

# Ten Major Trends: Reflections Twenty Years Later

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Toward the end of 2005 I was requested by Steve Addison in Australia to reflect back on the “ten major trends” that that Dan Runyon and I highlighted in our 1986 book, *Foresight* (Snyder & Runyon 1986). Steve had posted a summary of the trends that had appeared in article form (Snyder & Runyon 1987) on his Christian Futures Network (2005) website. He gave his own reflections on the trends and later posted comments from various other people. I found the comments perceptive and refer to some of them below.

Here are my own reflections on these trends twenty years later. I do not attempt to outline *new* trends that may be emerging except for some incidental comments.

In 1995 I published *EarthCurrents: The Struggle for the World's Soul* (Snyder 1995), which also dealt with trends. I originally conceived of that book as an update to *Foresight* but it developed into something quite different—a survey of global trends (not specifically relating to the church) and an inventory of worldviews. The book was not addressed primarily to a Christian audience and was published as an attempt in “worldview evangelism.” The eight trends analyzed there:

1. The coming of online global society (Internet, etc.)
2. Economic globalization
3. The feminist revolution
4. Environment at risk—global warming, species depletion, water, etc.
5. The genetics and quantum physics revolutions (DNA, superstrings)
6. Virtual reality and artificial intelligence
7. Cultural and economic decline of the U.S.
8. Global culture vs. global clash of civilizations

These also deserve some updating comments now that a decade has passed, but that will have to await another time—though again some comments below relate to those eight trends.

What follows, then, is a series of reflections on the ten trends identified in 1986. This is a revision and expansion of the material sent to Steve Addison.

## **1. From regional churches to world church.**

This is continuing. Philip Jenkins' *Next Christendom* is helpful here.

It is yet not clear however what “world church” might end up meaning. The church worldwide will be increasingly diverse but increasingly linked, I think—both in terms of global electronic communications (email, cell phones, websites, blogs, live video, podcasting, etc.) and in terms of various ministry and mission networks. This includes the continuing internationalization of denominations; denominationalism is not dead, even though it is morphing.

I don't see a “world church” emerging in any organizationally unified sense. That would probably be Anti-Christ! But I do hope for Spirit-led greater understanding and cooperation globally, and I

think revival currents here and there and global communications (much of it informal) will foster this.

Significantly, we are seeing the globalization and internationalization of Christian leadership and writing. I see this, for instance, in the increasing numbers of non-Anglos as book authors and organizational leaders in the English-speaking world. Also, influential Christian leaders are emerging already in (e.g.) India, China, Korea, and throughout Latin America. Their numbers and proportion will increase, to the good of the whole church, I believe. But new divisions, conflicts, and controversies will emerge unless trend #2 really flourishes.

Clearly, well before the end of this century the church will be predominantly non-Western in virtually every respect, as it already is numerically. In what has been “the West,” more and more of the church’s leaders will be non-Western or multiethnic.

## **2. From scattered growth to broad revival.**

We argued in 1986: “Now that the world has become one global, interconnected communications network, the unprecedented Christian growth worldwide is bound to have an impact in the traditionally Christian lands of North America and Europe.” This is proving to be true. But it’s also true, as Steve Addison notes, that “we’re still a long way off seeing the dynamism and growth of the church replicated in the ‘traditionally Christian lands.’ If the problem is consumerism, God may have to take away our toys before we’ll see significant revival in the developed world.”

We can now identify a number of “impacts” that church growth and revival around the world have had on the North Atlantic countries. I mentioned some above, and Jenkins speaks of this (and probable longer-term influences) in *The Next Christendom*.

I do see signs of a broad renewal movement (or movements) brewing in the U.S. I cite among other things the late-December *Time* cover story on Bono, clearly a prophet of our time. Bono notes, as others have (e.g., David Brooks of the *NY Times*) numerous signs of ferment in the U.S., and probably elsewhere—a sense of a transition coming. It is encouraging to see rising concern globally about health and poverty, especially in poorer nations, and some constructive action being taken.

