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MEGACHANGE

The world in 2050

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9 Believe it or not

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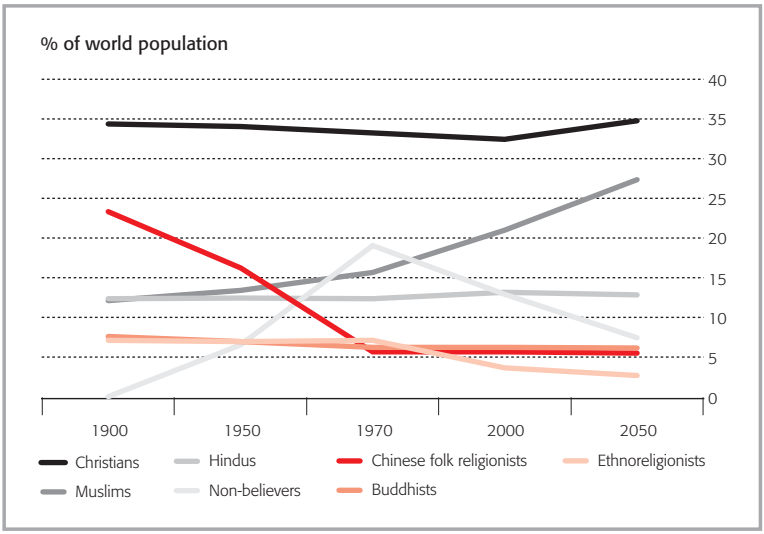
The world will have more believers in 2050, but the secular will still eventually inherit the Earth

THERE IS PROBABLY ONLY ONE THING that could transform the fortunes of the world's religions between now and 2050, and that is the arrival of a messiah. Barring the return of Jesus, or the coming of Islam's Mahdi or the Moshiach of the Jews, we may reasonably expect today's patterns of religious belief to continue much as they are. This is because religion is largely inherited. In the normal course of events, you are more likely than not to share the religious outlook of your parents, at least approximately. So big changes in the world's religious map tend to take place only over the course of several generations.

For the purposes of this chapter, let us ignore the possibility of a supernatural cataclysm between now and 2050, and assume that the kingdom of God is still some way off. Even with this proviso, though, forecasting spiritual trends is tricky, because in religious matters it is often unclear what the present situation is, let alone what the future will be. Data about belief are notoriously unreliable, especially when based on polls and interviews, because people can be vague, confused and insincere about their spiritual lives. One man's God may be a being who answers prayers and judges souls, and another's may be a nebulous impersonal force. Finding out what proportion of a population say they believe in God is therefore sometimes not very informative. People may exaggerate or play down their degree of religious observance, as a result of social approval or disapproval. And in the case of supernatural beliefs, many respondents seem to treat questionnaires as a game, and will say the first thing that comes into their heads.



Source: World Religion Database, accessed May 2011 (provided by Todd Johnson: tjohnson@gcts.edu)

FIG 9.1 Adherents of major religions

National census data, when they record broad religious affiliations, are subject to fewer problems than more detailed surveys of precise religious views. Yet even they are far from perfect: communist countries will undercount believers, and minority ethnic groups (Christians in Egypt, for example) may be similarly misreported by sensitive regimes. Also, many people will casually put down the religion they were raised in, even if they no longer practise it. Nevertheless, such official statistics, complemented by the research of major religious organisations, provide the best available information on large-scale trends. The most comprehensive compilation and analysis of this sort of data are the World Christian Database and the World Religion Database (WRD), produced by the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts.

Figure 9.1 uses WRD data to show what seems to have happened to the world's major religions in the course of the 20th century. There are reckoned to be about 10,000 distinct religions, 270 of them with more than 250,000 adherents in 2000. Figure 9.1 shows only those

groups that have attracted more than 2% of the world's population, and it includes both agnostics and atheists combined into a single category of non-believers. It also projects the major groups' shares of world population to 2050, by extrapolating demographic trends to adjust for births minus deaths, and converts minus defectors, for each religious (and non-religious) group.

Two things stand out. First, although Christianity retained its comfortable lead as the world's most popular religion in the 20th century, Islam has grown considerably, from 12.3% of the world's population in 1900 to 21.1% a century later. This is almost entirely due to a population explosion in Muslim countries. Even though three people converted to Christianity for every one who converted to Islam in 1970–2000, Muslims have greatly increased their share of the world's believers, because Muslims have had many more children than Christians.

