

This file - the longest of any of those on this Web site, is an introduction to the URI, an analysis of the draft Charter that it wrote in 1998, and proof that the URI opposes Christian evangelisms and favors a new, Earth-centered religion.

The United Religions Initiative - Foundation for a World Religion

By Lee Penn

Summary: This story summarizes the mission and scope of the United Religions Initiative (URI), analyzes the draft Charter that the URI prepared in 1998, and argues that the URI has - among other problems - two grave flaws: URI opposition to Christian orthodoxy and Christian evangelism, and URI support for religious syncretism.

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What Is The United Religions Initiative?

Bishop William Swing, of the Episcopal Church's Diocese of California, thinks he is building a religious bridge to the new millennium, and he wants everybody on Earth to cross it with him. His United Religions Initiative (URI) is trying to create a United Religions, a world parliament of religions, "a permanent assembly, with the stature and visibility of the United Nations, where the world's religions and spiritual communities will gather on a daily basis, in prayerful dialogue and cooperative action, to make peace among religions and to be a force for peace among nations, to address urgent human need and to heal the earth." (41) As Bishop Swing has said, "the religions of the world should aspire to be as moral as the nations of the world and meet regularly to strive for global good." (42) The Rev. Charles Gibbs, Executive Director of the URI, describes the proposed United Religions (UR) as "an inclusive, decentralized organization, a spiritual partner of the United Nations." (43)

Its planners intend for the UR to be everywhere; it "will have global visibility and stature, and will be a vital presence in local communities all over the world." (44) Bishop Swing states the goal, "a reunited humanity": "a United Religions could offer the world a powerful new vision of hope - the vision that the deepest stories we know can now cease to be causes of separation between people, and become instead the foundation for a reunited humanity." (45)

The URI invites everybody to join: believers in the traditional religions, adherents of "modern spiritual movements," and those whom Bishop Swing describes as "earnest agnostics." (46) URI staff member Paul Andrews urges fundamentalists of all faiths to enter a new dialogue within the United Religions: "We need the power of what the fundamentalists bring as part of the religious conversation. It is my hope that our organization will not just be a network of religious liberals, but will include people who have real differences." (47) URI Executive Director Charles Gibbs said that "indigenous religions" would be included in the URI "the same way everyone else would be involved. ... I was just in Oxford and we were talking about indigenous religions. Well, the indigenous religion there is the Druid faith." (48)

When Bishop Swing and other URI proponents speak to the public about the URI, their most common theme is one that has almost universal appeal: the desire for peace and the fear of war and terrorism. Bishop Swing says, "What is a bigger terrorist threat than religion in the world today? There is none." (49) On another occasion, he wrote, "Religions need a United Religions. Bombs are exploding in the name of God in cities throughout the world, religious persecution is more prevalent now than ever before, religious extremists are demanding and obtaining nuclear weapons, and still there is no neutral arena where all of the religions can engage each other." (50) Thus, Bishop Swing offers us a way out of fear into peace, a lure that many find hard to resist. To call forth our courage and imagination on behalf of the URI, Bishop Swing quotes from the prologue of Goethe's Faust: "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it." (51)

Since the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions, there has been a legion of interfaith groups attempting to unite the world's religions. However, the Rev. James Davis, an interfaith minister from New York, said of the URI conference he attended in 1997: "We've never seen any organization build coalitions as quickly or as successfully as the United Religions Initiative." (52) Commenting on the 1998 URI summit conference, Huston Smith, a scholar of comparative religions and author of *The World's Religions*, a standard reference in the field, deems the URI the "most significant" interfaith effort. (53)

The agenda of the URI and its allies is far broader - and far stranger - than ending violence in the name of religion. In mid-1996, Bishop Swing explained that "The nature of the United Religions would be to focus on: 1) the whole human family; 2) the whole health of our planet; and 3) the whole realm of living species, and to offer the unique gifts of religions." (54) He added that "the creation of a United Religions" would: "set the world's hope ablaze to imagine a religious, global sensitivity to all life instead of despairing over the present fragmentation that exists among guardians of the world's soul." (55)

This was not the first time that Bishop Swing had invoked the *anima mundi*. In February 1996, Bishop Swing had said, "I think that as we become one global unit, we have to find out where religion is in regard to our global tribe." (56) In 1995, Bishop Swing had said that the world is moving toward "unity in terms of global economy, global media, global ecological system. What is missing is a global soul." (57)

How will this global soul be found or created? At first, by means of conferences, networking, fundraising, declarations, and press releases. ...

The draft URI Charter

Whether or not the rest of the world listens when the URI talks, the URI takes itself very seriously indeed. They have prepared a draft charter showing that the URI can help solve mankind's most deep-seated problems, if only the world will take heed.

The June 1998 draft of the URI Charter includes almost 20 pages of politically correct rhetoric about diversity, tolerance, peace, and justice. Nevertheless, the draft charter also contains real substance that shows the direction in which the URI wishes to take the world. Deepak Naik, a delegate to the 1998 summit conference, said that the charter's "words are carefully selected," with attention to "how we include people," (190) - so let's see what words they selected.

Preamble: "for the benefit of the earth and all living beings"

The Charter Preamble begins with a declaration of goodwill that encompasses all religions - and all living things on the Earth:

"We, people of many faiths, called by our traditions to compassion in response to the suffering of humanity and the crises which endanger our Earth community, wish to create a permanent forum where we gather in mutual respect, dialogue, and cooperative action to foster peace and the flourishing of all life." (191)

The Charter views all religions and spiritual traditions alike as sources of wisdom - again, to be used for the benefit of "the earth and all living beings":

"We believe that the wisdom of our religious and spiritual traditions should be shared for the health and well being of all. Therefore, as communities of faith and interdependent people rooted in our faith, we now unite for the sake of peace and healing among religions, peoples and nations, and for the benefit of the earth and all living beings." (192)

The Preamble commits the URI to freedom of religion and human rights (as defined by UN treaties), to "diversity," and to non-violence:

"We unite to support freedom of religion and belief and the rights of all individuals, as set forth in international law, and to witness together to the wondrous spirit of life which embraces all our diversity. ... All members of the United Religions do solemnly vow to use our combined resources only for nonviolent, compassionate action." (193)

Then, the URI promises to make public policy recommendations based on "shared values," and will "unite in responsible cooperative action" to bring about social change:

"We unite in responsible cooperative action to bring the wisdom and values of our religious traditions to bear on the economic, environmental and social crises that confront us at the dawn of the new millennium. We unite to be a voice of shared values in the international arenas of politics, economics and the media, and to serve as a forum for research and excellence on values in action." (194)

This commitment to social action, and the collectivist tenor of the programs and study resources recommended in the 1998/1999 draft URI charter, belie Bishop Swing's 1996 statement that "It would not be in the interest of the whole earth for a United Religions to become a political debating society with a right-wing or left-wing bias." (195)

Organizational design: a decentralized network

The proposed organization of the URI envisions cooperation with other interfaith organizations, open deliberations and decision-making, "the highest standards of integrity and ethical conduct, prudent use of resources, and fair and accurate disclosure of information," and "organizational learning and adaptation." (196) The UR would have multiple sites around the world, with "electronic satellite possibility of collecting people on an instantaneous daily basis." (197) The draft Charter says:

"The UR is decentralized. All local organizations have the right to organize in any manner, at any scale, in any area, and around any issue or activity which is relevant to and consistent with the purpose and principles. ... Authority is vested in and decisions are made at the most local level that includes all the relevant and affected parties. ... Each part of the UR has primary responsibility to develop financial and other resources to meet its needs, and secondary responsibility to share financial and other resources to help meet the needs of other parts. ... Every local UR organization shall surrender only such autonomy and resources as are essential to the regional and global pursuit of the purpose and principles." (198)

Thus, the URI has chosen a decentralized, network-based management structure. Unity will be maintained through consensus rather than through centralized management control. The appearance and style of this structure is likely to increase the appeal of the URI in the US and other countries with similar liberal traditions. The draft Charter confirms a shift away from the centralized UN-style structure that Bishop Swing and other URI supporters had envisioned in 1995 and 1996. This new organizational design for the URI reduces the likelihood that others will perceive the URI as a centralized religious bureaucracy.

