

THE FUTURE AS AN ALLUSION:
*What Social Forecasts Tell Us About
Explicit and Implicit Religion*

by

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ABSTRACT

an allusion n. "calls something to mind without mentioning it explicitly"

In the course of embarking on a new research project on the future of Canada, I have been attempting to familiarize myself with the efforts of individuals to address the future. It has become apparent to me that attempts to anticipate the future are characterized by three dominant frameworks or what Charles Glock and Thomas Piazza have called "reality structures." The first and second reality structures involve different degrees of determinism, and typically are found among scientists and other futurists who focus on collective rather than individual futures. By definition, their assumptions about the future do not include religion or other non-naturalistic phenomena. The third reality structure is easily the most common among people across the planet, in large part because it uniquely addresses personal as well as collective futures and, in doing so, draws on a wide range of religious and other non-naturalistic resources. The bases of forecasts associated with this third reality structure may provide a rich source of unobtrusive data that "allude" to or give us important clues to the presence of explicit and implicit religious expressions.

Introduction

In the mid-1970s, I inadvertently started to monitor social trends in Canada. I say “inadvertently” because I conducted a national survey in 1975 which, at the time, was simply a singular, one-time survey. My limited skills as a social forecaster did not allow me to foresee that the 1975 survey would evolve into a series of “Project Canada” national surveys that would be carried out every five years through 2005 – seven in all. In addition, in the mid-1980s, the adult surveys started to be accompanied by complementary, “Project Teen Canada,” national youth surveys that were conducted every eight years through 2008 – four in all. Together, these eleven national surveys provide considerable information into what was happening in Canada from the 1970s through the first decade of the 21st century.

Monitoring Trends: Project Canada Surveys

* 7 Adult...1975 → 2005: > 10,000

* 4 Teen....1984 → 2008: > 15,000

PCS
PROJECT CANADA
SURVEYS

- Readings of
 - Boomers
 - Pre-Boomers
 - Post-Boomers
 - Teens
 - 80s
 - 90s
 - 00s
 - Now
- Together: surveys lots of information on how we have changed & not changed since 1960s

Having generated data about Canada’s last four decades or so, I am now turning my focus to the fairly ambitious task of exploring where Canada will be four decades or so from now – by approximately 2050.

The project has been introducing me to a great number of people who have been attempting to study the future, along with the methodological approaches they have had at their

No lack of efforts

- **Conventional**
- **Less conventional**

disposal. Along the way, I have been taken by the extent to which a wide range of thinkers – many with academic credentials – many more self-anointed – have consciously and less consciously speculated

BACKGROUND: SCIENTIFIC EFFORTS

- **H.G. Wells**
 - * 1902 lecture : future could be scientifically known
 - * 1932 BBC broadcast: "Departments & Professors of Foresight"
- **Ossip K. Flechtheim**
 - * 1943: universities needed to each about the future
 - * coined the term "futurology" as a new science
 - at minimum: develop high probability outcomes
- **Alvin Toffler**
 - * 1966: 1st US university course on future
 - New School for Social Research (NYC)

about the future. They have included, of course, a large number of social scientists – perhaps not surprising given that the three axiomatic goals of sociologists, for example, are allegedly description, explanation, and prediction.

TODAY: FUTURES STUDIES

- Often **interdisciplinary**
- Emphasizes **plural futures**
 - limitations of prediction & probability
- Future: possible, probable, & preferable (3 Ps)
- Also emphasizes "wildcards":
 - low-probability, high impact events
 - e.g., 9-11, Internet

Note: also turns lens on examination of future views...assumptions behind; i.e., looks at futurists, not just their scenarios of the future

Today, the field is officially known as “futures studies.”

The Prominent Approaches to Studying the Future

So far I have uncovered seven major ways in which people have attempted and continue to attempt to study the future. Most of these methodologies are undoubtedly familiar to everyone here at Denton. They variously emphasize the cyclic nature of history, trends and wildcard events, multiple scenarios, and data plus opinion. Moreover, the futures market does not lack for the ongoing presence of people who claim to be “gifted.”

Given the lack of success of individual and social scientific psychics/forecasters, there appears to be a growing consensus that **prediction** – while highly valued – is nonetheless elusive. More realistic goals seem to be to determine what is **possible** and, at best, what is **probable**. Some of the multiple scenario proponents would go so far as to say that the best way to predict the future is to create it.

