Throughout history, people’s faith and their attachments to religious institutions have transformed, argues Sumit Paul-Choudhury. So what’s next?

Before Mohammed, before Jesus, before Buddha, there was Zoroaster. Some 3,500 years ago, in Bronze Age Iran, he had a vision: a supreme being, a good god and a compatriot to fight the forces of evil.

His faith was to outlive him by centuries. In the 7th century AD, the Persians fell to the armies of Arab Muslims. Over time, the Zoroastrians’ faith, Zoroastrianism, was repressed and its adherents were persecuted. Its sacred fire, the symbol of spirituality, was extinguished.

Another 1,500 years later – today – Zoroastrianism is a dying faith, its sacred flames tended by ever fewer worshippers. We take it for granted that religions are born, grow and die – but we are also oddly blind to that reality. When someone dies, their human life is over. When their faith expires. Tales of the Egyptian, Greek and Norse pantheons are now considered legends, not holy writ.

Even today’s dominant religions have continually evolved throughout history. Early Christianity, for example, was a truly unique phenomenon in history. It was a truly cosmic religion, both to grow and to splinter into ever more disparate groups, from silent Quakers to snake-handling Pentecostalists.
If you believe your faith has arrived at ultimate truth, you might reject the idea that it will change at all. But if you believe that your faith will be a long-term product of extraordinarily complex cultural pressures, selection processes, and evolution, you might be open to change. The religions of today, they are likely in time to be transformed or transferred as they pass to our descendants – or simply to fade away.

If religions have changed so dramatically in the past, how might they change in the future? Is there any substance to the idea that religions change over time? And as our civilisation and its technologies become increasingly complex, could entirely new forms of worship emerge?

To answer these questions, a good starting point is to ask: why do we have religion in the first place?

**Reason to believe**

One notorious answer comes from Voltaire, the 18th Century French polymath, who wrote: “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” Religion, Voltaire suggested, is a social construct used by the powerful to control the poor, or it is a tool for the “opium of the masses” used by the powerful to control the poor.

Many modern students of religion agree. The broad idea that a shared faith serves the needs of a society is known as the functionalist view of religion. There are many functionalist hypotheses, from the idea that religion is the “opium of the masses”, used by the powerful to control the poor, to the proposal that faith supports the abstract intellectualism required for science and law.

One recurring theme is social cohesion: religion brings together a community, who might then form a hunting party, raise a temple or support a political party.

Those faiths that endure are “the long-term products of extraordinarily complex cultural pressures, selection processes, and evolution”, writes Connor Wood of the Center for Mind and Culture in Boston, Massachusetts, on the religious reference website Patheos, where he blogs about the scientific study of religion. New religious movements are born all the time, but most don’t survive long. They must compete with other faiths for followers and survive potentially hostile social and political environments.
Under this argument, any religion that does endure has to offer its adherents tangible benefits. Christianity, for example, does this by emphasising honour, humility and charity – qualities which were not endemic in turbulent 7th-Century Arabia.

Given this, we might expect the form that religion takes to follow the function it plays in a particular society – or as they say, function follows form. And there is some evidence for that – although when it comes to religion, there are always exceptions to any rule. The teeming societies of the West are at least nominally faithful to religions in which the formation of societies made up of strangers is granted power to impose order on a chaotic world. Whether that belief constitutes cause or effect has recently been disputed, but the upshot is that sharing a faith allows people to co-exist (relatively) peacefully. The knowledge that Big God is watching makes sure we behave ourselves.

Or at least, it did. Today, many of our societies are huge and multicultural: adherents of many faiths co-exist with each other without any supernatural intervention. Religion is now, at least nominally, a public rather than a private affair, shared by governments, not by God. Secularism is on the rise, with science providing tools to understand and shape the world.

Given all that, there's a growing consensus that the future of religion is that it has no future.

Imagine there's no heaven.