Agenda: "Religious Rights and Responsibilities"

The URI proposes a "Draft Agenda for Action." The first section, titled "Religious Rights and Responsibilities," states that:

"The United Religions seeks to uphold and support the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities. The United Religions stands for the end of violence committed in the name of religion: 1. Violence against children. 2. Violence against women. 3. Violence against persons from a different religion." (199)

To further these goals, the URI will do research, education, and social action. It is noteworthy that the URI emphasizes violence against women - a phrase that some feminists and UN bureaucrats interpret to include laws against abortion. (Indeed, a UN commission which monitors compliance with the "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" recently told Colombia to "end its legal ban on abortion to bring the country into compliance with international conventions".) (200)

Agenda: "Sustainable, Just Economics" - Malthusianism and redistribution

The URI's next cause is "Sustainable, Just Economics." In their terms, this means that Malthus was right: the world is running out of resources; the rich capitalist countries of the West are to blame (no hint that the USSR, mainland China, and the other communist countries have created large-scale environmental disasters); redistribution of wealth is key to solving the world's problems; and UN efforts at economic change are frustrated by sovereign nations and that ever-ready villain, "the corporate sector":

" 'Sustainable economics' means an economic system that utilizes the world's finite resources prudently and sparingly. 'Just economics' is a system in which created wealth is distributed in a fair and equitable manner. ... There is a dire need to revisit the global economic system from a religious/spiritual perspective in order to make some fundamental changes. Efforts by the UN in this direction are often frustrated by

the domination of national interests in that body. In addition, the corporate sector's dominance of world economic practice lacks a moral, socially responsible foundation. The United Religions can bring the moral voice of our sacred traditions to bear on the following issues, among others: 1) The present rate of using the world's resources is alarmingly fast. The planet Earth is under strain, and there is a need to slow down. Otherwise, the coming generations might find themselves living on a barren planet. 2) Currently, a tremendous gap exists between the rich and the poor. The twenty OECD (201) countries contain 17% of the world's population, yet own 75% of the world's wealth. 3) Major world trade exists in arenas that are morally reprehensible and exploitative: the sex trade, the arms trade, and the drug trade." (202)

To further these goals, the URI would create task forces and forums for the elite, who would presume to create an economic plan for us all: "Proposed Projects: 1. Establish a Blue Ribbon Task Force (a select group of highly competent people) to study and understand the complexities of the present situation and develop an action plan to work toward a more sustainable, equitable world for all. 2. Create a forum to discuss and understand the global financial system. 3. Sponsor a conference where CEO's [sic] and billionaires will be invited to attend and give talks on the global economy. 4. Create a forum for addressing justice issues arising from the world trade in sex, arms, and drugs." (203)

The State of the World Forum - which is friendly to the URI - is an example of the forums and conferences that the URI suggests.

Agenda: "Ecological Imperatives" - honoring a sacred Earth

The URI moves on to address "Ecological Imperatives." They decry the current ecological crisis - including human "overpopulation." (204) The URI's solution involves teaching us all to rediscover "respect for the sacredness of the whole of Planet Earth":

"The root of this ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis. Just as the religions and spiritual traditions of the world teach respectful interaction with a sacred whole, so must spiritual values and moral imperatives help humanity to rediscover a reverence for all life and respect for the sacredness of the whole of Planet Earth. Therefore, we call for interfaith cooperation in furthering this vision for love and protection of the Earth, reverence for life, and harmony with all living beings." (205)

The draft Charter offers a long list of project ideas to implement this vision. Most of these involve re-directing education, environmental action, and religious training to foster a new, "Green" religion.

The first project listed is "Develop an 'eco-literacy' project for young people" (206) - in other words, start the indoctrination early.

The second project involves a strategy that would be familiar to any Communist: a plan to "consciously infiltrate" existing environmental groups to "inspire a more holistic world view":

"Find out what ecology groups are active and see what spiritual values might be brought to bear in those. (This might be a way in which the 'Supporting the Agenda' group and this group might collaborate - the 'Supporting' group might provide a list of local organizations, and UR reps might begin to consciously 'infiltrate' those organizations in ways that might inspire a more holistic world view.)" (207)

The URI would "create solstice and equinox festivals, the natural earth holidays, which celebrate the changes on the planet." (208)

They would also have "the religions of the world ... lead the way in addressing the issue of global climate changes" by modeling the use of renewable energy sources and "creating pressure for lower-cost sources of renewable energy." (209) Thus, the URI would encourage the religions to act as a political lobby, "creating pressure" on behalf of the theory - as yet unproven - that the Earth is warming due to human activity.

The URI would also exploit millennial fear, using "the 'clout' of the Year 2000 Problem as a foot in the door for developing local [sic] sustainable and caring community - an argument for 'getting off the grid'." (210)

There would be a "URI course to 'retool' both clergy and lay religious leaders in the philosophy of spiritual ecology"; currently available examples of these courses include "Whole Earth and Whole Person Ministry" and "Integration of Native American and Christian Traditions." (211)

In addition, "Local or regional UR groups should sponsor ecumenical and interfaith celebrations on the Environmental Sabbath, which has already been established by the UN." (212)

The study resources recommended in the URI charter include the "Earth Charter," as proposed by Maurice Strong's Earth Charter Commission, several works (such as *The Voice of the Earth*) by Theodore Roszak, a book by Howard Clinebell titled *Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves and Healing the Earth*, and *Threshold 2000*, written by Gerald Barney, of the Millennium Institute. (213) ...

Agenda: "Building Cultures of Nonviolence and Respect"

The fourth - and least controversial - section of the URI "Draft Agenda for Action" involves "Building Cultures of Nonviolence and Respect." The UR "will become part of an international movement that fosters authentic personal and corporate good will and reconciliation and that actively promotes peace. In particular, it will work to heal religious wounds by seeking tools from every faith for respecting the stranger, empowering nonviolence, and nurturing reconciliation." (214) Peace would be fostered when members of different religions listen to each other, since listening "is the cornerstone of building peace"; "communities of all sizes" could "declare themselves Peace Zones." (215) To ensure that all this happens, "hire a media person at the URI," since "creating a culture of peace requires education, media attention, and a coordination of resources." (216)

Agenda: "Sharing the Wisdom and Cultures of Faith Traditions"

The fifth section of the URI "Agenda for Action" calls for "Sharing the Wisdom and Cultures of Faith Traditions." Here is where the URI belief in the common origin and common goal of all religions becomes explicit. A new "theology of acceptance," a common collection of "sacred writings and oral wisdom," and shared "spiritual practices" are planned: the triad of creed, code, and cult that, in human terms, defines a religion. The URI draft charter says:

"Religion is concerned with the relationship of human beings with their spiritual Origin. We believe in the universality and eternity of the Spirit. We believe that all religions derive their wisdom from that ultimate Source. Therefore, the world's faith traditions share in common wisdom, which can be obscured by differences in religious concepts and practices. ... The United Religions promotes dialogue. A theology of acceptance will help the world's people explore common ground. Our awareness of unity within religious diversity promotes ever-increasing kinship." (217)

Proposed projects include: * "Interfaith Dialogue on Sacred Scriptures: we propose a compilation of information from sacred writings and oral wisdom. Similar expressions of faith exist all over the world. We intend to collect and edit this material as an important dialogue resource. ... * Interfaith Sharing of Spiritual Practices" (218)

"Unity within religious diversity" and "ever-increasing kinship" appear to describe the gradual introduction of a New Religion; they just want to phase it in slowly, so as not to scare people off in the early stages.

Agenda: "Supporting the Overall UR Agenda" - building a headquarters

The draft charter concludes with a suggested mission for a central UR office:

"A central office which acts as a clearinghouse and which serves the regional offices would facilitate the work of the UR by:

1) providing access to information 2) supporting grassroots regional efforts 3) inviting guidance toward enlightenment in a global voice 4) awarding recognition and appreciation to effort within and outside the organization 5) ensuring the just global distribution of financial and other resources." (219)

Proposed projects for the UR central office include exploring "ways to invite enlightened guidance in the project, 'Holding the Space that Holds Us,'" support for fundraising, providing literature and telecommunications networks for the UR regions, establishing links with interfaith groups, and establishing ties with researchers in universities and think tanks. (220)

The URI Charter concludes with a call for readers to offer suggestions for changes. Any of us could suggest that URI adopt a short substitute for the Charter: the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the call from Christ, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." (Mk. 1:14) There's reason to doubt that the URI will accept this change, even if the new, shorter Charter would save paper and other natural resources.

