

# My Journey into the Future

## A Personal Essay

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[Foresight 2005 Conference](#) - September

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From September 22-24, 2005, the School of Leadership Studies hosted Dr. Todd Johnson on campus at Regent University, for the third annual futures conference for Christian leaders. This essay by Johnson was circulated to participants beforehand. We encourage you to join us next year for our annual Foresight conference, as we hear from top futurists from the both the U.S. and around the world.



*Todd M. Johnson, Ph.D., is the director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, MA. He is the co-author of World Christian Encyclopedia (WCE), Second Edition, released in 2001 by Oxford University Press. Since 1989, Dr. Johnson has been a full-time researcher on the empirical status of global Christianity, most recently as director of the World Evangelization Research Center (WERC) in Richmond, Virginia. He has also served with Youth With A Mission (YWAM) since 1978 and has performed various ministry tasks in over 30 countries, including relief work among Cambodian refugees in Thailand, inner city work in San Francisco, evangelism in villages in Guatemala and field-based research in Asia. He is co-founder of the Christian Futures Network, a professional member of the World Future Society and a member of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). He is a contributor to the Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year and the International Bulletin of Missionary Research.*

### **Essay**

My earliest encounter with the future was as a teenager watching science fiction on television. I was a Star Trek aficionado and especially enjoyed the moral lessons played out against the backdrop of the 23<sup>rd</sup> century. It seemed to me that the future was a safe place to examine human behavior and societal patterns. Another preferred show was The Time Tunnel where two brave young men set out to influence the past, present and future. In my later teenage years I followed reruns of The Twilight Zone and The Outer Limits. All of my favorite episodes involved time travel and the future.

When I later moved into books my favorite science fiction author was Isaac Asimov. I encountered his delightful future in the Galactic Empire novels (I have read them all including several tributes to the *Foundation* series written after Asimov died). I particularly appreciated the interaction between humans and technology, as in the three laws of robotics. But my imagination was captured by the concept of psychohistory, the science of directing the course of large numbers of individual decisions for a positive future. I also enjoyed Gordon Dickson's *Childe Cycle* series. Of particular note is *The Final Encyclopedia*, where all of human knowledge was

gathered into a library orbiting the earth. Another author I enjoyed was Arthur C. Clarke. I read *2001: a Space Odyssey* shortly after being mesmerized by Kubrick's film as an 11 year old. Clarke was one of the most imaginative but firmly grounded futurists writing fiction and non-fiction. In keeping with my early interest in time travel I enjoyed Poul Anderson's *Time Patrol* series. It made perfect sense to me that if people were going to be traveling in time then you would need a special force to police their activities. Anderson's *Boat of a Million Years* is one of my all time favorites, not involving time travel but tracing the lives of a handful of immortal humans over long periods of time. I have also had an abiding interest in dinosaurs and the distant past (it gives one perspective for a distant future, if one can think about 65 million years ago, why not 65 million years into the future?).

One other "future factor" was my interest in the year 2000. I remember as a 10 year old in 1968 (with a great love for numbers) how I would reflect on what it would mean to be 42 years old in the year 2000. (When it finally happened, it was not much of a thrill). I had a friend in high school who delighted in thinking back in time in order to think forward. He would say "Just think, it's easy to remember that camping trip we took 6 months ago. In 6 months time we will graduate. Think about how soon that is." My view of the short term future was developed by this method. The other day I was thinking about a particular event when I was 17 years old. Now that I am 47 I realized that when another 30 years passes I will be 77!

I also developed a great love for the concept of infinity, which continues to fascinate me today. In high school math we puzzled over this riddle: If you have an infinite number of guests in a hotel and one more guest shows up, what room do you put him or her in? (Answer, Room #1, moving everyone into one room higher). When an infinite number of guests show up, what do you do? Fortunately, a simple solution presents itself (email me for the answer if you are interested). Thinking about infinity is an easy way to break out of the temporality of the American cultural experience.

Another encounter with the future was through science. I was a Chemical Engineering major for a year in Montana and Minnesota (calculus, physics, chemistry) before switching over to the soft sciences in California (history, anthropology, religion). I was always impressed with the half-life of radioactive elements—ranging from nanoseconds to very long periods of time. This micro to macro characteristic of nature is one of the most fascinating features of the cosmos. One of my choice books on this subject, published by the Smithsonian, is *From Quark to Cosmos*. My love for numbers intersects with these cosmic reflections in books like Eli Maor's *History of  $\pi$*  or Martin Rees' *Six Numbers*. The universe appears to be finely tuned in every way.