Methodological Possibilities

1. Historical Analyses
2. Trend Analyses
3. Trend + Emerging Issues Analyses
4. Trend + Emerging + Cross Impact Analyses
5. Multiple Scenario Analyses
6. Data + Opinion Forecasts
7. Forecasts from the Gifted

The Attainable



- **prediction**: highly *valued* but *elusive*
- **short term**: work with *cause* → *effect*; *regression*
- **attainable goal**: *possible outcomes & futures*
- maybe at best = *probable outcomes (high probability)*
- **NB** always *elusive* = **emerging variables**

Futures Thinking and Explicit and Implicit Religion

This last methodological framework draws attention to a potentially important link between social forecasting and religion, in both its explicit and implicit forms. The assertion that we ourselves can create the future carries with it the assumption that we alone are in control of at least a big part of the future. Advocates of such a position typically are thinking of our ability to shape our own lives, or shape a company or some other kind of organization.

Academically-speaking, when we are thinking of futurists, we have in mind people like H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Alvin Toffler, Arthur Clarke, Daniel Bell, John Naisbitt, Edward Wilson, Faith Popcorn, Don Tapscott, and – in Canada, the brilliant eccentric, Frank Ogden. Their ranks swell when we include scholars who are focusing on the future in specific areas – in the case of religion, for example, Comte, Durkheim, Freud, Marx, and contemporaries such as Rodney Stark, Harvey Cox, Grace Davie, Eric Kauffman, and our own Edward Bailey.

For the most part, futurists are thinking of major social trends, and the implications of those trends for more specific areas of life such as religion, economies, education, media, leisure, intergroup relations, and so on.

The rules of the game call for formal futurists to rely on scientific methods, in which projections about the future are based on empirical data that are primarily historical and trend in nature. A century ago, in 1913, H.G Wells called for the scientific study of the future. But he readily acknowledged that, while broad social patterns could possibly be uncovered, predictions specific to individuals would elude science:

The portion of the future that must remain darkest and least accessible is the individual future. Scientific prophecy will not be fortune-telling, whatever else it may be. Those excellent people who cast horoscopes, those illegal fashionable palm-reading ladies who abound so much today, in whom nobody is so foolish as to believe...need fear no competition from scientific prophets (Wells 1913:45-46).

Wells parenthetically made a profound observation about forecasting. Individuals around the world are fascinated with the question of what will happen to them in the future. Science’s inability to provide them with much help means that a vast market exists for such expertise – with little or competition, as Wells notes, “from scientific prophets.”

So it is that when we reflect on the future, our forecasts tend to fall within one of three categories.

The Future Lies Only With Us

First, some people, undoubtedly influenced by science, think in **highly deterministic** terms. “When I finish high school, I expect to become a professor, get married, have children, and live a comfortable life, eventually retire, and at some point die.” Pretty blunt and straightforward, but also a fairly transparent, cause and effect map of one’s lifetime.

Such thinking reflects the historical and trend methods of predicting the future. Phrases such as “history repeats itself” and “we only need to look at the past to see the direction we are headed” reflect such historical and trend inclinations. This deterministic model is also readily evident in the multiple scenario approach to tomorrow, where futures depend on the various outcomes that we ourselves choose to create.

Expectations of Canadian Teenagers: 2008	
<i>% Who Indicate They Expect to...</i>	
Pursue a career	96
Get an education beyond high school	94
Get the job I want when I graduate	87
Have children	94
Get married	90
Stay with the same partner for life	88
Eventually stay home and raise my children	43
Own my own home	97
Be more financially comfortable than my parents	81
Have to work overtime in order to get ahead	43

SOURCE: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Emerging Millennials* 2009:195ff.

For those who work with such highly deterministic views of the future, the proverbial “locus of control” lies with us. We are the proverbial “masters of our fate.” The position is summed up in clichés to the effect that, “Your future is in your hands” and “It’s up to us to create a better future.” Frank Ogden (1993:3) puts things bluntly: “We either change to meet the demands of new times or we vanish to be replaced by others more open to adventure.”

The Future Lies Primarily With Us

There is a **second** and sizable number of people who think **fairly deterministically** when they are looking at individual and social futures. But they **add qualifiers** with words and phrases such as “providing that,” “as long as,” and “unless.”

Any number of social, economic, and political variables come to mind. For example, we all know well that people die and relationships end. Recessions occur and government funding is cut. In some settings, political stability is far from a given. And innovation can shake up just about everything: people who thought they could make a good living indefinitely in the music, newspaper, publishing, mail, and travel businesses had no way of knowing that they were about to be blind-sided and in some instances devastated by the Internet. And that’s just the short-list of casualties.

In the parlance of futurists, these kinds of deterministic forecasts allow for intervening variables or what are commonly referred to as “wild card factors” and “emerging issues.” We are readily familiar with them.