The second notable development is that, for the first time in recorded history, large numbers of people have abandoned belief in God. A conservative analysis by Phil Zuckerman of Pitzer College in Los Angeles suggests that the global total of unbelievers is 500m at the very least, which would make unbelief the fourth-largest religious category. Agnosticism and atheism are relatively new: they began to win adherents among a small number of the most highly educated Europeans in the late 18th century and gathered pace among the European elite in the late 19th century. In the 20th century, unbelief spread more broadly, rising from a mere 0.2% of world population at the beginning of the century to around 13% at its end. This rate of growth is enormously higher than that of any religion in the period.

After Marx and Mao

Most of the places with the highest levels of unbelief – such as France, Scandinavia and Japan, where nearly half or more of the population say they do not believe in God – are not communist or ex-communist states. But the rise and fall of communism in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe greatly complicates the business of charting unbelief. So does China's communist revolution in 1949 and its government's increasing tolerance of some religions since Mao's death

in 1976. It is, to put it mildly, a fair bet that many religious believers who lived under an authoritarian and officially atheist regime will not have had their religious beliefs recorded correctly. Similarly, it is only to be expected that many people who grew up with atheist secularism imposed on them will embrace religion once they are permitted to do so, especially if the secular regime was an unpopular one. That is why unbelief seems to have peaked in the 1970s (see Figure 9.1). According to Todd Johnson, a co-editor of the WRD, the global decline in recorded unbelief in the final four decades of the 20th century is explained by the collapse of communism in the former Soviet bloc. Because some of the people registered as unbelievers will not in fact have been any such thing, the fall in recorded unbelief is to some extent a correction of the figures rather than a reflection of any real change. It is also true, though, that religious belief seems to have genuinely increased in former communist countries.

Similarly, an expected decline in atheism and agnosticism in the coming decades (from 11.6% of the global population in 2010 to 7.6% in 2050) reflects a rising toleration of religion in China. Because China is home to about one in five of the human race, its religious trends will have an outsized effect on global ones for some time. Although the Chinese Communist Party continues to discourage religion among its members, it now officially tolerates (under fairly strict conditions) the practice of Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. Roughly two-thirds of the world's recorded unbelievers live in China, so as its citizens are allowed to rediscover religion, this is likely to swamp the effects of secularising trends in developed countries.

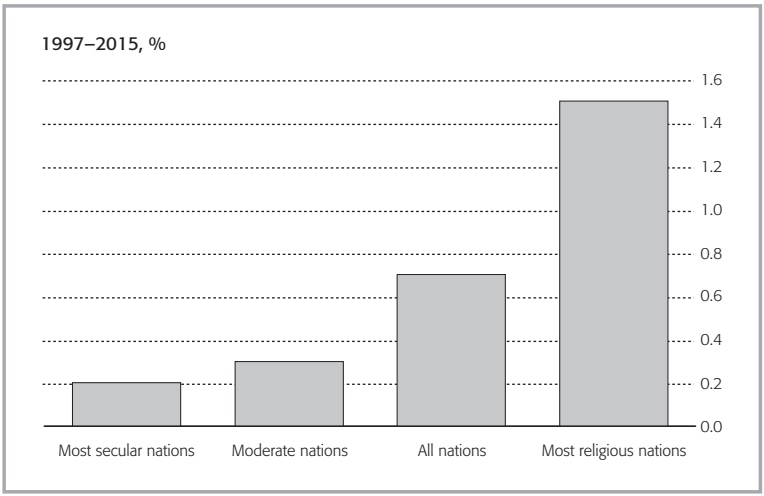
According to what is known as the secularisation thesis, societies tend – other things being equal – to become less religious as they become more economically developed. I shall defend a version of that idea later. For now, it is worth noting that the revival of religion in China, and in many former communist countries, does not really contradict this notion, even though those places are becoming richer. This is because the thesis aims to describe what happens in the normal course of economic and social development. It cannot be expected to apply when patterns of development are distorted by the rise and fall of authoritarian regimes that dictate what people should believe.

