

APF Student Award 2025 Submission
Tristan Markwell, University of Houston Masters Program
Future of Religion in the US 2050

1: Using AI to Create a Foresight Game

For Futures Research, I chose to do my semester-long project on the Future of Religion in the United States through 2050. Having the opportunity to practice all parts of a strategic foresight engagement using the Framework Foresight methodology allowed me to dive deep into the domain.

As our final project, we were assigned to find some way to communicate the findings of our research to the hypothetical client. This could be a standard presentation, but we were encouraged to do something creative. I chose to make a board game that could demonstrate the key dynamic of my scenario (that the decline of religion meant the erosion of lots of invisible labor and social ties that help prevent and ameliorate social ills). The game allows people to experience the scenarios via simulation in a way that a narrative or report would struggle to convey. The game even includes the ability to invest in foresight to better understand the challenges that may arise in future rounds.

A 10-minute demo is available at <https://youtu.be/mOc-e2GXUjY?si=maAsmsaZZITgIEtR>. The game is available for free as a mod for Tabletop Simulator at <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=3144058849>.

A screenshot of the game in the tool is below.



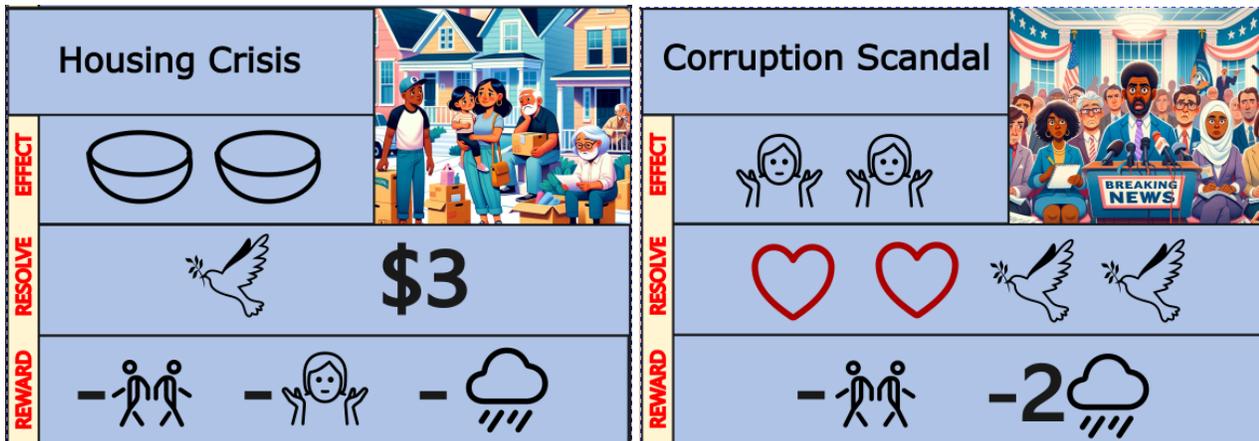
2: AI Methodology

I knew that creating a board game meeting my own quality standards in 4 weeks would require more time and effort than I could possibly spare, especially the ideation phase. I was able to greatly accelerate the process by using an AI chatbot to test ideas, work on expanding content, and more. Being able to rapidly iterate through ideas and refine the concept with my own expertise and taste allowed full design of a game very clearly showing both the central issue of the coming crisis in the social fabric and how the different scenarios affect the acuity of the issue.

