

# Trends In Global Religion

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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For many years the church has been curious about the state of religion in the world because of such prophecies as Christ's Olivet Prophecy, the first Horseman of the Apocalypse, the Man of Sin and the second beast of Revelation 13. It is a "given" within church circles that the end-time Beast will have the cooperation and backing of a worldwide religious system. Thus, we have watched expectantly for the unification of the world's religions into one global system.

Is that how things are shaping up? Is that what the Bible predicts?

Looking at the world scene, it may seem discouraging to notice that Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox "Christians" still maintain their distance from each other. America contains hundreds of different Protestant denominations. The Jews and the Arabs remain at each other's throats, and we hear of Shiite and Sunni Moslems wrangling now and again. The East has many different religions, from Hinduism to Buddhism to Shintoism to the worship of nature or ancestral deities. Various cultures still have tribal or shamanistic religions. Upstart New Age religions multiply daily. Millions have no religious ties whatsoever!

The world is not very unified religiously, is it? What does this mean for the fulfillment of Bible prophecy? Could this mean we still have a long time to wait until conditions are ripe for "the crisis at the close of the age"?

## The End-Time Unified Religion

The January-February issue of *The Futurist* contains an article by researcher Ron Sellers titled "Nine Global Trends in Religion." Sellers heads Ellison Research, a marketing research firm that specializes in keeping track of religious trends worldwide for the Christian communications industry. Its client list includes Christian Broadcasting Network, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, Thomas Nelson Publishers, The Southern Baptist Convention, The Salvation Army, World Vision, and Dallas Theological Seminary, among many others.

Sellers' article maintains as its foundation that:

1. Religion is currently in a state of flux.
2. It is national or regional in nature, not global.
3. Religious change usually results from broader shifts in society.
4. Religion is extremely personal.

Each of these points seems to argue against any religious unification in the near future. Were world conditions to remain status quo, global religious unity would be all but impossible.

The Bible concurs. Unity in any form does not just happen; it is *caused*. The predominant cause of a carnal person's loyalty to a nation, organization, idea or party is self-interest, self-concern. Left to

themselves, the people of this world constantly shift their allegiance, endlessly forming and reforming themselves into groups, depending on what they see as best for them. This "get" way of life is the result of sin, which separates (Isaiah 59:2; see Philippians 2:1-4).

Therefore, if religious unity is to be achieved before the end, an overriding cause must arise to bring the myriad opposing, bickering, even warring religions together. Jesus prophesies this cause in Revelation 13:11-15:

Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and *causes* the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed. He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived. He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and *cause* as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

The cause for the end-time religious unity is two-fold:

1. The False Prophet deceives the people into allegiance through signs, wonders and miracles (II Thessalonians 2:9-10).
2. He has the authority to force conformity and kill the opposition.

Obviously, the seeds of religious unity's destruction are inherent in these causes. Miraculous trickery and brute force are shaky foundations for any organization, and thus this unity is short-lived. In addition, the Bible shows that the political power will turn on its religious partner once it has outlived its usefulness:

And the ten horns [*kings*, verse 12] which you saw on the beast, these will hate the harlot [*the false church*, verses 1-6], make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. (Revelation 17:16-17)

As verse 17 says, God makes it possible for this unity to occur for the express purpose of fulfilling His plan for mankind (see II Thessalonians 2:11-12). As we will see, only God's hand is strong enough to allow the world's religions to unite, even for the brief period ("a short time" and "one hour," Revelation 17:10, 12) that it is prophesied to happen.

## **Trends Toward Disunity**

One factor that courses through all of Ron Sellers' global religious trends is the tendency toward continued or further disunity. His points, with explanatory comments, are as follows:

- 1. *The Continuing Presence of Religion*** . Religion is such an integral part of human life that a "religion-free" world is unimaginable. Individual preference necessitates a plethora of competing religions.

**2. *Increasing Clashes Between Science and Religion*** . Since they derive from opposing viewpoints, science and religion are frequent enemies. New advances in science (like cloning or fetal-tissue research) call both sides to arms. However, because of the wide spectrum of beliefs, the likelihood of a unified religious voice for or against emerging science is nonexistent.

**3. *Increased Cooperation Between Science and Religion*** . This trend proves the disunity in religion. While some denominations blend science and theology (for instance, those who believe God created through evolution), others keep their distance. Science has proven enough religious claims (such as prayer's effect in healing and the social benefits of family values) that in some fields a wary truce exists.

**4. *Religious Mixture and Conflicts on a Micro Level*** . In many parts of the world, different religions exist side by side, yet this increases the risk of conflict. Sellers foresees more local, less-severe religious conflicts and fewer large-scale ones. Notwithstanding, this promotes strife and separation.