Why Oppose the United Religions Initiative

Despite concerns arising from the Twilight Zone agenda of some URI supporters and allies, shouldn't faithful, orthodox Christians assist the URI anyway? "The earth is the LORD'S and the fulness thereof" (Ps. 24:1), and Jesus has commanded us to "Love your enemies" (Mt. 5:43). So, isn't a movement whose stated aims are peace, religious tolerance, and environmental protection - even if imperfect - worth supporting? In one word: No. The URI is gravely flawed, from its foundation up. This was true when Bishop Swing launched the URI in 1995, and the movement has not improved with age. Christians ought to watch the activities of this movement, but should not offer it any support. Here are two major flaws in the URI: its opposition to Christian orthodoxy and Christian evangelism, and its support for religious syncretism.

Intolerance of Christian evangelism

Bishop William Swing

Leaders of the URI, including Bishop Swing himself, habitually equate evangelism - preaching the Gospel - with conquest and manipulative proselytism. They see orthodox Christians as "fundamentalists" who put "peace" at risk.

In his opening speech to the 1996 URI summit conference, Bishop Swing said, "There is not going to be a time in the near future when one religion converts, conquers, subjugates all of the other religions to itself." (690) He also has said that the world needs a United Religions:

"Because some day, the ascendancy of militant fundamentalist voices of politically aspiring religions might be so pervasive that a United Religions will need to be created in order to save religions from their ethnic, tribal agendas." (691)

Bishop Swing continues to link religious conversion with conquest and subjugation. In his 1998 book, Bishop Swing identifies Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the religions that include the Ten Commandments in their tradition, as "exclusive religions." (692) These are the religions that bid their followers: " 'Thou shalt have no other gods but me.' Is any dimension of religion deeper than that? This is the first commandment according to Jews and Christians. It is not foreign to Muslims, or, in fact, to more than half the people on earth. Yet if billions of people from exclusive religions are commanded to oppose the godly claims of other exclusive religions, what hope is there for peace among religions? In order for a United Religions to come about and for religions to pursue peace among each other, there will have to be a godly cease-fire, a temporary truce where the absolute exclusive claims of each will be honored but an agreed upon neutrality will be exercised in terms of proselytizing, condemning, murdering, or dominating. These will not be tolerated in the United Religions zone." (693)

Here's Bishop Swing's logic: link "proselytizing" to "condemning, murdering, or dominating" - and then say that none of these will be tolerated in "the United Religions zone" - the whole world.

Bishop Swing repeatedly equates Christian evangelization to "proselytizing." When he preached the United Religions message to a Bible study class at the Maramon, a week-long revival meeting of the Mar Toma Church in Southern India:

"In an instant, the little Bible study turned into a wild scene of interrogative and declarative assertions. Hundreds of energized people with Bibles in their hands came hurrying out of the jungle. They had come together at the Maramon in order to excite a passion to go out and convert every Hindu and Moslem possible. And here I was stating that the religions, themselves, need to come together and discover a new level of interacting. This, clearly, was perceived to be a threat to proselytizing." (694)

There's no indication that the revival participants planned to use deceit or violence to win converts.

In 1998, Bishop Swing gave an interview to Endtime, a fundamentalist Christian magazine. When the interviewer asked about converting members of other faiths, Swing again criticized "proselytizing":

Swing: "I can respect a Hindu as a Hindu worships, but I don't worship what the Hindu worships." Baxter: "So then do you attempt to convert the Hindu?" Swing: "I think we have got to take a look at proselytizing. Is God best served by proselytizing the way we do it now through all kinds of questionable means, as well as good means, or whether there are other ways of proselytizing." (695)

What Bishop Swing condemns as "proselytizing" is evangelism, the God-given duty of faithful Christians and the Church: in the words of Jesus, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Mt. 28:19-20) In scorning Christian evangelism, Bishop Swing belies his statement that the URI "seeks to honor the ancient and recent wisdom and good works of each" (696) of the world's religions.

Later in the same interview with Endtime magazine, Bishop Swing proposed a "new understanding" of the First Commandment in the light of the requirements of a "new day":

"When He [God] gets to the whole business of thou shall have no other gods but me, what do we do with that? I think there is a truth about that which has to be lived at a new level. ... And the issues around exclusivity are some of the issues that we are going to have to come to a new understanding about in a new day." (697)

As recent history shows, Episcopalian bishops have much experience in creating a "new understanding" of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Scriptures. In case "fundamentalism" outlives its usefulness as an epithet for the orthodox, Bishop Swing has invented a new one, "religionism." "What the world fails to deal with is the unmitigated prejudice against people of religions. There is no such word as religionism, yet the reality is overwhelming beyond all measure. The existence of a United Religions will be a symbol that stands in direct opposition to the ancient, corrosive, and widespread hatred against religions that thrives, unchecked by religions. This global denial will end when the United Religions begins. Not only will the United Religions be a symbol of hope, it will also be a symbol that religionism exists and will be countered." (698)

Expect this new epithet to appear soon on a network news broadcast or in a "diversity training" class near you. Of course, the term religionism will not be used to condemn the militant atheism of current or former Marxist regimes.

Charles Gibbs, Executive Director of the URI

Charles Gibbs, the Executive Director of the URI, has recently apologized for two millennia of Christian evangelism. His mea culpa is not limited to religious violence committed by Christians; it also includes regret for "proclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of all" and for seeking "to make the whole world Christian":

"I must acknowledge that, throughout the centuries, in seeking to love God and express the unity that is in God, many Christians have not honored the distinctness and validity of other religions, but have sought to make the whole world Christian. I confess that a tremendous amount of violence has been visited on the world by Christians aflame with the conviction that the only path to salvation is through proclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of all, and that it is the responsibility of Christians to make Christians of all people. I profoundly regret that violence." (699)

Like Bishop Swing, Gibbs blurs the distinction between evangelization and forced conversion. Of such ideas, Christ said, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of the Father with the holy angels" (Mk. 8:38).

Members of the URI Board of Directors

Three current URI board members - Paul Chafee, Rita Semel, and Sri Ravi Peruman - have also made it clear that they have no sympathy for "fundamentalism."

At a February 1997 URI forum at Grace Cathedral, Paul Chafee (now URI Board Secretary) said, "We can't afford fundamentalists in a world this small." (700) At the same forum, Rita Semel (now URI Board Chair) said of fundamentalism, "Don't you think it comes out of fear and ignorance? So many things are out of our control now that were much simpler when I was growing up. People want an easy answer because they can't deal with the conflict, they can't deal with the complications, they can't deal with the fact that they can't control their own lives." (701)

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (Jn. 11:25) and "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me," (Jn. 14:6) and "For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn. 6:40). Was He motivated by "fear and ignorance," or an inability to "deal with the complications"?

At an April 1997 URI forum at Grace Cathedral, URI Board member Sri Ravi Peruman said that religions have "invaded and crusaded," "subverted and converted." Pacific Church News reported: "Calling statements about 'authentic religious freedom' for everyone, 'the freedom to proselytize,' Peruman said that there should be a universal Declaration of Rights not to be converted to another religion." (702) Some of Peruman's co-religionists in India agree with this sentiment. Leaders of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) - the World Hindu Council - asked the Indian President for a "complete ban on religious conversions" in January 1999. (703)

Paul Chafee's report on the 1997 URI summit conference shows how URI leaders view Christian fundamentalists. Chafee wrote in glowing terms about tolerance:

"The goodness, beauty, and truth in each of the world's religions was the essential gift to United Religions when it began to breathe with life last week. United Religions' gift back to the religions of the world is not only a better world, but one where all of us can benefit from appreciative inquiry, the art of discovering and magnifying all that is good in our lives." (704)

However, in next paragraph of the report, he described an encounter with some fundamentalist protesters outside the summit meeting:

"Dr. Carl McIntire, one of this nation's most judgmental Christians, came in a wheelchair to protest our work the day we began. His leonine presence has shrunken, his eyes are bloodshot with illness, and his friends standing nearby carried colorless 'Salvation only from Jesus' signs. I remembered being a child in the fifties in Bangkok where McIntire founded a congregation there. It gained notoriety in the city by proclaiming that not only would Buddhists all go to hell, but Christians as well if they were not part of McIntire's one true congregation. Last week I walked by McIntire on the way to lunch and stopped, shook his hand, and said, 'Hello, Dr. McIntire.' He pulled his hand back in a weak gesture, saying, 'Jesus is the only way.' Walking away, I had a hunch that Jesus has been in front of this man ten thousand times and mostly gone unrecognized. Part of the task ahead is to find ways to give sight to spiritual blindness, including our own." (705)

This was the only downbeat note in the Rev. Chafee's report on the URI summit. Chafee's veneer of tolerance and magnanimity did not withstand the shock of meeting Christian opponents of the URI. Chafee did not recognize Jesus before him, in the person of an infirm and elderly opponent, nor did Chafee apply the URI principle of "appreciative inquiry" to fundamentalist Christianity.