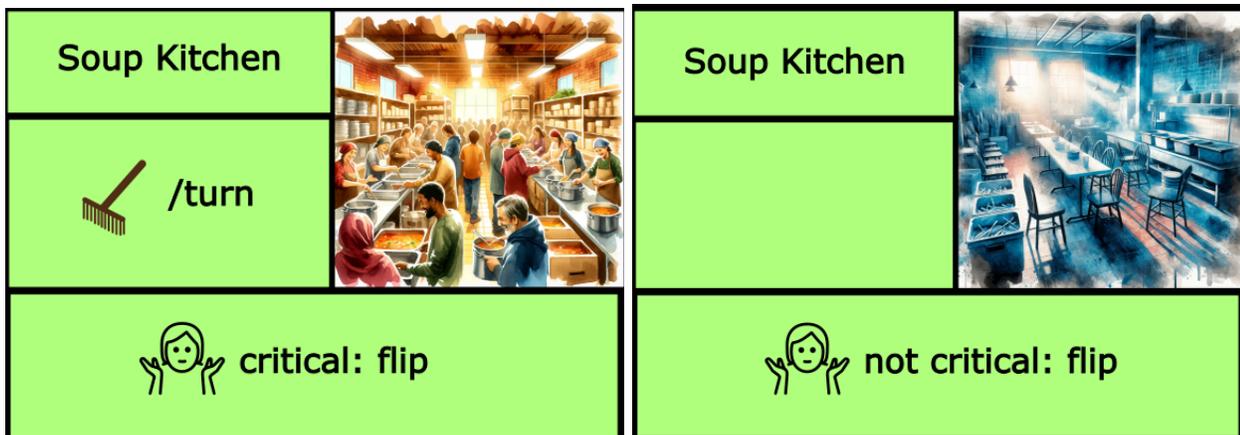
My full log of game development conversation with the chatbot is available at https://docs.google.com/document/d/1sC63_O0OTvYtXaYS45ppughN_NL9WXikhhIFXKUBPMY/edit?usp=sharing

I also used AI to develop most of the art assets for the game. I worked to define a consistent style for each type of card, refined prompts, and iterated until the results were acceptable. Open-source icons and images for the different religious populations were used (AI struggles to avoid offensive stereotypes of religious groups), and each card was then manually built.

Examples of two of the 30 event cards:



Example of one of the four two-sided institution cards:



3: Spring Gathering Presentation

The work of using AI to rapidly develop a game for teaching futures was recognized as sufficiently novel that I was invited to present at the Spring Gathering for the University of Houston Foresight program.



Appendix 1: Overview/Domain

The rest of the submission contains the other artifacts for my project, to show the overall work that went into it and supported the findings that were incorporated into the game.

My focus was on the role of religion in the lives of Americans. This included demographic changes like aging and immigration, as well as changes in religious affiliation and changes in practice among the affiliated. Religious infrastructure, from buildings to schools to professional clergy, was also in scope. I chose 2050 as my horizon because I wanted to make sure there was time for demographic changes to make a real difference. I chose Pew Research as my hypothetical client due to their interest in the topic. My domain map is below.

Domain Map

Type your domain topic in the center circle and add primary categories in the colored circles. Sub-categories go in the light circles of corresponding to the primary category color. Delete or add circles as needed.



Appendix 2: Current Assessment

Looking at the current state of the entire domain demonstrated clearly that the domain is already in the middle of significant, turbulent change that affects the country from private homes to the White House:

