

# Perspective

www.mercurynews.com

NEWS ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY FROM THE NEWSPAPER OF SILICON VALLEY

In the Opinion sec

**Community centers**

San Jose needs to get creative  
keep open as many of its 34 cer  
as possible EDITORIAL | 4P

## A VIEW OF THE FUTURE

Understanding religion's role  
in the 21st century helps  
us navigate increasingly  
intertwined communities  
and enable pursuit of peace

By Eric O. Hanson

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the attack of Sept. 11 and the confusion of the Iraq war have left us grasping for ways to make sense of our increasingly complicated, fast-changing world.

How do we understand and plan for the new and future relationships among nation states, multinational corporations, media conglomerates, terrorist groups and other global actors?

We in Silicon Valley have a privileged perspective, thanks to the valley's rapid technological progress and the pluralistic world views of our diverse community.

We grasp that former House Speaker Tip O'Neill and New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman are both right: All future politics will be both local and global. But Friedman's flat world view misses the increasing and diverse impact of religion in the post-Cold War world, from San Jose to Baghdad.

Immigration has greatly enriched Silicon Valley's religious diversity, helping to create a model environment for global understanding. Religion is also shaping Iraq's future, which would be considerably worse without the national moral leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. That the secular Ahmed Chalabi could lead that country was a Defense Department fantasy.

To make sense of the 21st century, we must pay greater attention to

See RELIGION, Page 3P

ERIC O. HANSON, professor of political science at Santa Clara University, is the author of the just-released "Religion and Politics in the International System Today." He wrote this article for the Mercury News.



# RELIGION | Awareness needed in diverse world

Continued from Page 1P

the increasing role of religion in the world.

Politics, economics, the military and the media are not only becoming more global as individual systems. They are also rapidly integrating among themselves. Financial resources foster military might, political campaigns and media concentration. Armies protect weapons of mass destruction, oil fields and language schools. Television develops product demand and disposes populations to support or oppose military intervention. Advances in contemporary technology — such as satellites and cell phones — should be termed “quadruple use” for their impact on politics, economics, the military and communication. No single technology or geographic area makes sense without relating it to many other technologies and geographic areas.

These four global systems constantly create new environments in which individuals and societies must make rapid, complex choices based on perceived personal and communal identities.

The second half of any post-Cold War paradigm must explore the differing roles that various types of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and

Maoist Marxism exhibit in world politics.

Each religion combines elements of spirituality, ritual, scripture and prophecy, morality and law, cultural worldview, doctrine, and organization in a unique, living tradition.

The nature of these combinations makes a great difference in the global pursuit of peace. Each religion exhibits strengths and weaknesses and is influenced by the geographical distribution of its adherents. For example, Korean Buddhists and Christians each have special advantages in mediating between Chinese and Japanese nationalisms. A solution to the Palestinian issue is difficult to imagine without increased dialogue among Jews, Muslims and Christians.

## Interfaith dialogue

From a global perspective, the five most important interfaith dialogues today are: 1) among the three religions of the book; 2) a multi-religious dialogue in China; 3) a multi-religious dialogue in India; 4) a European religious dialogue between pre-existing Judeo-Christian faiths and those of new immigrants; and 5) a similar dialogue with immigrant faiths in North America.

No reasonable person denies that religions have and can do horrible things, from Catholic and Protestant anti-Semitism to Japanese Buddhist support for the 1937 invasion of China. But religious traditions can also have at least three major positive effects in international and national affairs. They can:

- Foster widespread support for the inherent dignity and human rights of each individual.

- Provide inspiration in what seem like hopeless social and political situa-

Today's complicated global society can only escape its increasing economic stratification and global conflict with religious awareness, motivation and public activity.

tions.

- Help maintain stable personal and social identities and values in our 24/7 world.

For these reasons, many Nobel Peace Prize winners testify to the significance of religion in their work, including Shirin Ebadi, Jimmy Carter, Kim Dae Jung, John Hume, Carlos Belo, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, the Dalai Lama, Elie Wiesel, Desmond Tutu, Lech Walesa and Mother

Teresa.

How much simpler it would be to view religion and politics from the perspective of the Paris World Exhibition of 1900. All “reasonable” Western intellectuals would have agreed on the superiority of Western culture, the inevitability of scientific progress and the continuing demise of religion. In the face of such Enlightenment optimism came a century of horrific events, from the senseless slaughter of World War I, to the Rape of Nanking, to the Holocaust, to the Cambodian Killing Fields, to Rwanda.

The 20th century also experienced four great success stories in which religion played a significant role: the Allied victory in World War II, the postwar rapprochement of France and Germany leading to European unification, the end of Western colonialism, and the peaceful end of the Cold War. Survey research has demonstrated that the recent weakening of religion in Europe means the European Union receives less grass-roots support and the extreme anti-immigrant parties of both the left and the right receive more.

While secularism was the safe political bet for the modern West in the Westphalian system that followed the Thirty Years War (1618-48), today's incredibly complicated global society can escape its increasing economic stratification and global conflict only with growing religious awareness, motivation and public activity. Religious and political leaders have separate and autonomous vocations, but, in the 21st century, their successes and failures have become inextricably linked. All of us have a great stake in the success of both.

Any 21st-century solution must maintain the Enlightenment value of religious freedom. But leaving the

## Values of Enlightenment

public square empty is no solution, either.

The 1995 Aum Shinrikyo subway sarin gas attack occurred in one of the world's most secular nations, Japan. Young people look for spiritual inspiration, and some will seek it in death cults if it is not available in its true forms. The world needs more pluralistic toleration, not cultish religion nor fundamentalist secularism like a French *laïcité* that does not allow Muslim women to wear head scarves in its classrooms. Both the French and the U.S. elite educational systems remain far too secular to prepare their graduates for effective leadership in their own increasingly diverse societies, let alone in the Middle East, India, China, Africa and Latin America.

While secularism was the safe political bet for the modern West in the Westphalian system that followed the Thirty Years War (1618-48), today's incredibly complicated global society can escape its increasing economic stratification and global conflict only with growing religious awareness, motivation and public activity. Religious and political leaders have separate and autonomous vocations, but, in the 21st century, their successes and failures have become inextricably linked. All of us have a great stake in the success of both.