Personal encounters with URI intolerance of "fundamentalism"

Chaffee's treatment of McIntire matches the way that URI supporter Sister Joan Kirby, of the Temple of Understanding, responded when I spoke to her on April 24, 1998. The interview went smoothly until I said that I disagreed with the URI. She became angry, said that I was talking about proselytizing, and asked, "aren't you doing some proselytizing here right now? Are you a fundamentalist?" (I replied that I am a Catholic.) Likewise, Bishop Swing said that an anti-URI article that I had written for the New Oxford Review, an orthodox Catholic publication, was "hysterical propaganda; by the end he was using prayer to God as a vehicle for his hatred. ... Pursuing peace among religions is a threatening prospect to millions of people. I assume this Penn sides with the sword." (706) It's very easy to get labeled by URI leaders as a "fundamentalist;" all one has to do is to question the URI.

Robert Muller

Other prominent URI supporters express the same disdain for "fundamentalism." The San Jose Mercury News reported that at the 1996 URI summit conference, Robert Muller "said that fundamentalism, resting on inflexible belief systems, tends to play an incendiary role in global conflicts. Peace will be impossible, Muller said, without the taming of fundamentalism through a United Religions that professes faithfulness 'only to the global spirituality and to the health of this planet.'" (707) (At that time, Bishop Swing disagreed with Muller, saying, "When the fundamentalists join the family of the world, they will bring great gifts ... They are not the enemy.") (708) Muller has reiterated his hatred of fundamentalism, saying that the "greatest obstacle to our further evolution is fundamentalism, my nation right or wrong, my religion right or wrong, my ideology right or wrong, my culture or race right or wrong, at a time when the whole human species is in the midst of transformation." (709) Recently, Muller has added an anti-Catholic twist, as well: "Two of the worst principles and words still used on planet Earth are: fundamentalism and infallibility." (710)

Hans Küng

In 1991, Hans Küng - a URI supporter - denounced the Pope's call for the re-evangelization of Europe, scorned Papal denunciations of Western hedonism, and stood for "the modern values of freedom, pluralism and tolerance" - including revision of Church teachings about sex: "And much as a spiritual renewal of Europe is necessary, one form of it may be doomed to failure from the start. That is the backward-looking utopia of a 'spiritual unity of Europe' in which the confessional walls between Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox are retained, leading to the restoration programme of a 're-evangelization of Europe' in a Roman Catholic direction which John Paul II proclaimed in 1982 in the mediaeval pilgrimage centre of Santiago di Compostela and again in 1990 in Prague (at the same time insisting on the need for obedience to the church.) For such a programme is accompanied by a constant denunciation of Western democracy as consumerism, hedonism and materialism, not by an unambiguous affirmation of the modern values of freedom, pluralism and tolerance - right into the sphere of the Pope's own church (questions of birth control and sexual morality!)(711)

The only things denounced are Christian orthodoxy, evangelism, and traditional morality. Küng makes a threat, as well:

"To put it bluntly: no regressive or repressive religion - whether Christian, Islamic, Jewish or of whatever provenance - has a long-term future." (712)

When Küng denounced "regressive or repressive religion," it was the monotheistic religions that he named specifically as not having "a long-term future." These are the same religions that Bishop Swing describes as "exclusive religions." (713)

Writers for the Journal of the United Religions

Writers for the Journal of the United Religions also express contempt for "fundamentalists." In "An Experiment With Truth," Anke Kreutzer discussed four possible responses to the current spiritual crisis. She praised aspects of three alternatives - the ecological movement, the esoterics, and the spiritual movement. For the fourth alternative, "fundamentalism," she had only condemnation:

"Fundamentalism of all provinces, including pseudo-religious communities with fascist structures satisfies those who cannot bear the freedom and responsibility of autonomous decision. The void in the sphere of collective norms and practices is thus filled with oversimplifying recipes by those who exploit it to satisfy their own sense of power and not rarely - financial profit. This trend is manifest on all levels of communal life, from the so called theocracies to the rigorous regimes of small religious communities. It must also not be forgotten that it is also manifest in the inflexible insistence on outdated dogmas and hierarchical structures on the part of established religions, for which a broad basis of consent has been lost a long time ago." (714)

This definition of fundamentalism makes veiled references to cultists ("rigorous regimes of small religious communities"), the Iranian Islamic regime ("so called theocracies"), and the Vatican ("inflexible insistence on outdated dogmas and hierarchical structures").

Elizabeth Mayer, a psychoanalyst who attended the 1997 URI summit conference, said: "To work with diversity means, I think, really understanding certain anxieties - the anxieties that lead to intolerance, to ruthless proselytizing, to the need to make everybody else just like oneself. Analysts know a lot about those anxieties; they're our bread and butter. We know a lot about the kinds of things that lead to them, but also about the attitudes and behaviors which these anxieties insistently hold in place - narrow-mindedness, self-protective hatred, the need to destroy others. On top of that, the real heart of our work as psychoanalysts entails helping people confront and transcend those anxieties. As the URI dedicates itself to helping individuals as well as religious organizations do just that, I would hope we can find ways to contribute." (715)

Same song, tenth verse - orthodox believers are violent, and sick, too. We should not worry about this diagnosis. In the future "new civilization," just as in the former Soviet Union, the doctors will be available at government expense to "help" us broaden our minds.

Bishop Ting, China Christian Council

Bishop K. H. Ting supports the URI; (716) he is also President of the China Christian Council (CCC), a government-controlled Protestant church organization in the People's Republic of China. The Pacific Church News reported that Bishop Ting gave a slap to "fundamentalists":

"Although there were no denominational differences, there are disagreements among the Christians in China. Those who show the tendency of being fundamentalists often question the faith of others who do not agree with them. On the development of the ethical content of Christianity, Bishop Ting said that many Christians felt that their priority was to go to heaven and paid little attention to giving witness in society. He hoped that his successors will work hard to solve these problems." (717)

The Communist regime is trying to "solve these problems" by persecuting unregistered Protestant house churches and Catholics who remain in communion with Rome (rather than worshiping at the schismatic, state-approved "Catholic Patriotic Association"). Bishop Ting can live with that, but publicly criticizes "fundamentalism." It should be no any surprise, then, that the CCC is friendly to the URI. It appears that the URI definition of "fundamentalism" is inclusive enough to cover all orthodox Christians.

In defense of "fundamentalism": two voices of wisdom within the URI

A few URI supporters understand that attacking "fundamentalism" is neither feasible nor just. At the 1996 State of the World Forum, Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg said:

"I must repeat, insistently: Let us not call upon the ancient communities to dissolve, for they will not. They will only turn more hostile as they feel more threatened. In the here and now, we must act as if the existence of each community, of each tradition, and especially of those with which we disagree most vehemently, is a good which we must help protect, and with which we must come to terms." (718)

In a similar vein, URI staff member Paul Andrews said in 1997 that Marxism and secular humanism could be as fundamentalist as any religion: "If you say that fundamentalism is the conviction that 'I have the answer; I don't need to listen to somebody else, and I'm not willing to change my beliefs and open up to the possibility of change,' then there is a whole lot more fundamentalism in the world than what's represented by religion. Marxism is a fundamentalism; secular humanism is a fundamentalism. ... Never approach evil as if it is entirely outside yourself." (719)

That's one of the errors of the URI leadership and their New Age allies: seeing no possibility of evil within themselves, and projecting responsibility for the world's evils onto "fundamentalists" and others who won't accept the proposed "new civilization."