- When my mother and father were young children, how could they possibly have known that their lives would be dramatically affected by the early deaths of their fathers...followed just a few years later by a Great Depression...followed almost immediately by a second major World War?
- Who among us would have thought that so many couples we knew who seemingly were so happy in their early 30s would no longer be together by the time they turned 40?
- How many of us would ever have thought during our first few years of school that we would end up with PhD’s, which in turn would have such an important impact on our lives?

As we all know well, those “wild card” factors in turn can interact with any number of related variables – leading futurists to speak of “cross impact” effects. I may have started out as a Protestant minister with a fairly conservative outlook and lifestyle that saw me sticking pretty close to home. But in the course of enjoying higher education, I became a professor, author, and world traveller, with an outlook and lifestyle quite different from what I discovered in re-reading my old teenage diary a few years back. ...That person, by the way, seemed like a very nice, clear-thinking, idealistic person. But he was no longer me....

The Future Lies Primarily With Us, Plus

There is a **third** category of people who also tend to think sequentially about the future and recognize that unanticipated factors may intervene. But they also are inclined to see outcomes – particularly outcomes that are days or weeks or years away – as being **dependent on more than personal and social sources**. At this point, such observers cross a line where they have to leave scientifically-minded futurists behind. Such a parting of the ways is driven by necessity: credentialed futurists have to play by the scientific rules. But as H.G. Wells acknowledged, that isn't to say that an extensive market for personal forecasts does not exist. Consequently, large numbers of people turn to add-ons to science and to people who champion them.

Here, there is consideration of additional, non-naturalistic factors that may have an impact on the future – factors that are external to us. They may include such things as God or fate, chance or synchronicity, luck or the lack of it, the position and movement of the stars and planets, maybe intuition or some kind of sixth sense.

The **superstitious** athlete, for example, may not shave or change his sweat socks when his team is on a winning streak. Presumably there is “something” extraneous to his performance and that of the team that is having an influence on the club's success.

Religion, of course, is one of the most prominent external factors that people draw on as they look to the future. For example, in the 1950s, an American songwriter, Stuart Hamblen, wrote these words that were part of a gospel song that was highly popular in North America over the next few decades:

*I know not what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.
It's a secret known only to Him.*

Hamblen's lines sum up two very widespread ideas among many people who value faith – that (1) God is in control of the future and (2) God alone knows what lies ahead. Here the common clichés include statements such as, “The future is in God's hands” and “God only knows what the future holds.” A frequently-quoted line attributed to Netherlands war hero Corrie ten Boom sums things up this way: “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”

Perceived Sources of Influence: Canadian Teenagers, 2008

*% Seeing as Influencing Their Lives
“A Great Deal” or “Quite a Bit”*

The way you were brought up	92
Your own willpower	89
Your mother specifically	89
Your friend(s)	86
Your father specifically	82
The characteristics born with	76
Another adult(s) you respect	65
Music	64
What you read	49
Your teacher(s)	45
Television	41
God/some other supernatural force	40
Luck	39
The Internet	39
What people in power decide	36
Advertising	27

SOURCE: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Emerging Millennials* 2009:39.

This kind of thinking or theology does not preclude individuals believing that they and other people play important roles in shaping personal and collective outcomes. Unexpected variables also may well appear. But the assumption is that, ultimately, an omniscient and omnipotent God both knows and controls the future. That's why God-believing mortals supplement hard work with considerable supplication. Significantly, their ranks have historically included such ardent predestination proponents as Calvinists.

Sociologist Peter Berger noted some time ago in his book, *A Rumor of Angels* (1969), that there has been age-old belief in the order of the universe. It is reflected today in common assertions to the effect that "there is a purpose for everything" or that "things will work out okay." Such ideas are sustained by the assumption that there is something beyond this world in which we can trust, that is in ultimate control of life and history (Bibby 2002:172).

Little wonder, then, that large numbers of people who want to feel that the future is under control opt to believe in a Supreme Being who created the universe and oversees it. For such people, the thoughts of someone like the German theologian and pastor, Helmut Thielecke (1960) are reassuring – that back of life there is a God who brought history into being, oversees it, and will be there at its end to greet it.

But the available supplements to a deterministic framework for anticipating the future hardly stop with superstition and religion. As we all know well, for thousands of years people have maintained that **astrology** provides insight into the future. The activities of the stars and planets have been seen as having an effect on what happens on Earth. Even today, some 65% of Canadian adults and teenagers read their horoscopes at least occasionally – many "just in case" the reading turns out to be fairly accurate.