As to broad revival, in terms of a genuine movement of the Holy Spirit that will transform the church and society? I don’t know. I’m hopeful. I believe God is working in a number of subtle ways. I don’t see a lot of positive signs in (or hope for) U.S. churches that can’t distinguish between the kingdom of God and U.S. patriotism, but that’s being transcended or questioned in places. A number of Evangelical leaders, for instance, are becoming concerned with environmental issues and global poverty. See the significant report in *CQ Weekly*, the influential magazine published by the *Congressional Quarterly* (Cochran 2005).

No truly broad, authentic revival has yet occurred. However I’m actually more hopeful about that today than I was in 1986.

## **3. From Communist China to Christian China.**

This was stated provocatively, of course, in the 1986 book. Obviously China is not yet a Christian nation. As I see it, China is now experiencing a great contest between the Christian faith and

economic materialism/consumerism. The remarkable growth of the Chinese church continues, much of it more or less underground, though Christians are beginning to have some influence in educational, economic, and political circles.

I don't know where this will end up. *If* the Chinese Christians can maintain radical fidelity to Jesus Christ and not succumb to materialism, and not be torn apart by internal divisions, a genuinely Christian China could emerge in the next fifty years. But the church in China will have to prove more effective in resisting the seductions of advertising, entertainment, and consumerism than Western Christianity has been.

I still believe China will evolve in a more democratic direction over the next decades and that the Christian faith will be less and less persecuted—as a result of Christian influence on the society, the openness demanded by economic globalization, and an increasing trend globally toward democracy. But this is not assured, and we could witness totalitarian reactions in China as elsewhere.

A part of this picture, certainly, is China's growing economic and political clout worldwide. A new Chinese empire is emerging, already challenging U.S. power and influence in some areas. China now has huge economic influence in the U.S. due to massive trade (based on artificially low prices) and its holding of massive amounts of U.S. debt (due to fiscal irresponsibility in the U.S.). And it has growing economic, political, and in some places military presence and influence in parts of Africa and South America. It is unfortunately becoming a competitor of the U.S. in the production of pollutants! So the spiritual contest going on in China today has huge global implications. In the U.S., some observers are beginning to speak of the growing "Communist threat" (i.e., Chinese influence) in Latin America in rhetoric reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s.

#### **4. From institutional tradition to kingdom theology.**

I am encouraged with the increasing emphasis on the kingdom of God, broadly understood, and on "holistic" and "transformational" mission and the *missio Dei* theme among Evangelicals. Kingdom theology is a strong emphasis of many of the so-called "emerging churches" (Gibbs and Bolger 2005:44). Among Evangelicals, so far I see little understanding that a "holistic" kingdom theology must include creation care, but there are some signs of progress.

The most encouraging thing here is that much of the church outside the U.S. has a more holistic kingdom theology and sense of mission than does the U.S. church (especially Evangelicals and Fundamentalists). This likely will have a positive reflex impact on North America Christians.

I don't expect that Christian organizations will ever escape the problems and cycles of institutionalism, but I still believe that more flexible and organic models of organizational being and operation will become more influential, for the reasons I spelled out in *EarthCurrents*.

#### **5. From clergy/laity to community of ministers.**

Throughout much of the world church, as I see it, considerable progress has been made here. The universal priesthood, ministry of all believers, diversities of ministries and gifts are much more accepted today (in most places) than twenty years ago. The "second Reformation" needed here (restoring the *ministry* to the people of God, as the Reformation attempted to restore the *Word* to the people of God), has not yet fully happened, but on a scale of ten, I think much of the church has

moved from, say, a 1 or 2 to a 5 or 6. Still a long way to go—in practice and probably even more in theology. Here again some of the so-called “emerging churches” are pointing the way. (Others seem to be rather confused as to what they’re about.)

Postmodern sensibilities, experimentation, and angst are fueling a lot of discussion about “new forms of the church”—a discussion which in some ways resonates with similar discussions during the Jesus Movement of the late Sixties and early Seventies. The considerable ferment and discussion today about “emerging churches” and also about a “new monasticism” are worth noting (cf. [www.newmonasticism.org](http://www.newmonasticism.org)). I am encouraged with the more holistic (or what *wants* to be a more holistic) understanding and practice of the Christian life, and the emphasis on creation care and the ministry of all believers, in many of these groups.