Cardinal Ratzinger's warning: subtle, anti-Christian dictatorship

Cardinal Ratzinger rebukes the theologians whose definitions of fundamentalism are elastic and ever expanding:

"But instead of simply hammering away at fundamentalism - whose definition keeps getting broader and broader - theologians should ponder to what extent they are to blame for the fact that increasing numbers of people seek refuge in narrow or unhealthy forms of religion. When one no longer offers anything but questions and doesn't offer any positive way to faith, such flights are inevitable." (720)

Ratzinger notes that the critics of the Church condemn her not merely for what she does wrong, but also for what she does right, her failure to "leave man alone in his self-made ideologies":

"The secondary scandal consists in our actual mistakes, defects, and over-institutionalizations, but the primary scandal consists precisely in the fact that we stand in opposition to the decline into the banal and the bourgeois and into false promises. It consists in the fact that we don't simply leave man alone in his self-made ideologies. For this reason, I would say that the fact that the Catholic Church is a scandal, insofar as she sets herself in opposition to what appears to be a nascent global ideology and defends primordial values of humanity that can't be fit into this ideology of unity, it in itself a positive one." (721)

The scandal of the Church is that "she sets herself in opposition to what appears to be a nascent global ideology and defends primordial values of humanity that can't be fit into this ideology of unity," the New Religion proposed by the URI and its allies.

Cardinal Ratzinger also shows the ominous implications for the Church and for faithful Christians of "a modern world view that regards Christianity or the Catholic faith as an intolerant, antiquated affair unreconcilable with modernity":

"And a new peril is also growing: the development of what you might call a modern world view that regards Christianity or the Catholic faith as an intolerant, antiquated affair unreconcilable with modernity and begins to apply pressure. I believe that this peril is already rather great, even though it still doesn't seem immediate. But the social pressure on the Church essentially to conform to today's accepted standards already exists now. [The interviewer asked: 'Is that the same as the persecution of Christians? It does make a difference whether Christians are imprisoned or tortured in dictatorial or Islamic states, or whether they are socially marginalized in the West, doesn't it?' The Cardinal replied:] Of course, it is not yet persecution; it would be absurd to apply that expression to this case. But there are indeed areas of life - and not a few - in which, once again, it already takes courage to profess oneself a Christian. Above all, there is a growing danger of assimilated forms of Christianity, which society then gladly holds up as humanistic forms of Christianity, as opposed to the alleged fundamentalism of those who don't want to be so streamlined. The danger of a dictatorship of opinion is growing, and anyone who doesn't share the prevailing opinion is excluded, so that even good people no longer dare to stand by such nonconformists. Any future anti-Christian dictatorship would probably be much more subtle than anything we have known until now. It will appear to be friendly to religion, but on the condition that its own models of behavior and thinking not be called into question." (722)

If Ratzinger's fears of a "future anti-Christian dictatorship" are realized, the tyranny of the future will tolerate those Christians who do not question the rulers' models of "behavior and thinking," and who accommodate themselves to the spirit of the age. Orthodox Christians will be denounced as "fundamentalists" and will be - at best - pushed to the margins of society.

An Anglican bishop from Canada, Michael Ingham, rejects the view that salvation comes only through Jesus. He has said, "Traditionalists who defend 'Christian exclusivism' and other judgmental ancient dogmas may, in fact, worship a different god than the interfaith deity who inspires modern pluralists. ... The exclusivist god is narrow, rigid and blind. Such a god is not worthy of honor, glory, worship or praise." (723) In Bishop Ingham's own terms, he holds a different faith than the "faith once delivered to the saints." The same appears to be true for Bishop Swing. Having rejected (or "redefined") their old faith, such liberal bishops are then free to promote a New Religion. Bishop Swing and the URI have begun to do this.

Religious syncretism and a New Religion of the "sacred earth"

Official URI documents insistently and repeatedly deny any intent of establishing a new religion. Bishop Swing says, "In the same way that the United Nations is not a nation, the United Religions would not be a religion." (724)

Nevertheless, there is much evidence - from recent URI documents and from statements over the years by individual URI leaders and supporters - that the URI will promote religious syncretism and a novel, Earth-centered spirituality.

Bishop William Swing

Bishop Swing made United Religions the theme of his Christmas Eve, 1996 sermon. He proposed that:

"For the sake of all the children of the world we are going to learn a new way for religions to interact. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians - all - all of us will learn to live beside each other. Everyone will be invited to bring their best, richest, deepest stories to the common ground. And there we will build." (725)

Thus, he invited his listeners to imagine building a new religious structure on a "common ground," using material from the "stories" from all religions.

In mid-1996, Bishop Swing predicted religious syncretism as the wave of the future. He said that the world's youth "walk around trying to piece enough religion together to make decisions about the future. They add a little yoga to the words of The Prophet. A little Catechism to a little Dharma. They will find their way eventually because humanity has always stretched to find its soul in new and foreign settings. One way or another, in Bangalore or in your grandchild, a United Religions will happen." (726)

In a June 1997 interview with the San Francisco Chronicle, Bishop Swing called for a revision of the scriptures and theology of all the world's religions:

Swing: "Maybe we have to take a deeper look at theology. I think that religions are based on assumptions of truth being mediated from the creator to the created. These truths are divinely inspired and sacred for the people who hold them. I think all the religions of the world have a blind spot. If there's a United Religions pursuing a dialogue in depth, it begins to ask larger questions and force religions to make larger statements."

Interviewer: "Isn't a lot of the problem that many sacred scriptures are full of violent, exclusionary rhetoric?"

Swing: "That's right. And it's taught all week long, every place we go. The religions have to go back and read that one more time and ask if that is really what they believe. If you're sitting there with people from other religions at the table, you might come up with other conclusions." (727)

"Force religions to make larger statements" ... Bishop Swing's own words.

By 1998, Bishop Swing moved from predicting syncretism to advocating it. In *The Coming United Religions*, Bishop Swing illustrates the nature of religion as he sees it. Six lines represent the major faiths - Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and the indigenous religions; like multiple paths up a mountain, these lines converge from below on a single point, a divine "unity which transcends the world." (728) At the top of the mountain are the esoteric believers from each faith; they:

"intuit that they were ultimately in unity with people of other religions because all come together at the apex, in the Divine. Everyone below the line would be identified as exoteric. These people in all religions would wed the form of faith to the content or final truth of their own faith. Thus the forms of one's faith become absolutized because these forms, alone, are held to carry the truth." (729)

Pity, then, the simple-minded, exoteric followers of Jesus, who take Him at His exoteric word when He says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." (Jn. 14:6) The Bishop of California has demoted the Incarnate Word to one of the many "forms of one's faith." He is also, perhaps without knowing it, following a tradition from Helena Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy:

"She did not reject religions such as Christianity and Hinduism, but claimed that all religions have an exoteric and an esoteric tradition. The exoteric traditions are unique and distinct for each religion. The esoteric doctrine is the same for all." (730)

Bishop Swing goes on to describe Alan Jones, Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, as one of the many "spiritual astronauts" of our time who are "pushing outward and upward following the embrace of the sacred." (731) Here's what Dean Jones says about "the Absolute":

"There are absolutes that cannot be fully grasped or put into words ... our struggle with language will never end. We are pilgrims of the Absolute. Some people are protectors of the Absolute rather than pilgrims of it. God doesn't need looking after ... the Absolute exists not as turf to be defended or as proof of one's own superiority, but as the horizon toward which one is forever on pilgrimage." (732) [The ellipses are as given in the original text.]

Jones forgot to mention that "the Absolute" has a name and is incarnate in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Christ is not merely an abstraction, "the horizon toward which one is forever on pilgrimage." Rather, Christ is our Shepherd, Savior, and Lord; He calls us to follow Him, love Him, and obey Him. Dean Jones' words mirror those of the apostate bishop described in C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*:

"For me there is no such thing as a final answer. The free wind of inquiry must always continue to blow through the mind, must it not? Prove all things' ... to travel hopefully is better than to arrive." (733) [The ellipse is in the original text.]

Having quoted his "spiritual astronauts," Bishop Swing goes on to describe a new spiritual unity that will arise via the United Religions:

"In the United Religions: a) Silent respect would be rendered to every religion as each pursues its sacred path. b) That Which Binds Us Is Beyond Us. As each religion renders silent respect to other religions, the rising mutual sympathy will lead to the discovery of a unifying mystery. c) That Which Is Beyond Us Will Bind Us. The unifying mystery that will be discovered will persuade religions of an ever-increasing kinship with each other and with all life." (734)

Bishop Swing does not name the "unifying mystery" "beyond us" that "will bind us." Instead, he calls for ultimate religious unity - a "common language and a common purpose for all religions and spiritual movements:"

"The time comes, though, when common language and a common purpose for all religions and spiritual movements must be discerned and agreed upon. Merely respecting and understanding other religions is not enough." (735)

If all religions are to have "a common purpose," and the purpose of religion is to worship a god, then Bishop Swing is calling "all religions and spiritual movements" to worship a shared god.