Still further, belief that the universe has order is reflected in the ongoing inclination for large numbers of people of all ages in Canada and elsewhere to think some individuals have **special psychic powers** that enable them to predict future events. What's more, no less than 5 in 10 Canadian adults and teens say that they themselves have anticipated an event before it happened (precognition).

Supernatural Beliefs of Canadian Teenagers: 2008	
<i>"Do you believe..."</i>	
% Indicating "Yes, I definitely do" or "Yes, I think I do"	
In life after death	75%
God or a higher power exists	68
Good people will be rewarded after they die	61
Miraculous healing sometimes occurs	57
You have experienced an event before it happened	56
In astrology	47
We can have contact with the spirit world	46
In ESP	44
Some people have psychic powers	43
You have felt the presence of God or a higher power	39

SOURCE: Reginald W. Bibby, *The Emerging Millennials* 2009:167, 175.

To sum things up, social forecasts on the part of the experts and everyone else tend to be of three varieties. The first emphasize that **the future lies only with us**, the second that **the future lies primarily with us**, because unanticipated factors may intervene, and the third that **the future depends primarily us, plus** – with the “plus” involving additional, non-naturalistic factors.

In delineating such outlooks, I am reminded of the thinking of Charles Glock and Thomas Piazza (1978:60) some three decades ago. They pointed out that, when individuals deal with questions of meaning, they draw on “assumptions they hold about the forces which govern what happens in the world.” Glock and Piazza referred to such assumptions as “reality structures.” They wrote that that they “required no new research to specify at least some of the assumptions,” noting that “philosophers, theologians, scientists, and pseudoscientists have been speculating for centuries about forces which influence human events and shape social life.” Glock and Piazza suggested that prevalent assumptions that structure reality include emphases on *individual efforts*, *the supernatural* (e.g., God, fate, luck), and *natural factors* (e.g., heredity, history, culture, power relations).

Borrowing the language of Glock and Piazza, these three frameworks for anticipating the future that I have delineated might be viewed as three kinds of “reality structures.”

The Future as an Allusion

Given the existence of these three structures, I want to pose a fairly straightforward hypothesis: ***how people view the future provides an unobtrusive indicator of the absence or presence of religion and its functional equivalents.*** One dictionary defines “allusion” as “*calling something to mind without mentioning it explicitly.*” In speaking about “the future of an allusion,” I am arguing that our views of the future provide clues or “allusions” to religion or the lack of it.

For starters, the belief that “the future lies only or primarily with us” can be expected to characterize futurists, other scientists, and individuals who subscribe to scientific methodology. Their analyses of the future, by methodological definition, exclude factors that do not meet the criterion of being empirically observable. As a result, their anticipated outcomes reflect causal relationships between identifiable factors.

For example:

- Alvin Toffler combines global data with provocative ideas in putting together his classic trilogy of *Future Shock*, *The Third Wave*, and *Power Shift* in the 70s, 80s, and 90s respectively.
- John Naisbitt and Faith Popcorn use social scientific methods to identify major trends characterizing American life – while yours truly attempts to do the same thing in Canada (Bibby 2006);
- Comte, Marx, and Freud proclaim the eventual demise of religion, with their perspectives ruling out in advance the possible intervention of the gods.

These links between anticipated outcomes and researchers are straightforward. We know the nature of their prophecies because we know the nature of their method. The dependent variable is directly related to the independent variable. To know one is to know the other. The adoption of a scientific mindset carries with it the exclusion of any causal role for players such as the gods, the stars, and luck.

What begins to become interesting is when we focus on how some people view their personal futures, and discover that their thoughts point to similar, naturalistic assumptions. The adoption of what is essentially a scientific outlook that dismisses non-observable causal factors. can also be seen, for example, in:

- an individual in his 20s who fairly stridently informs us how he expects his biography to unfold, with no acknowledgment of any constraining or enabling factors;
- the English professor who says that, when he dies, he wants and expects people to “celebrate his life” in a local hotel, with the “MC” a friend from the History Department;
- a young woman who says she expects to live a long and happy life, as long as she eats well, stays fit, and surrounds herself with family and friends;

These kinds of forecasts of people point to people who, personally or professionally, make use of reality structures that see the future as solely or primarily dependent “on us.” In some cases, there may be some allowance for “wildcards,” in other cases there is not. The forecasts bear no trace of religion, presuming that we are “the masters of our fate.” If additional factors matter, they are either unacknowledged or seen as outside the boundaries of science.

However, what is intriguing for the researcher to learn is that people who believe that the future lies primarily or only with us constitute a minority in most countries in the world – including places like Canada. Virtually everywhere, the majority of people “top up” deterministic models of the future with religious and other non-naturalistic supplements. Why? Because they are fascinated with their personal futures and are open to answers.