**5. *Increasing Governmental Intervention*** . Intense debates among mixed religious populations may move governments to try to broker agreements to reconcile conflicting beliefs or even pass laws restricting exercise of religion. Such action will tend to polarize religious groups.

**6. *Overcoming Government Limitations Through the Internet*** . Governments will have a difficult time controlling electronic communications, so religious groups will use these tools to spread their beliefs despite political restrictions. This will continue the age-old competition between religions.

**7. *Blending Faiths*** . This may sound ecumenical, but it is really just the opposite. Individuals are blending beliefs from one religious system with others from a variety of different religions. People are losing their loyalty to denominations and creating their own syncretistic religions.

**8. *Religious Individualism and Its Effects*** . Just as the secular world is becoming more individualized, so is religion. This could cause a major realignment of Christian denominations along the lines of liberal versus conservative beliefs rather than traditional theology. This may affect the Catholic Church as well. It will also cause more interfaith marriages and spur the "megachurch" movement, where the individual receives multiple choices in worship style and benefits.

**9. *Increases in Religious Cults and Scams*** . Increased individualism and its corresponding isolation will make many people easy targets for groups who promise family togetherness or utopia in return for their money or life. Often based on New Age beliefs, these groups prey on the normal human desire for family, belonging and leadership in times of turmoil. Such separatist groups are the extreme fringe of religious disunity.

Together, these trends describe the instability of world religion in its various guises. Ironically, this instability will make unification under the Beast possible, since many will be looking for spiritual leadership bolstered by something more than dogma—like the ability to work miracles and real authority to impose its beliefs.

### **Mirrored in the Church**

We see the same instability found in the world also in the church of God. The larger church organizations seem to be fragmenting at a high rate as individuals and groups are leaving them for a host of reasons. Maybe the largest category of church members is the independents, who have individualized their beliefs and thus cannot find any group that agrees with them on all counts.

This splintering, too, was prophesied to occur. Daniel 12:7 speaks of "the power of the holy people [being] completely shattered" at the time of the end. II Thessalonians 2:3 predicts "the falling away" of many before the Day of the Lord. Jesus warns that "because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12), and that "many false prophets will rise up and deceive many" (verse 11). How many times do the New Testament writers advise us to "hold fast" or "endure to the end"?

As we saw with the unity of the false church, so we see now with the disunity of the true church: It is God's doing. He is working out events in the church to bring about His purpose. Lamentations 2 pulls no punches that God has caused the church to disintegrate, as a punishment for sin:

The Lord has swallowed up and has not pitied. . . . Standing like an enemy, He has bent His bow; with His right hand, like an adversary, He has slain all who were pleasing to His eye; on the tent of the daughter of Zion, He has poured out His fury like fire. . . . He has done violence to His tabernacle, as if it were a garden; He has destroyed His place of assembly; the LORD has caused the appointed feasts and Sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion. . . . The Lord has spurned His altar, He has abandoned His sanctuary. . . . The LORD has purposed to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion. He has stretched out a line [in judgment]; He has not withdrawn His hand from destroying. . . . Her king and her princes [leaders] are among the nations [scattered]; the Law is no more, and her prophets find no vision [*torah*, instruction] from the LORD. (verses 2, 4, 6-9)

Why has God done this? We had moved so far from Him that He had to take drastic action to make us return. This is the precise thought Lamentations ends with:

Remember, O LORD, what has come upon us; look, and behold our reproach! . . . The joy of our heart has ceased; our dance has turned into mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned! . . . Turn us back to You, O LORD, and we will be restored; renew our days as of old, unless You have utterly rejected us, and are very angry with us! (Lamentations 5:1, 15-16, 21-22)

He is angry, and He will not restore until our repentance is complete! By then He will have pruned His church into the fruitful vine He expects, a plant that will not be shaken by winds of doctrine, persecution or calamity. Only at this point will real unity be possible, as a counterpart to the deceptive and forced unity of the false religious system.

And then what happens? Some may have to give their lives as a witness. Others may go to the Place of Safety to support the work of the Two Witnesses. Still others may be called upon to work among the captives like Ezekiel. The Bible does not say specifically. However, by the time Christ returns, the Bride "has made herself ready" for her marriage to the Lamb (Revelation 19:7). She will have met the qualifications God requires.

Though at first glance the world religious scene seems to be working away from the fulfillment of prophecy, it is actually right on schedule. God's purpose is moving forward; He is setting all the pieces in place for the right moment. Because God is the Sovereign Governor of all things, He will cause unity in world religion and His church when the time is right and no sooner.