Syncretism in the 1998 draft of the URI Charter

Another indicator of things to come is the draft URI Charter. This Charter is far more explicit about URI support for a New Religion than earlier URI documents had been. The solution to the ecological crisis is to have "respect for the sacredness of the whole of Planet Earth." (736) The Charter suggests a "URI course to 'retool' both clergy and lay religious leaders in the philosophy of spiritual ecology," (737) and proposes "solstice and equinox festivals, the natural earth holidays." (738) The charter says that all religions "derive their wisdom" from a single "ultimate Source;" this "common wisdom" "can be obscured by differences in religious concepts and practices." (739) To make the

unity of religions evident to all, the URI will devise a new "theology of acceptance" to "help the world's people explore common ground," (740) promote "awareness of unity within religious diversity," (741) create "a compilation of information from sacred writings and oral wisdom," (742) and begin common prayer, "Interfaith Sharing of Spiritual Practices" (743) A new object of devotion, a new philosophy of "spiritual ecology," new Earth-centered holidays, a new theology to promote "unity within diversity," a new collection of sacred writings and traditions, and shared prayer ... all of this adds up to a new creed, a new code, and a new cult - a New Religion of the Earth.

Executive Director Charles Gibbs

Other URI leaders and proponents have shown support for a New Religion. In 1997, URI Executive Director Charles Gibbs said that the URI planning conference held in New York City made plans to "support sacred earth values in a variety of ways." (744)

Mikhail Gorbachev

In a recent interview with an environmentalist magazine, Mikhail Gorbachev openly avows that "nature is my god":

"[Interviewer] What are your spiritual beliefs?"

[Gorbachev] Well, I believe in the cosmos. All of us are linked to the cosmos. Look at the sun. If there is no sun, then we cannot exist. So nature is my god. To me, nature is sacred. Trees are my temples and forests are my cathedrals." (745)

Robert Muller

Robert Muller made it clear at the 1996 URI summit conference that the United Religions must tame "fundamentalism" and profess faithfulness "only to the global spirituality and to the health of this planet." (746) In his view, the Earth is the divinity: "Hindus call our earth Brahma, or God, for they rightly see no difference between our earth and the divine." (747)

Muller also referred to the Earth as "the One in Whom we live and breathe and have our being":

"Students need to develop an awareness of their place in, and potential contribution to, the human family, the kingdoms in nature, and the planet Earth, as the 'One in Whom we live and breathe and have our being'." (748) [Capitalization is as given in the source document.]

Muller had the reference to the "One in Whom we live" wrong. In the Bible, this refers to God, not the Earth. When St. Paul preached to the Athenians at the Aeropagus, he said,

"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring'." (Acts 17:24-28)

Neale Donald Walsch

Neale Donald Walsch says that between 2000 and 2015, we will see "the emergence of a New Spirituality on a worldwide scale; a spiritual movement that embraces the highest thoughts ever held by human beings, discards the tenants [sic] of fear and exclusivity that have marked so many of the world's religions thus far, and produces a larger experience in our daily lives of Who We Really Are as Beings of Divine Heritage." (749)

Patricia Mische, Global Education Associates

Patricia Mische, president of Global Education Associates (who attended the 1997 URI summit meeting (750) and spoke at the 1997 State of the World Forum on "Governance Structures for the 21st Century)," (751) says that "Our spiritual journey - our search for life in God - must be worked out now in a global context, in the midst of global crises and global community. Our spirituality must be a global spirituality." (752)

Barbara Marx Hubbard

In her newest book, *Conscious Evolution*, Barbara Marx Hubbard called for a "meta-religio," a "new ground of the whole":

"Conscious evolution is the context for a 'meta-religio,' [sic] a new ground of the whole, calling upon spiritual leaders and practitioners of all faiths to create what Bishop William Swing, Episcopal bishop of California, calls a 'United Religions' to end the conflict among religions and to bring together the unique gifts of the faiths for the future of humanity. We need to move beyond ecumenical understanding to evolutionary fulfillment through the embodiment of the principles and the practices of the great faiths. We long not for a new religion, but for the evolution of religion, such that we embody the qualities of our master teachers and become conscious cocreators with the divine universal intelligence ourselves." (753)

United Communities of Spirit

The United Communities of Spirit (UCS) is an on-line interfaith network which actively supports the URI and includes "members from every mainstream religion, an array of eclectic 'new agers' of all types - and pagans, and Wiccans, and humanists, and even atheists." (754) The UCS also favors a New Religion.

The UCS web site provides links to six "special organizations, who are leading the way in the emergence of a new spiritual understanding"; the URI is listed together with five New Age sites, including "The Summit Lighthouse" (Church Universal and Triumphant).(755) The UCS says that "We are devising an array of programs intended to pursue the agenda of the URI, and doing what we can to lay the groundwork for a high-powered global network that can truly change the world." (756) In his report on the 1997 URI summit conference, UCS leader Bruce Schuman said: "In many ways, the URI is intimately related to the United Communities of Spirit project. One might almost say our objectives are identical." (757) So, let's examine the objectives of the UCS.

A UCS document, "A Philosophy of Interfaith Harmony and Unity," states:

"We see no need to develop one universal common religion for all of humanity - yet it seems clear to us that the global confluence of religions is, indeed, tending to create a new universal spirituality, that incorporates perspectives and insights from all traditions. ... We are creating a forum for 'unity in diversity' that celebrates the unique merits of each particular approach to the divine energy, yet also provides a way that each of these approaches can be welded into a cohesive common framework." (758)

In a letter to Anke Kreutzer, another URI activist, Bruce Schuman says of celibacy "It is not 'the answer,' at least for the 'large boat' religion that we must devise for the broad human future." (759) Regarding another UCS project, "World Scripture: A comparative anthology of sacred texts," Schuman says, "I tend to feel that World Scripture is the beginning of a global database of fundamental spiritual principles that will eventually serve as the foundation for an emerging new global spirituality." (760) (One of the projects suggested in the draft URI charter is the development of such a "compilation of information from sacred writings and oral wisdom.") (761)

Schuman also envisions new prophets, new theology, and a new revival:

"It's my feeling that today, the globalization of culture is leading to the transformation of religion, and I do believe that prophets of this new dispensation should and will arise, and will play a role in guiding the world community into a new era of globally enlightened spirituality. ... I anticipate the emergence of a new form of global theology, that is grounded in the classical doctrines of the religions, but which reinterprets them through a common set of principles. ... I am also an advocate of grass-roots spiritual revival, the direct white-lightning mystical connectivity and personal energy-flow that can inspire and heal individuals and entire cultures." (762)

Associated with all this is a new millennial hope, which Schuman appears to share with Teilhard de Chardin:

"We are all linked together in one loose association of evolutionary forces, apparently converging towards a universal light, and gathering together a tremendous diversity of powerful forces that can accelerate our spirits into a new millennium." (763)

"Emerging new global spirituality," "universal spirituality" and a "large boat religion that we must devise;" new scriptures, new prophets, new theology, a new vision of mankind's destiny - if it walks like a New Religion and talks like a New Religion, it is a New Religion.

