have no trouble working side by side for common ends; and where rising generations of young people are transforming

Neither secular nor religious intolerance constitutes a viable path to global human solidarity.

religious thought and practice itself in ecumenical, intelligent, cosmopolitan, and forward-looking ways—even if their efforts do not make the six o'clock news. Moreover, the conception of religion as an evolving system of knowledge and practice, as discussed above, is emerging in religious discourse today.¹⁶ If skeptics fail to recognize these emerging realities, it is because they choose to ignore them or to engage in highly selective and prejudicial readings of their wider social reality.

Consider the Alternatives

In contrast to the scenario above, characterized by constructive engagement with religion, consider the futility of ongoing efforts to ignore or extinguish religious impulses and commitments. Such efforts, at best, have never succeeded. At worst, they resemble the stridency and the proselyting zealotry that characterizes divisive forms of religious fundamentalism, which polarize and alienate people rather than bind them together in community. In essence, such efforts become an expression of secular fundamentalism, rooted in ontological premises that are neither more nor less provable or rational than thoughtful versions of the spiritual premises to which they set themselves in opposition.

Neither secular nor religious intolerance constitutes a viable path to global human solidarity. Would it not be more productive and universally empowering to foster the ongoing evolution and refinement of religion as a system of knowledge and practice focused on questions of human meaning and purpose and on the practical means for actualizing latent human potentialities? And can this not be encouraged either from the position of an active participant or a sympathetic secular observer?

Further, if we consider other major semiotic forces in the world today, we see additional reasons to take religion seriously. Foremost among these forces is the vast system of advertising and marketing that now dominates human consciousness in many regions of the world and is rapidly colonizing the rest. This system has learned how to exploit the universal human need for meaning and purpose and bend it toward the ends of consumer stimulation and profit maximization. Indeed, as one prominent semiotic scholar has demonstrated, the contemporary system of advertising is aggressively seeking to displace religion as the primary system of meaning in the modern world.¹⁷ The conception of human nature this commercially-motivated system propagates is of a creature driven by insatiable appetites, needs, and desires that can only be met through spending, acquisition, entertainment, and consumption. It frames society as an arena of competitive pleasure seeking, status attainment, and satisfaction fulfillment. Within this matrix, the semiotic codes that have emerged are deeply maladaptive on psychological, social, and ecological levels.

Another powerful semiotic force in the world today is partisan politics and the system of political marketing to which it has given rise—a system that directly parallels consumer marketing in the growing sophistication of its semiotic strategies and techniques. In this sphere, we see increasingly polarizing discourse comprising us-

We need to encourage the ongoing evolution and refinement of religion as a partner in a growing global citizens movement

against-them identity constructs, mud-slinging, simplistic slogans, and endless public posturing informed by crass electoral calculations. The reactionary policy proposals, short-term planning horizons, nationalism, and partisan gridlock that often result are as deeply maladaptive as the culture of consumerism—while the underlying assumptions about human nature and the over-arching social frames are remarkably similar.

The contemporary systems of consumer capitalism and partisan politics are becoming increasingly inseparable in many regions of the world. They each embody and reinforce the same underlying competitive logic, which aligns with the narrow short-term interests of the most powerful segments of society.¹⁸ In effect, they have merged into a single political-economic system—with variations on the same theme playing out in an increasing number of countries. This integrated political economy is, in turn, characterized by a largely consistent semiotic code that is becoming one of the most influential systems of meaning on the planet today. It is rivaled in its influence only by religion.

In this context, efforts to foster and encourage the ongoing evolution and refinement of religion, and to recognize it as a partner in a growing global citizens movement, seem well founded. We would do well then to consider the practical questions that follow. How can this best be accomplished? What can we contribute as individuals—whether secular or religious? What collective actions can we take within our organizations or communities? And what role, if any, can the Great Transition Initiative play in such efforts?

Endnotes

1. Paul Raskin, "A Great Transition? Where We Stand," *Great Transition Initiative* (October 2014), <http://www.greattransition.org/publication/a-great-transition-where-we-stand>.
2. Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997).
3. Michael Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2004).
4. Robert Benford and David Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611-639, <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>; Hank Johnston and John Noakes, eds., *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).
5. Michael Karlberg, "Reframing Public Discourses for Peace and Justice," in *Forming a Culture of Peace: Reframing Narratives of Intergroup Relations, Equity, and Justice*, ed. Karina Korostelina (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 15-42.
6. Jürgen Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 17-29, http://www.digitalnpg.org/archive/2008_fall/04_habermas.html; José Casanova, "Public Religions Revisited," in *Religion: Beyond the Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 101-19; Daniel Philpott, "Has the Study of Global Politics Found Religion?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 12, no. 1 (2009): 183-202, <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.polisci.12.053006.125448?journalCode=polisci>; Craig Calhoun, "Religion's Many Powers," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 118-34; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
7. Fred Kniss and Gene Burns, "Religious Movements," in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. David Snow, Sarah Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 694-715; Daniel Philpott and Gerard Powers, eds., *Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Timothy Shah, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Toft, *Rethinking Religion in World Affairs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Helene Slessarev-Jamir, *Prophetic Activism: Progressive Religious Justice Movements in Contemporary America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Christian Smith, *The Emergence of Liberation Theology: Radical Religion and Social Movement Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Melissa Snarr, *All You That Labor: Religion and Ethics in the Living Wage Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Christian Smith, *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2004); Brian Temple, *Philadelphia Quakers and the Antislavery Movement* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2014); David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Christopher Queen, *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation*