<p>CURRENT CONDITIONS</p> <p><i>Identify 5-10 current “hot topics” in your domain. Including a link to a source.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● People are abandoning Christianity privately or deconstructing publicly [link]● Almost a quarter of Americans report having switched religions [link]● US immigrants are mostly Christian but an increasing number are Hindu or Muslim [link]● A quarter of those “shopping for churches” do so for political reasons [link]● Most Christian denominations skew old compared to “nones” and non-Christians [link]● Around a quarter of Americans volunteer formally and about half informally [link]● Old churches are being converted into housing, event spaces, and businesses [link]● Non-religious meditation is now normalized and monetized [link]● “Evangelical” is increasingly a cultural/political marker instead of religious [link]
<p>STAKEHOLDERS</p> <p><i>Identify 5-10 external stakeholder groups and describe why they are important to the domain in a phrase or short sentence.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Political parties: their strategies re: issues and messaging are highly tuned to what matters most to people● Religious private schools: these teach over 3M students and employ 300K+ people [link]● Non-profits: these often use churches for free space and rely on volunteers to accomplish their missions● Professional clergy: these people depend on congregants for their income● Media: religiously-oriented media is an important category, and religious attention is a kind of marketing (<i>Oppenheimer</i> in India, <i>Sound of Freedom</i> in US)
<p>RECENT HISTORY</p> <p><i>Identify 5-10 important events [include the historical date to your best estimate] in your domain in the last 10 years.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● 2014: The Mars Hill megachurch in Seattle collapses as its leader Mark Driscoll resigns after accusations of abusive leadership● 2016: Donald Trump is elected President with 80% of the evangelical vote● 2017: Q drops his first post about Democratic Satanic cannibalistic child molesters, marking the beginning of QAnon and its integration with Christian apocalyptic conspiracy thinking● 2017: 26 people are killed in the Sutherland Springs church shooting in Texas, the nation’s deadliest mass shooting in a house of worship● 2018: Congress bars the Navy from appointing an atheist chaplain● 2023: the Asbury Revival, a two-week non-stop prayer session at a university in Kentucky, goes viral

Appendix 3: Research Part 1 – Scanning

I scanned for signals of change in the domain. I gathered dozens of scan hits, and analyzed several of them in more depth. One example is below. I also had the opportunity to interview two experts at the forefront of religion’s changing role in society: [Dr Ryan Burge](#), pastor, professor, and author; and [Rev Paul Raushenbush](#), President and CEO of Interfaith Alliance. These interviews helped refine how I saw the domain.

TITLE	A Pride flag ban sparks accusations of betrayal in tiny Michigan city	AUTHOR	Allan Lengel				
STEEP CATEGORIES	Social Technology Economic Environmental Political	KEYWORDS	Immigration, Religious/demographic “sorting”, culture war				
URL	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/a-pride-flag-ban-sparks-accusations-of-betrayal-in-tiny-michigan-city/ar-AA1gO5E9						
TYPE	Actual Event New Trend New Cycle New Plan Potential Event New Info New Issues						
BRIEF DESCRIPTION	The all-Muslim mayor and city council of Hamtramck Michigan (which has become majority Muslim due to immigration) passed a law in June banning the display of “non-official” flags on city property, widely seen as targeting pride flags. Local progressives feel betrayed because they used government to welcome and support Muslim migrants and expected reciprocity.						
HOW COULD THE FUTURE BE DIFFERENT AS A RESULT?	This points to the future possibility of majority religions on a micro scale in the US in a way that hasn’t been seen in the past. Many of these religions bring a particular set of politics, and these local majorities may lead to an acceleration of the political “sorting” we’ve seen in recent decades, and the potential of escalation into more intense religious-based conflict.						
POTENTIAL IMPLICATION(S) FOR CLIENT	Pew may want to better track religious affiliation at a local level, especially centers of immigration, as well as the religious mix of various government bodies.						
HORIZON	H1 confirming <i>baseline scenario</i>	H2 resolving <i>between scenarios</i>	H3 creating <i>new scenario</i>	IMPACT <i>0 to 5</i>	3	PLAUSIBILITY <i>0 to 5</i>	4
	Non-Christian majorities are a new reality, this is a taste of the cultural/political conflict in store to see how different they are allowed to be			NOVELTY <i>0 to 5</i>	4	CREDIBILITY <i>0 to 5</i>	5

Appendix 4: Research Part 2 – TIPP

With the guidance of the scan hits and the interviews, I compiled Trends, Issues, Plans, and Projections for the domain. This showed the key social fault lines that religious issues are currently exacerbating, and also points to demographic/affiliation changes (especially the rise in people identifying with no religion) as a dominant part of the story.