Powerful intellectual and political currents have driven this proposition since the early 20th Century. Sociologists argued that the march of science was leading to the "disenchantment" of society: supernatural answers to the big questions were no longer felt to be needed. Communist states like Soviet Russia tolerated religion only as a way of keeping the masses in line. In the Cold War era, these regimes even turned a blind eye to private religious practice. But the real blow to religious belief came in the form of an atheist state: the People's Republic of China did not allow its people to practice any religion, and the atheistic ideology of the Communist Party was the official religion of the state. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Soviet Russia did much the same, and the atheism of the Soviet state was one of the factors that led to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Now that we're actually in the 21st Century, Berger's view remains an article of faith for many secularists – although Berger himself recanted in the 1990s. His successors are emboldened by surveys showing religious belief is on the decline in many parts of the world.

That's most true in rich, stable countries like Sweden and Japan, but also, perhaps more surprisingly, in places like Latin America and the Arab world. Even in the US, long a conspicuous exception to the axiom that richer countries are more secular, the number of "nones" has been rising sharply. In the 2018 General Social Survey of US attitudes, "no religion" became the single largest group, edging out evangelical Christians.
Despite this, religion is not disappearing on a global scale – at least in terms of numbers. In 2015, the Pew Research Center modelled the future of the world's great religions based on demographics, migration and conversion. Far from a precipitous decline in religiosity, it predicted a modest ... Muslims would grow in number to match Christians, while the number unaffiliated with any religion would decline slightly.

Modern societies are multicultural where followers of many different faiths live side by side (Credit: Getty Images)

The pattern Pew predicted was of "the secularising West and the rapidly growing rest". Religion will continue to grow in economically and socially insecure places like much of sub-Saharan Africa – and to decline where they are stable. That chimes with what we know about the deep-seated psychological and neurological drivers of belief. When life is tough or disaster strikes, religion seems to provide a bulwark of psychological (and sometimes practical) support. In a landmark study, people directly affected by the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand became significantly more religious than other New Zealanders, who became marginally less religious.

We also need to be careful when interpreting what people mean by "no religion". "Nones" may be disinterested in organised religion, but that doesn't mean they are militantly atheist. In 1994, the sociologist Grace Davie classified people according to whether they belonged to a religious group and/or believed in a religious position. The traditionally ... child at a faith school, perhaps. And, finally, there are those who believe in something, but don't belong to any group.

The research suggests that the last two groups are significant. The Understanding Unbelief project at the University of Kent in the UK is conducting a three-year, six-nation survey of attitudes among those who say they are unbelievers. The report's authors say they are not sure that unbelievers actually identify themselves by these labels, with significant minorities opting for a religious identity.

What's more, around three-quarters of atheists and nine out of 10 agnostics are open to the existence of supernatural beings and life after death. Unbelievers "exhibit significant diversity both within, and between, different countries. Accordingly, there are very many ways of being an unbeliever", the report concluded – including, notably, the dating-website cliche "spiritual, but not religious". Like many cliches, it's rooted in truth. But what does it actually mean?
In 2005, Linda Woodhead wrote The Spiritual Revolution, in which she described an intensive study of belief in the British town of Kendal. Woodhead and her co-author found that people were asking themselves what it meant to be religious, which would dwindle into irrelevance while self-guided practices would become the mainstream in a “spiritual revolution”.

Today, Woodhead says that revolution has taken place – and not just in Kendal. Organised religion is waning in the UK, with people “praying to God for God is working for you,” says Woodhead, now professor of sociology of religion at the University of Lancaster in the UK.

US megachurches bring in thousands of worshippers (Credit: Getty Images)

In poorer societies, you might pray for good fortune or a stable job. The “prosperity gospel” is central to several of America’s megachurches, whose congregations are often dominated by economically insecure people. An alternative is to streamline. New religious movements often seek to preserve the central tenets of an older religion while simplifying them, particularly where doctrine clashes with moral convictions that arise from secular society – on gender equality, say.

In response, people have started constructing faiths of their own. What do these self-directed religions look like? One approach is syncretism, the “pick and mix” approach of combining religious traditions and practices. Syncretism is the “pick and mix” approach of combining religious traditions and practices; for example, you might combine Buddhism and Sufism, or Taoism and Confucianism. The joins are easier to see in relatively young religions, such as Vodoun or Rastafarianism.