At the same time I was exposed to a very different future—that of Christian eschatology. These maps envisioned no future at all (the second coming of Christ at any minute) or a dizzying unending future (eternity in heaven or hell). As a teenager I read the best selling pop "futurist" book of the 1970s Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth*. This was supplemented by a diet of End Times films produced by Mark IV productions in Iowa. Initially I found this motivating but very quickly perceived its limited impact on my own Christian discipleship. The world was not a place to escape from but a place to work out one's faith. This was forever embedded in my conscience on my first visit to Mexico and then later among Cambodian refugees in Thailand.

Unlike many of my friends (even today) I felt little dissonance between varying forms of Christian eschatology and my love for science, largely because I didn't perceive a necessary conflict. I have always been comfortable with a scientific view of a universe created and governed by God. I also had a deep appreciation for the scale of events set forth in the Bible, especially the books of Daniel, Isaiah, and Revelation. For me, God's long-term future was one in which events unfolded with redemptive meaning. In a sense, my personal faith has been future-oriented.

At this time I returned to my interest in the year 2000, again through looking back in history. In the mid-1980s much of my academic research was focused on the late nineteenth century, particularly on student and missionary movements. It quickly became apparent to me that the series of events leading up to the year 1900 had profound meaning for planning for the year 2000. So I began to publish articles and eventually a book on the meaning of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century missions for late 20<sup>th</sup> century missions. A central and recurring theme for

both periods was a lack of coordination in planning for world evangelization (Johnson, T. M. (1988). *Countdown to 1900: world evangelization at the end of the nineteenth century*. Birmingham, AL: New Hope.)

All of these things prepared me for an academic interest in the future which came to me through the study of history, specifically, the science of cliometrics—the quantitative analysis of historical data. The seminal study in this field is by Robert Fogel (*Time on the Cross*, 1974). I initially wanted to do a historical study of Christian demographics but became interested in projection methodology—projecting the number of religious adherents in a particular country into the future. The foundation for this method is the United Nations Demographic Database, a masterful project in which 40 professional demographers provide year-by-year projections of every country's population from 1950 to 2050. Rather than settle for a simple linear trend analysis, I developed a way to “edit” the future of religion by taking into account non-mathematical factors in religious demographics (conversions, defections, immigration, emigration). In addition, projections are made for each United Nations region for every 25 years up to AD 2200. Although the method I developed in my dissertation received the support of most of my colleagues, some found it difficult to accept. I tried a number of ways to convince them that this was projection, not mystical prediction. I was only marginally successful until one definitive event took place a few weeks before my oral defense—Robert Fogel won the Nobel Prize in 1993 in econometrics! (For more, see Johnson, T. M., & Barrett, D. B. (2004, November). Quantifying alternate futures of religion and religions. *Futures*, 36(9), 947-960.)

When I moved from Singapore to Richmond, Virginia in summer 1989 one of the first things I did was to attend the World Future Society conference in Washington DC. I immediately felt at home there and later became a professional futurist. I particularly enjoyed a cordial relationship with the late futurist Warren Wagar. Two of Wagar's books had a special meaning for me. First, *A Short History of the Future* outlined three differing views of the future. This book helped me to see the value of scenario writing. I also appreciated Wagar as an atheist who treated religionists fairly in his books. He later wrote a methodological study of the future (*The Next Three Futures*, 1991) that was extremely useful to me in my work. Wagar and I got along partly because we both felt that science fiction should have had a more significant role in the study of the future. Over the years I have found that the majority of my futurist colleagues were introduced to the idea of future studies through science fiction.

One of my most satisfying moments in the WFS was working with Graham Molitor and George Kurian on the Macmillan *Encyclopedia of the Future* project (1996). I was asked to boil down my doctoral dissertation into an article on the Demographic Future of Religion. After completing that article, Molitor phoned me at home on a Saturday morning and told me how seriously he thought it dealt with the future of religion. That article has been the basis for several presentations and articles in professional and academic journals.

An old friend, Jay Gary, later introduced me to Richard Kirby and the World Network of Religious Futurists. While we enjoyed our affiliation with the WNRF, Jay and I felt the need for a forward-looking Christian network, so we co-founded the Christian Futures Network in 1996. I have a special concern for finding budding Christian futurists in their 20s and 30s who can help shape the future (<http://www.christianfutures.com>).