<p>TRENDS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since 1990, the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian has decreased from about 90% to the mid-60% range. (link) • In 2019, Protestant church openings were decreasing and closures were increasing compared to 2014. Now 3 churches are closing for every 2 that open. (link) • From 2002 to 2022, the number of students enrolling in Masters of Divinity programs (a proxy for seeking a career in ministry) has decreased by nearly 30% (link) • Attendance and donations per congregation have held steady since the before COVID, but the activity is increasingly online (link) • An increasing number of US cities are permitting the broadcast of the Muslim call to prayer (link) • Formal volunteering has held steady in the 25%-30% rate over the last 20 years, except for a slight dip during COVID (link) • Antisemitic threats and attacks have increased by about 5-fold over the last decade, and half of incidents targeting institutions are against synagogues. (link) • The percentage of Americans who meditate weekly has held steady at about 40% between 2007 and 2014. (link)
<p>ISSUES (CURRENT & EMERGING)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the Supreme Court continue to expand religious liberty, or will other rights take precedence? • Will evangelical churches continue to align with right-wing culture warriors, Trumpism, and conspiracy theories like QAnon after Donald Trump leaves politics, or will they refocus on the gospel? • Will governments take over the community support done by religions (soup kitchens etc), or will they leave them to the private sector or remain undone? • Will churches be able to maintain their tax-exempt status going forward, or will there be too much public pressure to remove it? • Will climate change fuel large-scale changes in religious practice as society shifts, or are there non-religious outlets for this? (link)
<p>PLANS > Key insights</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has 26 temples announced or under construction in the United States, a 31% increase over the current number dedicated. This huge investment suggests a confidence in stable or increasing membership. (link) • Oklahoma is planning to open a publicly-funded Catholic charter school next year, the first in the nation. This increasing blurring of the line between church and state could continue, or lead to an effective backlash. (link)
<p>PROJECTIONS > Key insights</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Modeling the Future of Religion in America</i> by the Pew Research Center projects that, at current rates of religious switching, the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian may be cut in half from 64% to 35%, and the number who identify with no religion may become a majority of the population (30% to 52%) by 2070. (link)

Appendix 5: Synthesis Part 1– Drivers

From all the inputs identified in the previous section, I synthesized all my research into six key drivers of change for religion in the US:

DRIVER NAME	DESCRIPTION	INPUTS
1 Losing Our Religion	Christianity is transitioning from a dominant to minority religion in the US. Those without religious affiliation are growing the fastest, and some minority religions are also growing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Projected drop in Christian identification (link) Protestant churches closing nationwide (link) Drops in people seeking divinity degrees (link) Muslim calls to prayer broadcast in some cities (link)
2 Culture War Blues	The culture war has become deeply intertwined with religious institutions over past decades. Some are re-evaluating these strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Church distances itself from “Sound of Freedom” member (link) Muslim-majority town bans Pride flags (link) Fights over school textbooks using the Bible (link) Oklahoma plans religious charter school (link)
3 Prophets of Profit	Businesses are co-opting spiritual practices and language to create more meaning for workers and consumers. (Hat tip to Bronwyn Williams)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apple’s 5-minute commercial about appeasing a personified Mother Nature (link) Ritualist - creating rituals for companies (link) Sacred Design - “translating ancient wisdom and practices into products” (link)
4 Just the Good Parts	People are increasingly trying to replace the social benefits of churches (especially social mixing, public service, and benign patriotism) using non-religious institutions. These sometimes take quasi-religious forms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Citizen University and its Civic Saturdays - church analogue for civics (link) More Perfect Union - secular service and leadership (link) Formal volunteering has been holding steady for 20 years (link)
5 Religious Weirding	As traditional religions lose prominence, people hungry for spirituality and belonging increasingly experiment with ideas long on the fringe.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Religious rituals at Burning Man (link) Satanic Temple forms after-school clubs (link) Many churches are becoming a hotbed of conspiracy theories (link)
6 Spiritual Machines	Changing technology is providing new ways to engage with religious content and practices. Acceptance will be uneven, and resistance will be common.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apps to make prayer a gamified, connected, social experience (link) Chatbots that use GenAI to speak with a certain religious viewpoint (link) Online church become more than just remote viewing (link) Robotic automation of ritual (link)