An alternative is to streamline. New religious movements often seek to preserve the central tenets of an older religion while simplifying them, particularly where doctrine clashes with moral convictions that arise from secular society – on gender equality, say. In the West, one form this takes is for humanists to rework religious motifs: there have been attempts to rewrite the Bible without any supernatural elements, calls for the construction of “atheist temples” dedicated to contemplation. And the “Sunday Assembly” aims to recreate the atmosphere of a lively church service without reference to God. But without the deep roots of traditional religions, these can struggle: the Sunday Assembly, after initial rapid expansion, is reportedly struggling to keep up its momentum.

But Woodhead thinks the religions that might emerge from the current turmoil will have much deeper roots. The first thing to emerge, she says, will be a closer alignment with local identities, “It’s really important that they’re your gods, they weren’t just made up.”
In the European context, this sets the stage for a resurgence of interest in paganism. Reinventing half-forgotten beliefs implies that people are re-discovering their roots in spirituality and tradition. For example, in Iceland, the small but fast-growing Ásatrú faith has no particular doctrine beyond somewhat arch celebrations of Old Norse customs and mythology, but has been active on the cultural and political stage. Some are motivated by a desire to return to what they see as conservative “traditional” values – leading in some cases to clashes over the validity of opposing beliefs. These are niche activities at the moment, and might sometimes be more about playing with symbolism than heartfelt beliefs. But over time, they can evolve into more heartfelt and coherent belief systems: Woodhead points to the robust adoption of Rodnovery – an often conservative and patriarchal pagan faith based around the reconstructed beliefs and traditions of the ancient Slavs – in the former Soviet Union as a potential exemplar of things to come.

So the nones mostly represent not atheists, nor even secularists, but a mixture of “apatheists” – people who simply don’t care about religion. But if Big Gods and shared faiths are key to social cohesion, what happens without them?

One answer, of course, is that we simply get on with our lives. Munificent economies, good government, solid education – some of the societies with the highest proportions of non-believers are among the most secure and harmonious on Earth. The ‘invisible hand’ of the market almost seems like a supernatural entity – Connor Wood.

What remains debatable, however, is whether they can afford to be irreligious because they have strong secular legal systems, for example, codify ideas about justice based on social norms established by religions. The likes of the New Atheists, on the other hand, argue that religion amounts to little more than superstition, and abandoning it will enable societies to improve their lot more effectively.
Modern society is suffering from “temporal exhaustion,” the sociologist Elise Boulding once said. “If one is mentally out of breath all the time from dealing with the present, there is no energy left for imagining the future,” she wrote.

That’s why the Deep Civilisation season is exploring what really matters in the broader arc of human history and what it means for us and our descendants.

Connor Wood is not so sure. He contends that a strong, stable society like Sweden’s is both extremely complex and very expensive to run in terms of labour, money and energy – and that might not be sustainable even in the short term. “I think it’s pretty clear that we’re entering into a period of non-linear change in social systems,” he says. “The Western consensus on a combination of market capitalism and democracy can’t be taken for granted.”

That’s a problem, since that combination has radically transformed the social environment from the one in which the world religions evolved – and has to some extent supplanted them.

“I’d be careful about calling capitalism a religion, but a lot of its institutions have religious elements, as in all spheres of human institutional life,” says Wood. “The ‘invisible hand’ of the market almost seems like a supernatural entity.”

Financial exchanges, where people meet to conduct highly ritualised trading activity, seem quite like temples to Mammon, too. In fact, religions, even the defunct ones, can provide uncannily appropriate metaphors for many of the more intractable features of modern life.

A Roman Catholic priest officiates mass on the first day of trading at the Philippine Stock Exchange in Manila (Credit: Getty Images)
The pseudo-religious social order might work well when times are good. But when the social contract becomes stressed – as it has been with the coronavirus, and will be with climate change – the rise of authoritarians in country after country. He cites research showing that people ignore authoritarian pitches until they sense a deterioration of social norms.