Schuman believes that the URI can foster dialogue within religions as well as among them. For example, he envisions the use of polls to redefine Catholic doctrine and belief, as a way to foster the dissenters within the Catholic Church:

"One way to define 'Catholicism,' for example, is by asking the question, 'What do people who say they are Catholics actually believe?' If we conducted a large-scale poll of religious people, and defined 'Catholicism' as 'what people who say they are Catholics actually believe,' we would have a potent and credible approach to the creation of a global interfaith organization, that would be grounded in the actual beliefs of religious people, rather than in some official but perhaps controversial doctrine. In the long run, this is probably the strongest approach. Clearly, there may be significant tensions in a large religious organization. This is certainly true in the Catholic Church, where official Church doctrine may be seen as quite controversial by significant sub-groups within the Church. In an interfaith organization, do we give voice to these sub-groups and their agendas, or do we allow only the official representatives of the established hierarchy to represent their institution? It seems to me that the best approach is probably a compromise, that provides a channel for both (or multiple) points of view. Perhaps, as we are reconciling tensions among the various religions, we can also provide a forum that mediates the same kind of dialogue within existing religions." (764)

At the 1997 URI summit conference, Schuman discerned the spirit of the coming New Religion, "the vision of a Common Flame":

"I am persuaded that this 'confluence' of cultural and ideational forces can lead to a profoundly illuminating general understanding of spiritual and religious truth - and that, indeed, something exactly like this is what is occurring in culture today, in a vast creatively bubbling conversational process in which all participants are being illuminated and educated by all others. This kind of 'mutual edification' was an inherent part of the Stanford URI conference. Out of myriad conversations, there seemed to emerge something of a common vision, expressed from the podium by different voices at different times, but somehow conveying a common sense of destiny. Out of the center, there seemed to emerge the vision of a Common Flame, a white heat of the spirit into which all believers are being drawn, each from their own tradition and perspective." (765)

Writers for the Journal of the United Religions

Writers for the Journal of the United Religions also propose a New Religion. Br. Wayne Teasdale wrote in favor of a new, "universal consciousness" that "acts with the totality in mind":

"The Community of Religions, a term that expresses the living reality of the interfaith phenomenon, and which includes all of the religions taken together in their new and powerful identity, has to establish itself on the historic precedent of the prophetic function as we move towards the third millennium, and hopefully, a new, universal consciousness. ... A new, universal awareness will dawn on the earth, and [sic] enlarged consciousness that acts with the totality in mind, and not merely vested interests as in the past." (766)

Bruno Barnhart said the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions had:

"two great imperatives to communion, horizontal and vertical: vertical, however, in the sense of a spirituality which moves - with the Spirit in our time - not toward transcendence but toward incarnation. The community of religions and of peoples can only be achieved on the common ground of humanity - known in the voice of the oppressed. This human ground, I believe, is mysteriously one with the earth itself. ... The Parliament signals not only the birth of a community of religions in our time, but the recognition of this new revelation - common and convergent - from the ground." (767)

A non-transcendent "new revelation" "from the ground," the earth and humanity, moving "with the Spirit in our time" - such would be the basis for the New Religion.

At the January, 1997 URI forum, URI proponent Bettina Gray denounced adherence to religious "history and dogma" and invoked the "creative oversoul of the universe":

"It is really a question of spiritual sovereignty. If you feel that the power and authority of your tradition rests in the social arena, in the leadership - that it is a question of history and dogma - then it is a struggle over whose world view [prevails], mine over yours. If you feel that spiritual sovereignty rests in that divine spark, that creative oversoul of the universe, God as I would call it, and your loyalty rests there, then it is not a struggle of sovereignties ... it is a struggle for truth." (768)

Richard Kirby and Earl Brewer

Richard Kirby and Earl Brewer forecast the coming of a United Religions in their 1994 article, "Temples of Tomorrow," a portion of which was reprinted in the Journal of the United Religions: (769)

"Religions are now headed toward what may eventually form a United Religions Organization (URO), structured in much the same way as the United Nations and sharing similar goals." (770)

They liken the task of a "United Religions Organization" (URO) to creation of a "new covenant between God and humankind":

"These suggestions and programs amount to a kind of theological revolution that recalls the prophets of Israel. These prophets engendered new relationships with God, and in the fullness of time a new covenant. Now, in planetary crisis, that new covenant between God and humankind needs urgently to be extended to science, politics, government, and technology. The URO, perhaps over decades of research and discussion, will discern the nature of that covenant, and with it the responsibilities, rather than the rights, of planetary citizenship. The case for a United Religions Organization, in summary, is that it provides a conduit for divine power to bring healing and inspiration to Earth. The URO should enlarge the religious vision of the human race as a whole and, hence, human decency." (771)

A "United Religions Organization" would "enlarge the vision of the human race." It would also discern "the responsibilities, rather than the rights, of planetary citizenship." What a strange thing to hope for, at the close of a century in which tyrants have violated the rights of their subjects, recognizing no limits from God, law, or tradition on their ability to impose "responsibilities" on their citizens! "Temples of Tomorrow" also lists some of the characteristics that the authors expect religion to have in the future:

5. "The world religions are increasingly working out the theoretical basis of a world theology, such as a global philosophy of knowledge (epistemology). A mature, whole-earth theology will likely develop. 6. Some groups are preparing to send their religions into outer space, and so to enter the space age. 7. Churches are becoming like malls, serving as economic centers as well as religious ones. ... 8. The merging of two or more religious impulses, such as Hinduism and Christianity, is increasingly producing hybrids, such as Christian Yoga. 9. Faith and finance are converging as religions enter the world of money with serious intent to reform it. ... 10. The East is rediscovering a theistic orientation in several contexts. For example, the Japanese have reclaimed the doctrine of the divinity of the Emperor. We will likely see a major Eastern contribution to the global doctrine of God, or the whole-earth concept of theism, in the twenty-first century. 11. The religions are rethinking their role as peacemakers, and a world theology of peacemaking is emerging. The Green Movement and the world religions are converging. ... 12. The feminine is increasingly partnering the masculine in religious thinking, leading to a fully integrated male/female world theology." (772)

Some of this stuff is predictable: "the whole-earth concept of theism," a "fully integrated male/female world theology," and the convergence of "the Green Movement and the world religions." Is this the New Religion of the year 2100, or the Canaanite fertility cult of 2100 BC?

Kirby and Brewer state that "the Japanese have reclaimed the doctrine of the divinity of the Emperor." This has indeed happened. Emperor Akihito performed the daijosai ceremony as part of his ascension to the throne in 1989; the ceremony "has the effect of turning the Emperor from an ordinary person into 'a supernatural being, whose person embraces the entire welfare of the people, and has the power to represent them before all the kami [gods]'" (773) This is an advance? Back to the future, AD 60 under Emperor Nero, divus!

Richard Kirby, a self-described "Esoteric Futurist," recently praised the United Religions Initiative as part of the "roundtable of world religions in dialogue," and states that Theosophists and "esotericists" should play a role in these discussions, with the aim of defining a new "Christ of the Third Millennium."

"Therefore the stock-in-trade of the spiritual scientist or esoteric futurist - the terms are almost synonymous in many ways - is to make sure that the spiritual sciences of the world are brought to the roundtable of discussion of exoteric philosophies and their bearing on the civil governance of the world. All the spiritual philosophies of the world are coming to the great Moot, the roundtable of world religions in dialogue. The United Religions Initiative is one of many associations promoting this dialogue. ... The Theosophy of the east and the Anthroposophy of the west are summoned to the great Conclave of spiritual science. All of these have a contribution to make. Perhaps, as Jung and others have prophesied, we can foresee the emerging synthesis of these East-West traditions. ... The Christ of the Third Millennium is from this viewpoint the goal, the center and the heart of the focus of Esoteric Futures studies and research." (774)

Matthew Fox

Matthew Fox, who was ordained as an Episcopal priest by Bishop Swing, has praised religious syncretism:

"But there's no point in starting a new religion. That's the last thing we need. However, we do need to gather the essence from all the religions we do have, which is what I call "deep ecumenism." By blending the best of all our world religions, hopefully we'll distill a more universal truth. The human race is young, and we evolve as our religious consciousness evolves." (775)

Bishop Swing and his friends share a common ground - favoring the emergence of a New Religion based on blending the elements of the old religions that they like best.

The name of the United Religions Initiative: a deliberate choice

Words have definite and commonly understood meanings. If there were no intent on the part of the URI (or of a faction within it) to give birth to a new world religion, why not call the organization "Religious Coalition for Peace," "Religions United Against Violence," or a similar phrase that connotes peacemaking without implying a union of the religions? In response to a question asked from the floor at the January 26, 1997 URI forum - about the name of the URI and the similarity of this name with the UN's name - Executive Director Gibbs said that the name of the Initiative was discussed extensively at the June 1996 summit meeting, and "at this point in time, United Religions was still the best way of capturing in a couple of words what this was about." (776) The choice of the name - United Religions - is a deliberate and considered choice, affirmed by URI leaders and participants.