Appendix 6: Synthesis Part 2 – Driver Cross-Impact

With the drivers developed, I examined the role of each driver on the others to determine which were dominant. The matrix below shows the magnitude and direction of the impact of the row driver on the column driver. This reinforced the preliminary finding from the TIPP's that the decline of Christianity overwhelms the other drivers.

	Losing Our Religion	Culture War Blues	Prophets of Profit	Just the Good Parts	Religious Weirding	Spiritual Machines
Losing Our Religion	X	++	+	++	++	-
Culture War Blues	+	X	0	+	++	0
Prophets of Profit	+	-	X	+	0	+
Just the Good Parts	+	--	0	X	-	0
Religious Weirding	+	+	-	+	X	+
Spiritual Machines	-	+	+	0	++	X

Legend

- ++** Strongly Reinforces
- +** Reinforces
- 0** Neutral
- Contradicts
- Strongly contradicts

Appendix 7: Scenarios Part 1 — Baseline Drivers

I developed three scenarios based on the Framework Foresight archetypes. I'm including what I developed for the Baseline scenario as representative of this work.

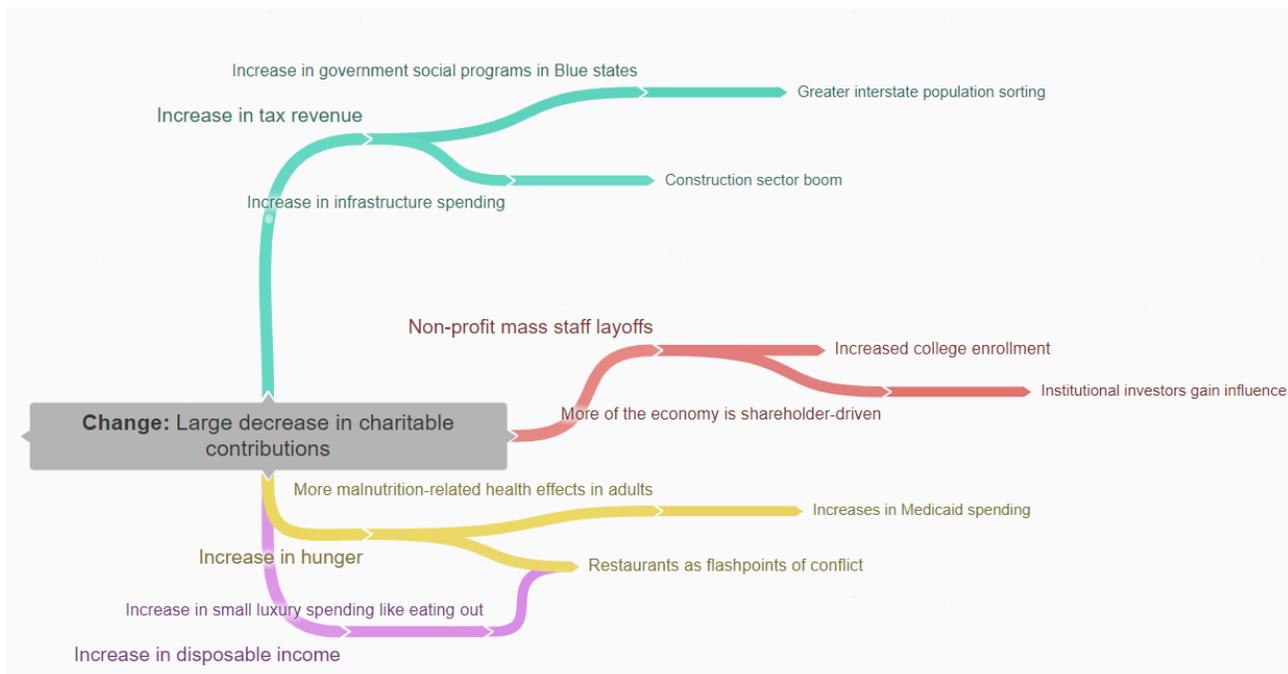
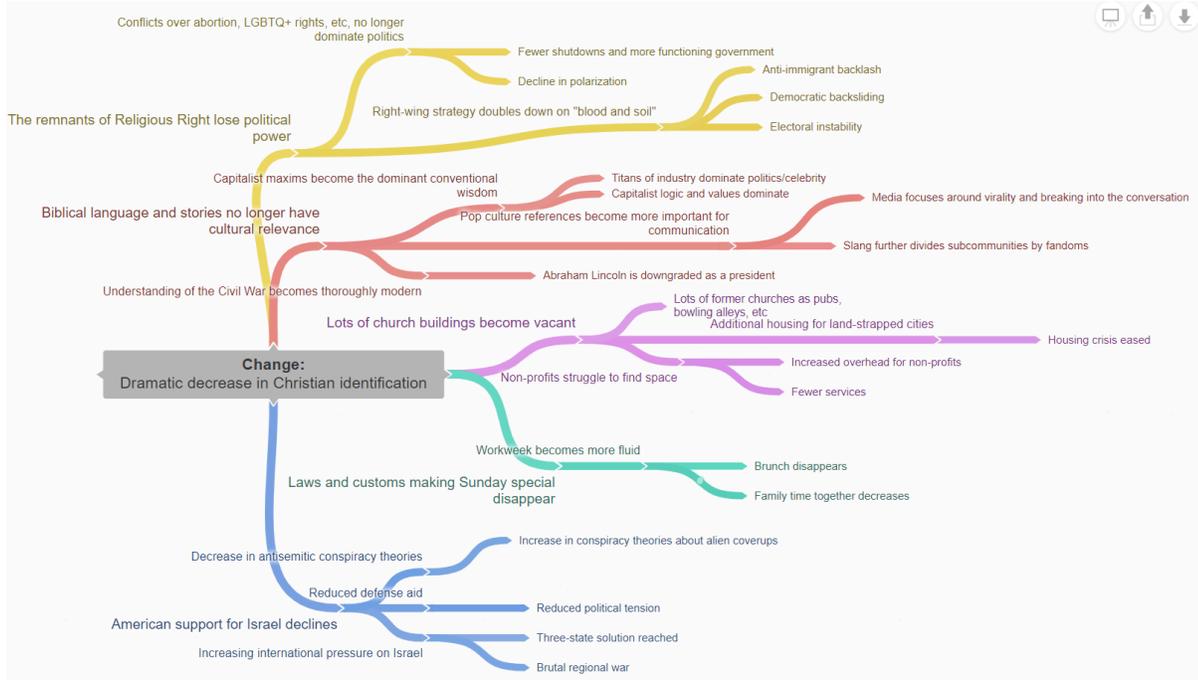
YOUR DRIVERS	BASELINE <i>one to two sentences</i>
1 Losing Our Religion	The percent of Americans that identify as Christian falls below 50% for the first time since the country's founding. The religiously unaffiliated approach 40% of the population, accelerating a massive cultural change.
2 Culture War Blues	Topics like abortion and gender identity continue to spark conflict in schools and around elections. An increasing number of religious leaders will try to extricate themselves from these conflicts and encourage their members to do the same.
3 Prophets of Profit	Corporations will use the decline in external religious observance to consolidate meaning around themselves. This will be seen in advertising, rituals for employees, and products that take religious form/content without the doctrine.
4 Just the Good Parts	Big and small community service and civics groups will continue to form. This will be a source of meaning for a small part of the population, and will mean that most of the traditional work of churches (food pantries, community cleanups, etc) will continue to happen voluntarily.
5 Religious Weirding	Formerly fringe religious identifications and practices will continue to grow. We will see more members of "protest religions" like the Temple of Satan, new QAnon-style add-on quasi-religions, mixing and matching of appealing rituals, and people who are "really into" astrology.
6 Spiritual Machines	Technology's advance will be a small but growing part of religious observance. Increases in remote participation, online/app-only experiences and AI chatbots to reinforce/destroy/convert faith will become more common, with a declining group of holdouts viewing these as illegitimate.