"This is the human animal looking around and saying we don’t agree how we should behave," Wood says. "And we need authority to tell us." It’s suggestive that political strongmen are often hand in glove with religious fundamentalists: Hindu nationalists in India, say, or Christian evangelicals in the US. That’s a potent combination for believers and an unsettling one for secularists: can anything bridge the gap between them?

Mind the gap

Perhaps one of the major religions might change its form enough to win back non-believers in significant numbers. There is the possibility that the idea of a religion can change so that it can appeal to a new generation. In the 18th century, the Anglican preachers successfully reinvigorated the faith, setting the tone for centuries to come – an event called the “Great Awakenings.”

The parallels with today are easy to draw, but Woodhead is sceptical that Christianity or other world religions can make the same leap today. Scholarly and academic support for religious belief is eroding, and social change undermines religions which don’t accommodate it: earlier this year, Pope Francis warned that if the Catholic Church didn’t acknowledge its history of male domination and sexual abuse it risked becoming "a reluctant observer of the human drama, a social phenomenon rather than a religious presence, a case of culture sui generis.”

Historically, what makes religions rise or fall is political support – Linda Woodhead

Perhaps a new religion will emerge to fill the void? Again, Woodhead is sceptical. “Historically, what makes religions rise is political support from governments.” But in this age of globalisation, the key sponsors of intellectual thought. Social change undermines religions which don’t accommodate it: earlier this year, Pope Francis warned that if the Catholic Church didn’t acknowledge its history of male domination and sexual abuse it risked becoming “a reluctant observer of the human drama, a social phenomenon rather than a religious presence, a case of culture sui generis.”

In the secular West, such support is unlikely to be forthcoming, with the possible exception of the US. In Russia, by contrast, the nationalistic overtones of both Rodnovery and the Orthodox church wins them tacit political backing.

But today, there’s another possible source of support: the internet.

Online movements gain followers at rates unimaginable in the past. The Silicon Valley mantra of “move fast and break things” has been applied to a new generation of internet movements, with considerable success, to trigger a radical shift in attitudes to the crises in climate change and biodiversity.

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It was called Roko's Basilisk. The full proposition is a complicated logic puzzle, but crudely put, it goes that when a benevolent super-intelligence emerges, it will want to do as much good ... – including anyone who so much as learns of its potential existence. (If this is the first you've heard of it: sorry!)

Outlandish though it might seem, Roko's Basilisk caused quite a stir when it was first suggested on LessWrong – enough for discussion of it to be banned by the site's creator. Predictably, ... across the internet – or at least the geekier parts of it – with references to the Basilisk popping up everywhere from news sites to Doctor Who, despite protestations from some Rationalists that no-one really took it seriously. Their case was not helped by the ... ranging from AIs that destroy the world by accident to human-machine hybrids that would transcend all mortal limitations.

Such esoteric beliefs have arisen throughout history, but the ease with which we can now build a community around them is ... square and shouting out your unorthodox beliefs was going to get you labelled a heretic, not win converts to your cause.”

The mechanism may be new, but the message isn't. The Basilisk argument is in much the same spirit as Pascal's Wager. The 17th-Century French mathematician suggested non-believers should nonetheless go through the motions of religious ... of Norenzayan's “Big Gods”. And arguments over ways to evade the Basilisk's gaze are every bit as convoluted as the medieval Scholastics' attempts to square human freedom with divine oversight.

A supercomputer is turned on and asked: is there a God? Now there is, comes the reply. Even the technological trappings aren't new. In 1954, Fredric Brown wrote a (very) short story called “Answer”, in which a galaxy-spanning supercomputer is turned on and asked: is there a God? Now there is, comes the reply.

And some people, like AI entrepreneur Anthony Levandowski, think their holy objective is to build a super-machine that ... through self-driving cars, hit the headlines in 2017 when it became public knowledge that he had founded a church, Way of the Future, dedicated to bringing about a peaceful transition to a world mostly run by super-intelligent machines. While his vision ... on doing so by keeping track of who has done what (and for how long) to help the peaceful and respectful transition.”