When I met my mentor David Barrett in 1989 he had already been working on a massive chronology of world history, beginning with creation (19 billion years ago, revised to 15 billion, now 13.8 billion) and ending with 10 to the 100<sup>th</sup> power (google) in the future. This chronology project is ongoing and is now double in size from the version published in *World Christian Trends* (Barrett, D. B., Johnson, T. M., Guidry, C. R., & Crossing, P. F. (2001). *World Christian trends, AD 30-AD 2200: interpreting the annual Christian megacensus*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library. My work with the chronology was directed toward editing the quantitative analysis of religious demographics, past, present, and future. I took some preliminary estimates of the presence of Christians on each continent every 100 years from the time of Christ to the year 2200 by the 21 United Nations regions. I used Mcevedy's *Atlas of World Population History* (1978) for the historical demographics and the United Nations Demographic Database for 1950-2200. This analysis was published as a massive set of tables in *World Christian Trends* in 2001. I did this work simultaneously with updating the religious demographics published the same year in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Barrett, D. B.,

Kurian, G. T., & Johnson, T. M. (2001). *World Christian encyclopedia: a comparative survey of churches and religions in the modern world* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press).

It occurred to me a few years later that since I had calculated the numbers of Christians in every UN region, it would be possible to calculate the statistical center of gravity of Christianity. This was the basis for an article I published last year in the *International Review of Mission* based in Geneva, Switzerland. After working out a statistical methodology I mapped the Center of Gravity over the time period AD 30-AD 2200. Interestingly enough, the center starts in Asia Minor and moves across to Europe before plunging into Africa and heading decidedly for Nigeria by AD 2200 (Johnson, T. M., & Chung, S. Y. (2004, April). Tracking global Christianity's statistical center of gravity, AD 33 - AD 2100. *International Review of Mission*, 93(369), 166-181.)

I continue to be interested in the future of the earth, now through the lens of sustainability and environmental stewardship. After years of independent voting in American elections I joined the Green Party, not so much to support a particular platform as to solidify my own commitment to sustainability. I have been particularly influenced by the work of the World Watch Institute.

Another view of the future is through the lens of philosophy. I met Fuller Seminary professor Nancey Murphy ten years ago and began to understand the massive shift in worldview outlined in Murphy's 1996 book *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*. My view of the postmodern tends to be positive because I have focused on the opportunities that it brings and I think there is great potential in the intersection of postmodernity in the North and post-colonialism in the South.

Although my research has been academically based I have a strong interest in changing the future. I reject any kind of deterministic view of society or religion. Before 9/11 I had developed a teaching on Christian-Muslim relations from the time of Muhammad to the present. I have been fascinated by the flowering of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish relations in Andalusia under Muslim rule in the medieval centuries. I find much inspiration and hope in this period and have recently been envisioning a future that recaptures that kind of camaraderie.

In March 2003, after a six-month research trip in Asia, my family and I moved to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, MA to establish the Center for the Study of Global Christianity. I was eager for our demographic research on religion to be tied to an academic institution where our resource library could be used by students and visiting scholars. At the same time, Gordon-Conwell was interested in strengthening its research program. Shortly after arriving in Boston we moved into a large space where our 10,000 books and one million documents were accessible to the community.

Our work at the Center, largely a continuation of the work began by David Barrett in Africa in the 1950s, has evolved in two ways. First, we were able to publish the World Christian Database online in October 2003. For the first time, this put the data behind our publications into the hands of students, scholars, missionaries, church leaders, and journalists. In the first 6 months the site received over 1 million hits from nearly every country in the world. Second, we have become more active in servicing journalists. Since moving to Gordon-Conwell our data has been quoted in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *BBC*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, and dozens of other places. We have also continued a rigorous publishing agenda with tables and charts appearing in numerous journals, books, and encyclopedias.

Our typical research cycle includes the collection of material from around the world, utilizing online directories, church publications, government censuses, scholarly monographs, interviews with informants, and other methods. We then take this new material and integrate with our existing demographic database, which includes countries, religions, peoples, cities, languages, and major civil divisions. This second step requires painstaking attention to how data from various sources relate to each other. We also constantly revise our future projections of religious demographics. Once data is integrated and new projections are produced, the results appear online or in publications. Since it is impossible to do this continually or even annually, we reconcile data in five-year increments (e.g. 2000, 2005).

I am excited by the focus of the School of Leadership Studies on strategic foresight. During the late-90s I served as an adjunct for Dr. Synan, in the Divinity School. I look forward to many years of partnership with the School of Leadership Studies as a co-learner and futurist.

**Related Links**

World Christian Database

<http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org>

Join Us for the next Foresight Conference, <http://www.regent.edu/acad/sls/conferences/home.htm>