Worship ceremonies of the United Religions Initiative

Symbols used in URI worship ceremonies express such views, as well. The San Francisco Chronicle and the San Jose Mercury News reported that during the 1995 interfaith service at which Bishop Swing announced the URI, "prayers, chants and incantations were offered to a dozen deities." (777) "Holy water from the Ganges, the Amazon, the Red Sea, the River Jordan, and other sacred streams" (778) was mixed in a single "bowl of unity" on the altar of Grace Cathedral. (779) During the service, Bishop Swing made the meaning of the ritual clear. The

San Francisco Chronicle reported: " 'As these sacred waters find confluence here,' said Episcopal Bishop William Swing, 'may the city that chartered the nations of the world bring together the religions of the world.'" (780) At this service, the "Hymn for a New Age" was sung:

"Through the long night we have come. The sun is bright, the wars are done. We will unite. We will be one. A new light has begun. Smile, heaven, on our loving land, shine blessings on our fair kingdom. Enrich our time with growing love, with joy abundant and long, prosperous days. Man's brotherhood is born again." (781)

The only surprise here is that the liturgical police did not censor the hymn for using terms like "kingdom" and "man's brotherhood."

At the 1997 URI summit conference, a public worship service included a procession of 15 banners with symbols representing the world's religions - including a banner for the Wiccans, the neo-pagan witchcraft movement. (782) The fifteenth banner had on it an empty silver circle, representing "the religions which are to come." (783) (This circle of 15 symbols, including the Wiccan pentagram and the empty circle for the religions of the future, now appears on all URI publications.) Schuman provides his interpretation of the meaning of the fifteenth banner with its "empty center":

"And the last of these banners carried simply an empty circle, which Deborah [Moldow] described as representing 'the religions which are to come.' The next day, as we were breaking into our final groups of the conference, Deborah created a new category for discussion that invoked this spirit of emptiness - this 'empty center' that conference organizer Paul Andrews had spoken about. ... I decided to join this group, because it seemed so deeply spiritual. Our group concentrated on meditation and inner receptivity. We began with silence, attuning ourselves to our 'inner guidance.' After a few minutes, I felt prompted to speak, and I mentioned why I had joined this group - which involved not only my sense of creative unfolding from this 'empty center,' but also because I myself do not really have some 'tradition' or existing organization that I represent. I feel myself to be a representative of something new, something emerging, something not yet entirely defined, yet drawing its form from many sources - in a 'syncretic' way. Out of this empty center there emerges - what?" (784)

Steps in the development of the New Religion

Bishop Swing set a tone of messianic expectancy in his opening address to the 1997 URI summit conference: "If you have come here because a spirit of colossal energy is being born in the loins of earth, then come here and be a midwife. Assist, in awe, at the birth of new hope." (785) The "new hope" will have the Earth - and not the Virgin Mary - as its mother. As Yeats asked, "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" (786)

In the early stages of the development of the New Religion, the emphasis will be on acceptance of "an inclusive set of global visions" - many religions and many gods - all on an equal footing. Gurudev Khalsa, a leader of the Appreciative Inquiry process for the 1997 URI conference, says of the process being used to build the UR:

"Chartering does not depend on reaching a consensus of vision as much as it aims to create an ever widening, more inclusive set of global visions and relationships that enliven local action on behalf of the emerging United Religions. As such, it responds to the challenge of creating a transboundary organization in a postmodern world where imposing a single vision onto others can only lead to failure." (787)

So the first step is reducing Christ to a member of a pantheon, one of the many teachers who shows us one of the many ways to enlightenment. Only later will the "more inclusive set of global visions" evolve toward what Bishop Swing describes as a "common purpose" for "all religions and all spiritual movements." As Dirk Ficca, executive director of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions said, "One of our most important principles is convergence, not consensus." (788) With the "convergence," we will learn the name of the entity that Bishop Swing hailed as "the spirit of colossal energy" being "born in the loins of earth."

A warning by Anglican Bishop Moses Tay

Anglican Bishop Moses Tay, of Singapore, issued a firm rebuke to religious syncretism when he preached in the US in 1992. Nationally syndicated columnist Terry Mattingly quotes Bishop Tay's sermon:

"The bishop took as a text Revelation 2:12-16, in which the exalted Christ says to the angel of the Church of Pergamum, 'I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is.' Is it possible, asked the bishop, that Satan had set a throne in that Church? 'Would we be shocked if that is true, that Satan has his throne in some of our churches?' The text offers two danger signs, Tay noted. The first is the presence of corrupt teachers who bring other gods and idols into church life through forms of syncretistic worship. 'I believe this is ... very prevalent within some quarters of the Anglican Communion,' he said. 'I say this with some shame and sadness, because this is the very thing that the Bible forbids.' Danger sign No. 2, he added, is compromise on issues of sexual immorality." (789) [Ellipses are as given in the original text.]

By his writings and actions, Bishop Swing has ignored the Biblically based warning given by his fellow Anglican bishop. Instead, Bishop Swing asked the 1997 URI summit meeting:

"What if we said 'We will investigate the foundation of the religions and live into a growing religious dialogue. We will pursue this dialogue until we have lived into a new peace among religions. We will so pursue peace among religions until we have discovered a new peace among nations.'" (790)

For Bishop Swing's threefold we will, there is a Biblical precedent, a fivefold I will - and a warning against such self-assertion:

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the depths of the Pit." (Is. 14:12-15)

Is opposition to syncretism a repeat of the blindness of the Pharisees?

If questioned about support for syncretism, URI leaders and supporters are likely to say that they don't want to start a New Religion; they just want the religions to meet the current needs of humankind and the Earth. They will accuse orthodox Christians of refusing to accept a new and inclusive understanding of religion, and of repeating the error and spiritual blindness of the Pharisees.

>From the perspective of an orthodox Christian - to borrow a phrase from the feminists - these folks "just don't get it" about the Faith once delivered to the saints. For orthodox Christians, Christ is the full and definitive Revelation of God to mankind; after the time of the Apostles, no new Revelation may be added to the deposit of faith. The Scriptures are not open to arbitrary revision, updating, or amendment

to meet the needs of the times or to respond to the spirit of the age. A true understanding of Scripture depends on faith on the part of the hearer, and a willingness of the hearer to receive the interpretation of Scripture as it has been given by the lawful teaching authority of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. (Believers may understand this Church as a visible Church with a teaching Magisterium, or as the invisible fellowship of all the faithful from the time of Christ onward, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.)

Christ is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:16). "All things were made through him" (Jn. 1:3), and all in heaven and on earth are "subject to Him" (1 Pet. 3:22). Christ is not a member of a pantheon of saviors. "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth" (Phil. 2:10), and "no one comes to the Father" except through Him (Jn. 14:6). Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment" (Mt. 22:37). No, the first commandment is not "love the earth."

Jesus' Great Commission to the faithful is "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you." (Mt. 28:19-20). The Great Commission is not "worship Ausar, Baal, Siva, Ishtar, or the Inner Light in common with thy neighbor, in order to understand his religion and make peace with him." Indeed, such common worship violates the First Commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Dt. 5:7). Thus, what URI supporters see as new revelation and accommodation to the needs of the times, orthodox Christians see as apostasy or idolatry.

There's another, ironic contrast between Christianity and the New Religion proposed by the URI. The first global URI summit conference met in 1996 at the Fairmont Hotel, located atop Nob Hill, one of the wealthiest parts of San Francisco. The United Religions Initiative had its first global meeting in an elegant hotel in the richest part of one of the wealthiest cities in the US, the world's richest country. By contrast, Christ, the Founder and Head of the Church, was born in a manger (there was no room for him at the hotel or at the inn) in a small town in an occupied province of the Roman Empire.

Those who favor development of a New Religion will find the URI to be a useful arena in which to seek their goal. When this arena is built, money, bureaucratic influence, and political power can sway the United Religions in a direction never intended by some of its Christian founders. It would not be the first time for a liberal movement to be hijacked by others with a clear vision of where they want the movement to go. In a world with United Religions, syncretism could win gradually, with religious orthodoxy being defined outside the bounds of polite discourse. What "political correctness" has done in the United States could be done worldwide, slowly but surely, with global money power and global media power bring about a slow change in people's worldview.

The Roman Empire persecuted Christians on charges of disloyalty to the Emperor, or on the more general accusation of hatred for mankind. If a future persecution comes under the aegis of the New Religion, the persecutors will be able to go the Romans one better; they will accuse the "fundamentalists" of disloyalty to the World Government and of hating the Earth.

Footnotes

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