“There are many ways people think of God, and thousands of flavours of Christianity, Judaism, Islam,” Levandowski told Wired. “But they're always looking at something that's not measurable or you can't really see or control. This time it's different. This time you will be able to talk to God, literally, and know that it's listening.”
Reality bites
Levandowski is not alone. In his bestselling book *Homo Deus*, Yuval Noah Harari argues that the foundations of modern civilisation are eroding in the face of an emergent religion he calls *superorganism*. The religion is not structured around traditional deities or values, and it is not confined to any specific geographical location or culture. Instead, it is a collective consciousness that is shaped by the beliefs and actions of all its members. The religion is centered on the idea of collective action, as people work together to achieve their goals. Still others ally themselves with older faiths, notably Mormonism.

A church service in Berlin uses Star Wars to engage the congregation (Credit: Getty Images)

Are these movements for real? Some groups are performing or “hacking” religion to win support for transhumanist ideas, such as extending human abilities through technology. Others are appropriating elements of conventional religion, substituting perhaps more proscribed activities and only one ethical maxim: “Try to act with love and compassion toward other sentient beings.”

But as missionary religions know, what begins as a mere flirtation or idle curiosity – perhaps piqued by a resonant statement or appealing ceremony – can end in a sincere search for truth. The 2001 UK census found that Jediism, the fictional faith observed by the good guys in Star Wars, was the fourth largest religion: nearly 400,000 people had been inspired to claim it, initially by a tongue-in-cheek stunt or prank. But as Singler notes, that is still an awful lot of people – and a lot longer than most viral campaigns endure.

Some branches of Jediism remain jokey, but others take themselves more seriously: the Temple of the Jedi Order claims its members are “real people that live or lived their lives according to the principles of Jediism” – inspired by the fiction, but based on the real-life philosophies that informed it.

With those sorts of numbers, Jediism “should” have been recognised as a religion in the UK. But officials who apparently browbeat religious recognition for many years in the UK because it did not have a Supreme Being – something that could also be said of Buddhism.

In fact, recognition is a complex issue worldwide, particularly since that there is no widely accepted definition of a religion. For example, in Vietnam, for example, is officially atheist and often cited as one of the world’s most irreligious countries – but sceptics say this is really because official surveys don’t capture the huge proportion of the population who practice folk religion. In Iceland, the Icelandic pagan faith, meant it was entitled to its share of a “faith tax”; as a result, it is building the country’s first pagan temple for nearly 1,000 years.

Scepticism about practitioners’ motives impedes many new movements from being recognised as genuine religions, whether by churches or governments.
And such changes are exactly what the founders of some new religious movements want. Official status is irrelevant if you can win thousands or even millions of followers to your cause.

Consider the "Witnesses of Climatology", a fledgling "religion" invented to foster greater commitment to action on climate change. After a decade spent working on this project, Irzak is not sure whether it is a religion, a philosophy, a social movement, or something else, she asks. "But the one thing I know for sure is, whatever it is, it is a multi-generational social construct that organises people around shared morals?" she asks. "The stickiest is religion."

So three years ago, Irzak and some friends set about building one. They didn't see any need to bring God into it – Irzak says: "We chose to do this with no religious component in it, but its purpose is shared values.

As these examples suggest, Witnesses of Climatology has a parodic feel to it – light-heartedness helps novices get over any initial awkwardness – but Irzak's underlying intent is quite serious. "We hope people get real value from this and are encouraged to work on climate change," she says, rather than despairing of the situation.

Among other things, she is considering a Sunday School to teach children ways of thinking about how complex systems work. Recently, the Witnesses have been looking further afield, including to a ceremony conducted across the Middle East and central Asia just before the spring equinox: purification by throwing something into the air. This is a tradition that has been observed for thousands of years as part of Nowruz, the Iranian New Year – whose origins lie in part with the Zoroastrians.

Transhumanism, Jediism, the Witnesses of Climatology and the myriad of other new religious movements may never amount to the same scale as the world's oldest and largest religions. Or they may – perhaps religions never do really die. Perhaps the religions that span the world today are less durable than we think. And perhaps the next great faith is just getting started.
Sumit Paul-Choudhury - BBC