Appendix 8: Scenarios Part 2 – Baseline Summary

<p>FUTURE OF <i>Add title of your project (including year). E.g. Future of Public Health in 2035</i></p>	<p>Future of US Religion in 2050</p>
<p>SCENARIO TITLE <i>Fun/memorable name of your scenario</i></p>	<p>The Widening Gyre (Yes I'm going to try to make all of my scenario titles quotes from WB Yeats's "The Second Coming" and not be overly pretentious)</p>
<p>THIS IS A WORLD IN WHICH... <i>3-4 sentences that highlight the key elements of the scenario</i> <i>HINT: This should be more than just a restating of the driver outcomes - what does the world look like when these drivers interact?</i></p>	<p>America is no longer a Christian-majority nation, with wide-ranging consequences. Courting conservative Christians is no longer a viable national electoral strategy, and many people have sorted themselves by moving or changing their religious status, with the culture war continuing to rage at the boundaries. Many other traditional religions will increase their membership, but a much larger group will be left to meet their spiritual needs in unconventional ways; America will, naturally, use the gap to sell products (spiritual wellness industry) and reinforce employee loyalty.</p>
<p>WHALE <i>Can you identify the "whale" of the system that runs this scenario?</i> <i>Hint: The Whale is the biggest influence on the system. Your world needs this ____ for the rest to happen</i></p>	<p> Definitely the decline in Christian identification is the whale (don't worry, no Jonah jokes). The gap it leaves behind is the tailwind for most of the other drivers, as people search for meaning on their own and groups in society try to either take advantage of this or mitigate the consequences.</p>
<p>CLIENT PERSPECTIVE <i>What's your immediate feeling on how your client will react to this scenario?</i></p>	<p>Frustration/confusion. Pew Research is used to studying religion in a tidy way - people belong to one or none. A future where many people engage in a number of different religious/spiritual practices, with huge diversity in self-identification, may require very different approaches to study.</p>

Appendix 9: Implications Part 1

Once the scenarios were finished, I developed some implications based on the Collapse scenario. This started with a Futures Wheel exercise where some of the key changes were expanded out to first-, second-, and third-order effects. Two examples are below.



Appendix 10: Implications Part 2

In addition to the Futures Wheel implications, I dove deep on the implications to identify those that would be most important (high impact, high likelihood in the scenario) and most provocative (high impact, but low likelihood in the scenario).