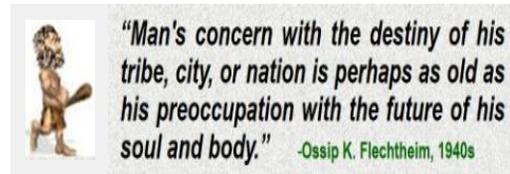
In short, most people do not live “religion-free” and “supplement-free” lives. As Durkheim (1965: 477-479) so clearly recognized, science moves too slowly for impatient people who want to fill in information gaps.

What seemingly is far more prevalent is **“the future is primarily dependent on us, plus”** reality structure. Evidence of its presence can be found not only in the widespread adoption of religion across the globe, but also in the extensive “market” that exists for a wide range of people who can provide unique insights into the future – be they credentialed or otherwise.

So it is that the researcher who is exploring explicit and implicit religions – along with their functional equivalents – finds a gold-mine of data in the form of how people see the future – especially their personal futures. Virtually anyone who has a view of the future constitutes “walking data.”

Let me offer a brief smattering of examples from people I know personally....

- A middle-aged woman has no formal involvement with organized religion. Yet, as she looks to the future, she envisions a day when she will join her deceased family members who are currently in heaven doing all the things they enjoyed here on earth. There is no formal theological rhyme or reason to her thinking – just “folk religion” at its best. But it all comes out when she speaks of what will happen to her after she dies.
- He is all excited as he takes \$400 out of his bank account, leaving a balance of under \$100. He is on his way to the casino to spend an extra-large amount of money because tonight, he says, “I feel lucky.” His phrase is fairly poignant, revealing that what he thinks might happen is not dependent upon him, but rather on some unknown “external” forces that seemingly will pitch in to bring about a positive outcome.
- Her nephew is getting married and everyone is predictably excited. But as she leaves the wedding reception, the older lady murmurs to another relative, “It’s not going to last – I just know it.” About a decade later, “her gut feeling” was realized.
- A close relative frequently has dreams that she is convinced inform her both of something that has happened or something that is going to happen. Sometimes she is wrong, sometimes she is right.
- The student didn’t have quite as much time as he needed to study for the final exam. “But,” he said, “God knows my needs and will help me to get the grade I have to have in the course.” ...That’s what you call, “us, plus”.



We have been FASCINATED with the future

- what lies ahead: e.g., relationships, career, finances, health; beyond death
- everyday life: e.g., daily events, interaction, weather, sports, travel, health, safety

Is important to be able to PREDICT the future

- curiosity: want to know what lies ahead
- enhanced living: personal & social well-being; aware of best choices
- organizationally: effectiveness, success

Consequently: a MARKET for expertise exists

- historically: want to know what lies ahead
- wide range: anointed, self-appointed, un-credentialed, credentialed
- today: information age → explosion of alleged experts

- Then there is the person sitting beside me on the plane who is convinced that her trip across Canada to spend two weeks with someone she met briefly will be worth it. Why? “Because,” she says in confidence, “that’s the way the stars are aligned.”
- And why did David Beckham forsake Europe and go to America to play for the Los Angeles Galaxy? In anticipating his possible impact, he told ESPN in an early interview, “I’m coming there to make a difference,” Did Beckham think it was his “fate” – his “destiny” – to popularize soccer in America? You be the judge....

Concluding Thoughts

I may mention to you over lunch on Sunday that, following the Denton conference, I plan to travel to London and then fly back to Canada. I can speak with a measure of certainty about what I plan to do and what is probably going to happen. You may think to yourself, “*Bibby is actually a ‘future lies with us’ kind of person.*” Not much ambivalence about his plans for his immediate future.

However, in reality, I am well aware that any number of factors could disrupt my plans. I could miss my train, get stuck in the underground, have my flight delayed. If I mentioned those things to you, you might think, “*Actually, Bibby’s reality structure sounds more like it is of ‘the future lies primarily with us’ variety.*”

But unknown to you, out of habit as much as conscious faith, along the way I may well find myself “thinking” a quiet prayer to the effect of, “Lord, please get me back home safely.” That silent supplication would suggest that, ultimately, I believe that God is in control of what takes place. In the process, I am “busted” as having *a future primarily lies with us, plus* reality structure.

In one closing line, I think that the frameworks we all use to anticipate the future tell us a great deal about the presence or absence of religion and its functional counterparts in our lives – about reality structures that are explicit and reality structures that are implicit.

As such, “the future as an allusion” could have the potential to offer us considerable research fodder for understanding the ongoing presence of explicit and implicit religion.

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