## **6. From male leadership to male-female partnership.**

It is probably unwise to generalize globally and transdenominationally(!), but overall I do see this trend continuing. Women are fairly prominent in leadership in more or less underground churches in China and Viet Nam and there are many women pastors (at least among some groups) in the Philippines, Cambodia, and Thailand, I understand.

In the U.S., seminaries are seeing increasing numbers of women enrolled. I haven’t seen recent statistics on this, so don’t know what the current trend line is, but the increasingly higher proportion of women at Asbury, where I teach, is striking. Many of these are on an ordination track in the United Methodist Church or other denominations.

Many “emerging churches” and other newer forms of the church also practice and/or emphasize gender equality and openness to women’s leadership gifts.

In the U.S., there has been something of an awakening (a new movement?) regarding women in ministry in the churches coming out of the 19<sup>th</sup>-C. holiness movement. Groups such as the Church of the Nazarene and Free Methodists (my denomination) once had many women in pastoral leadership, but that faded many decades ago with institutionalization and movement-decline. Now some of these groups are seeing a gradual increase in women in pastoral roles.

Steve Addison comments, “Strangely women are prominent in leadership roles at the beginning and end of the movement lifecycle. In the pioneering phase it’s all hands on deck regardless of gender or social standing. In the decline and death phase men are less attracted to leadership roles in an institution that has loss status.” Very true. Women have almost always been in the majority in the church but are given freedom to exercise major leadership roles most notably in the early movement stages. This is understandable, but decline in female leadership represents a spiritual and theological failure in the church—theological because theologies of authority, ordination, and male headship get introduced which are foreign to the New Testament.

Special note should be made here of the Salvation Army. Though its military structure may be problematic to some, the provision of having women be officers in the army (the legacy largely of Catherine Booth) has meant that women have had and continue to have prominent leadership roles in the Army. This says something about the importance of structure with regard to women’s roles.

## **7. From secularization to religious relativism.**

I agree here with Steve Addison's comment: "It's questionable whether 'secularization' was ever a reality outside of the wishful thinking of certain academic and theological circles. The problem is not that people don't believe. It's that they will believe anything."

In this area, I think the most significant development over the past twenty years is the recognition of the importance of religion (whichever it is—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, shamanism, economism, varieties of "New Age," or whatever).

Yet major influential sectors of U.S. society, and also some sectors in predominantly Islamic countries and in India, are aggressively secular in the sense that they oppose theocracy or attempts to give any religion privileged status within the political structure. We see this struggle being fought out right now in the U.S., Turkey, India, and to some degree in other places. We don't know where this will lead, but I do expect to see a growing reform movement within Islam—in part in reaction to radical terrorist Islamic groups—toward more religious toleration and pluralism (paralleling to some degree what happened in Europe and the U.S. in the 18th Century).

So I think religious pluralism and also religious relativism (which is something different) will continue and become increasingly prominent globally. This trend is fed by global entertainment, advertising, marketing and "branding," and consumerism. This is a major (maybe *the* major) challenge for authentic Christianity: Religious/philosophical relativism and the commodification of belief systems and religious "products," including the marketing of religious "experiences."

I also concur with those who say that materialistic consumerism, and the forces of global capitalism behind it with the commodification of everything, including culture itself, is the new religion which it is now heretical to question. And I don't see the church (at least in most places) being very effective in challenging this. In the U.S. most of the church has capitulated to a consumerist, celebrity-oriented, entertainment culture, and this same dynamic will be the main challenge, I think, in places like South Korea, Brazil, and the large cities of China.

Clearly the church, if it is to remain faithful, will have to figure out how to exist counterculturally in a world of TV and instant global video communications.

## **8. From nuclear family to family diversity.**

This continues in the U.S. where something close to half the population now lives in single-*person* households. That is staggering. It produces many shifting "virtual families" and communities in the form of social groupings around work, "third spaces" like health clubs, music clubs, and coffee shops, and the Internet. Increasing general acceptance of homosexuality is also a factor here though I think U.S. society is coming to a sort of *modus vivendi* in which many people accept homosexuality as normal and many do not.