<p>SCENARIO</p> <p><i>Pick either Baseline or Alternative Future</i></p>	<p>Collapse: Things Fall Apart</p> <p>The loss of Christianity as a common cultural reference point leaves mostly capitalism to fill in the gap. This gives corporations more power and influence but also erodes much of the invisible safety net that was protecting their workers from problems like loneliness, hunger, and homelessness. Traditional religion gives negative social cachet, so people revert to more tribal forms of cultural identity.</p>
<p>CATEGORY</p> <p><i>Pick a category to focus the implications on (refer back to your client; what part of their organization will either care the most, or be the most impacted by the forecast (e.g. strategy, human sources, regulatory)</i></p>	<p>Religion Research - this is the group at Pew that is responsible for conducting research that informs discussion about the current state of religion in the United States (link). They need to understand how the landscape is changing so they can adjust their surveys and where they're looking for signals.</p> <p>I'm focusing specifically on implications for religious identification, because that forms the buckets that drive their analysis, and the forces driving change in affiliation are the most powerful driver.</p>
<p>MOST IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS</p> <p><i>3-5 Most Important Implications from anywhere on your Futures Wheels</i></p>	<p>Increase in loneliness: we've been seeing this trend grow since the 90s with Putnam's <i>Bowling Alone</i> and the 2023 announcement of a loneliness epidemic, but further increases could have serious implications for life satisfaction and mental health.</p> <p>Non-profits facing increased overhead / decreased resources: so much of what's done centrally in other countries is done outside the state in the US. If this work gets more expensive and there are fewer dollars to work with, it could become significantly more miserable to be poor in America.</p> <p>Decrease in birth rate: America is significantly below the replacement rate. Further decreases would threaten the kind of demographic collapse seen in Italy, starting to show up in China, etc. Immigration demand is high and a good solution, but there are political and social difficulties in significantly raising the rate of immigration.</p>
<p>MOST PROVOCATIVE IMPLICATIONS</p> <p><i>3-5 Most Provocative Implications from anywhere on your Futures Wheels</i></p>	<p>Restaurants becoming conflict flashpoints: if more Americans are going hungry at the same time restaurants are providing more flashy/deluxe experiences to capture the discretionary income of people who used to donate it, it's possible that there could be more violent incidents, protests, panhandling, etc. in and near restaurants.</p> <p>Greater election instability from "blood and soil" Right: we've already seen strong indications that large portions of the Right consider preserving the "real America" either so important or divinely foreordained that it justifies ignoring unfavorable election results. If this infects enough of the Republican Party, it could lead to an increase in election-related violence and a decrease in peaceful transitions of power.</p> <p>Disappearance of Sunday brunch: if the rhythm of the week disappears and Sunday stops being a day when professionals don't have to work, then special weekly offerings and rituals like the Sunday Brunch could go extinct.</p>

Appendix 11: Options

Once the implications were developed, I could recommend action to the hypothetical client to prepare for possible outcomes. The elevator speech for the issue I developed is presented below.

ISSUE #1 <i>What is the issue?</i>	Loneliness Epidemic		
OPTION <i>Response: How will your client respond to this issue?</i>	The Pew Charitable Trusts could work to lay the vision for and seed the next generation of “third spaces” (social settings that are neither home nor work), and the Pew Research Center can focus research programs on the use of these spaces (including barriers to use) and the effects on participants in terms of mental and physical health. These are pitched as “the best civic idea since public libraries”.		
WHY IS IT IMPORTANT? <i>Rationale: Describe why the issue is worth responding to</i>	Surgeon General Murthy’s public advisory on loneliness (link) identifies many dire consequences to physical, mental, and public health. It also points out specifically (page 16) that declining religious participation has been creating a social gap for decades, but there’s definitely room for things to get much worse if the 47% of religiously attached Americans drops significantly in coming decades.		
WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT IT? <i>Strategic response: List the key components of your long-term strategy across the timeframe of your project</i> <i>Hint: Phases may be the same as your Horizon years</i>	PHASE 1 2023-2030 Pew issues grants to establish innovative third spaces in communities, with a wide variety of projects funded and with outcomes measured. Learn lessons of what kinds of third spaces are most effective and what they need to be successful	PHASE 2 2030-2040 Pew works with federal, state, and local governments to build a sustainable funding and sponsorship model (including corporate and non-profit partnerships) for the best ideas from Phase 1 to be spread nationally. Monitoring and publicizing the benefits.	PHASE 3 2040+ Pew works to make these gains permanent by helping to seed university degrees that are the equivalent of Library Science for these new spaces, and leads funding of a permanent endowment to support their functioning.
WHO “OWNS” IT? <i>Responsibility: Identify the long-term internal champion for the issue and option</i>	Chief Program Officer (link) and designated program director		