- Movements in Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996); Susan Berrin, ed., "Social Movements," *Sh'ma – A Journal of Jewish Responsibility* 43 (December 2012), <http://shma.com/2012/12/nishma-social-movements/>.
8. Lucas Johnston, *Religion and Sustainability: Social Movements and the Politics of Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
 9. Robert Homles and Barry Gan, *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2005); Mark Kurlansky, *Non-violence: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Modern Library, 2008); Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1964); Ira Chernus, *American Nonviolence: The History of an Idea* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).
 10. Joseph Camilleri, "Postsecularist Discourse in an 'Age of Transition,'" *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 5 (2012): 1019-39, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0260210512000459>. See also references in note 6 above.
 11. Farzam Arbab, "Promoting a Discourse on Science, Religion, and Development," in *The Lab, The Temple, and the Market*, ed. Sharon Harper (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2000), 149-238; Paul Lample, *Revelation & Social Reality* (West Palm Beach, FL: Palabra, 2009); Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, *Science, Religion and Development: Promoting a Discourse in India, Brazil, and Uganda* (Haifa, Israel: ISGP, 2010).
 12. It is important to note that faith is not an exclusive characteristic of religion. The entire enterprise of science, from its outset, also rested on articles of faith. These included faith that the physical universe is characterized by an underlying order and faith that the human mind can discover this order over time, through the right methods of investigation. Neither premise was verifiable at the outset of the enterprise; indeed, they would have appeared to contradict most people's experience of the world as highly chaotic, unpredictable, and unexplainable. Moreover, scientists continue to operate on faith in a wide range of premises that underlie the programs of research to which they devote their lives, some of which prove valid over time while others do not. So faith, itself, is not a distinguishing feature of religion, and only the most naïve conceptions of science fail to recognize its generative and ongoing role in the scientific enterprise. Therefore, what distinguishes religion is faith in a specific set of ontological premises regarding the existence of a spiritual reality that transcends the physical universe. This does not deny, of course, the central role of skepticism and critical thought in science. But we should not have a naïve understanding of how they operate within science—as Thomas Kuhn, Imra Lakatos, and many other philosophers and historians of science have documented.
 13. For sociologists, the implication here is that while Durkheim's conception of religion (and the sociological approach to religious studies it spawned) may have had some merit as a historical description of culturally-embedded and ritualized religious practices, it does not offer an adequate normative basis for understanding contemporary religion in the context of a great transition humanity is moving toward. Moreover, given that Durkheim's secularization thesis has not been supported by its own predictions, it would seem timely to at least question Durkheim's underlying assumptions. Most prominent among these are the assumptions that there is no transcendent spiritual reality and that religion is merely a functional social construct without any deeper ontological basis.
 14. George Lakoff, *Whose Freedom? The Battle Over America's Most Important Idea* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2006); Karlberg, "Reframing Public Discourses."
 15. John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion in Global Politics* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2011).
 16. Arbab, op. cit.; Lample, op. cit.; Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, op. cit.
 17. Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society* (New York: Routledge, 1990); see also William Leis, Stephen Kline and Sut Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997).
 18. Karlberg, *Beyond the Culture of Contest*.

About the Author



Michael Karlberg is Professor of Communication Studies at Western Washington University. His research and activism focus on the need to move beyond the prevailing culture of conflict and competition in order to establish a more just and sustainable social order based on recognition of the organic oneness of humanity. He is the author of numerous books, including *Beyond the Culture of Contest*; *Reframing Discourses for Peace and Justice*; *Discourse, Identity, and Global Citizenship*; *Discourse Theory and Peace*; *The Paradox of Protest in a Culture of Contest*; and *Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í Response to Oppression in Iran*. He holds a Ph.D. in Communication from Simon Fraser University.

About the Publication

Published as an Essay by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).



Cite as Michael Karlberg, "Religion, Meaning, and a Great Transition," *Great Transition Initiative* (December 2014), <https://greattransition.org/publication/meaning-religion-and-a-great-transition>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As a forum for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.