Globally the most important development in this area, it seems to me, is the rapid decline of traditional family patterns (particularly the extended family) in places like China and India under the impact of economic globalization and urbanization. (One should compare the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s with China and India currently, I think.)

The obvious Christian challenge and opportunity here continues to be building churches that really function as “the family of God,” where the church becomes the most important form of social identity and belonging—a discipling, “re-parenting community” and the builder of healthy Christian biological families.

## **9. From church/state separation to Christian political activism.**

This dynamic varies greatly according to the socio-political context, as it always has. On the plus side (in my view), some influential Evangelicals are beginning to form political alliances around specific issues (the environment, poverty, religious persecution, some family issues) which could bring significant results (depending on the impact of #1 and #2 above). The great danger of Christians in politics is cooptation, and that danger will remain. However I am encouraged to think, due to several factors, that more populist political movements (in the sense of a genuine concern for the well-being of *all* the people, not just the rich and powerfully and globally connected) will be emerging over the next twenty years in a number of places around the world. Partly this will be driven by ecological concerns and partly by the rather remarkable emerging concern with combating poverty worldwide. Countries like Brazil, India, Bangladesh, and perhaps even Lebanon and Saudi Arabia will be key places to watch.

Addison comments, “I’m old enough to be disillusioned by both the ‘Christian Right’ and the ‘Christian Left.’ I think I have Anabaptist tendencies.” Yes, of course. I’m not sure what’s happening elsewhere, and in many ways the U.S. is atypical, but recent writings in the U.S. by Jim Wallis and Jimmy Carter are, in my view, encouraging. Wallis’ *God’s Politics* (2004) has created something of a stir and Carter’s *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis* (2005) has hit the bestseller lists.

The faithful Christian stance here, in my view, is first of all the church existing as its own (that is, Jesus’) “culture,” being truly countercultural at the points of the world’s idolatries and properly contextualized in each instance, reinforcing kingdom values and virtues, raising up generations of people who will live the kingdom life. But secondly: helping equip people who will become activists in all the sectors of society, including politics, to the degree that that is possible and can be done with integrity within the context. (Remember Daniel, Joseph, and Esther, e.g., in the O.T.)

In this area the faithful response is both/and, not either/or. But whatever is or is not possible and appropriate politically, the church must be the faithful community gathered around Jesus with its values and virtues grounded in Jesus by the Spirit as revealed in Scripture.

Christians should never be naïve as to what can be accomplished politically (see Ellul’s *The Political Illusion* [Ellul 1967]) or how easily they can be co-opted. On the other hand, they should not give up the political fight where their voice can make the deciding difference. In past centuries key reforms in the U.S., Britain, India, China, and Japan for instance have come partly through Christian influence.

## **10. From safe planet to threatened planet.**

The key challenges here are global warming, species depletion, and control of water—and, relatedly, the geopolitical and geo-economic challenges involved. With the rapid economic expansion of China and India, global energy resources will be a major issue.

On the climate-change front, 2005 was a highly significant year. It will I believe prove to have been the tipping point when global business discovered global warming and learned that a corporation actually can gain an economic edge if it moves now to become environmentally responsible. A number of large corporations (e.g., BP and DuPont) are learning this and will be setting the pace. Further, 2005 was the year in which a number of major U.S. and some multinational energy companies began to move seriously into alternative energy sources, particularly wind and solar. (Projections by some analysts that “alternative” energy sources will never amount to 10% or so of energy needs are flat wrong, in my opinion.)

Ecologically speaking, the race is on. Though global environmentalism is on the rise, it is not clear that ameliorative steps can be taken in time to prevent disastrous effects from global warming, including the shutting down of the Great Ocean Conveyor which would produce a new ice age in just a matter of decades (cf. Snyder 2005).

And then, as always, war (nuclear, biological, conventional) remain a threat.

So we face what may be apocalyptic and yet potentially very hopeful times. Of course, as a Christian, I am in any case hopeful!

Howard Snyder

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