In addition to the dramatic natural increase in Muslim populations and the emergence of unbelief, the development of religion in the 20th century has been marked by two other global trends that are on course to continue, through probably at a slower pace. One is Christianity's shift towards the southern hemisphere: it has shrunk in its former strongholds of western Europe and North America, and grown in parts of Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. The other trend is the globalisation of religion: traditional local beliefs have been losing out to the multinational faiths, mainly Christianity and Islam.

At the start of the 20th century over 20% of the world's population were classified as adherents of Chinese folk religions, which involve a mixture of local deities, ancestor veneration, elements of Buddhism, Confucian ethics, magic and Taoism. Chinese folk religionists are now reckoned to amount to less than 7%; this decline began only with the rise of communism, and has doubtless been exaggerated. More tellingly, ethnoreligionists – a polite term for what used to be called "heathens" – have also lost out, falling from 7.3% of the global population in 1900 to 3.8% in 2000. In the early 20th century, it was expected that these ethnic groups of polytheists, animists and shamanists would fall victim to the first proselytising religion that targeted them, and would disappear within a generation. In fact they have proved to be more resistant, and their decline has been much slower than predicted. According to an analysis by Johnson and his colleague David Barrett, there will probably still be more than 360m heathens in 2200.

The godly and fertile poor

In terms of crude global totals, the world is on course to become more religious, simply because of what is happening in China. But is it true, as it has been claimed, that there is also a resurgence of religion elsewhere? The alleged signs of this are many and various. Fundamentalist Islam, which began to revive in the 1970s, is on the rise, as every day's news seems to attest. Christianity is growing in several parts of Africa. Many citizens of the former Soviet Union are rediscovering their churches. Pentecostalism is swelling dramatically



Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, 2003; *World Values Survey*, 1981–2001 (from Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 234)

FIG 9.2 Population growth rate by type of society

in Latin America – from 4.4% of the continent's population in 1970 to 27% in 1990, according to one estimate. And the growth of unbelief in the highly secular countries of north-western Europe seems to be slowing down. As for the United States, the country still displays the high levels of religiosity that are generally found only in much poorer nations.

What do these piecemeal observations add up to? Probably not much, because there are stories of religious decline to be told as well. Christianity's gains in Africa are offset by continuing losses in Europe. The rise of hot-headed Protestant denominations in Latin America is balanced by the waning of its traditional sleepy Catholicism. The United States may be highly religious, but it is becoming steadily less so, according to the most objective data. Also, the slowing pace of secularisation in largely Protestant north-western Europe is counterbalanced by a still-accelerating drift away from religion in Catholic countries, such as Ireland and Italy, which started secularising relatively late.

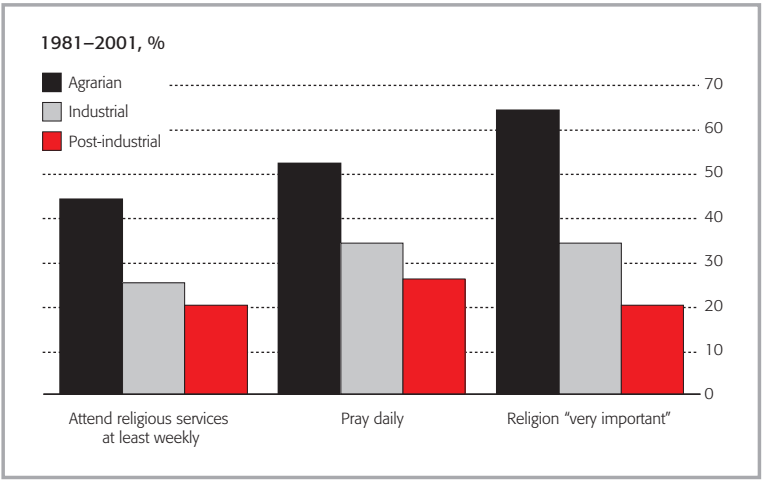
In 2003, an analysis for Harvard University's Weatherhead Centre

concluded that religious belief and practice were declining in most of the world's rich countries, but that the large and poor countries containing most of the world's population were in the midst of a religious resurgence. Demographic factors alone will ensure that the ranks of the religious will swell enormously. Suppose that the proportion of religious people in each relatively poor country stayed exactly the same for decades: the religious would still inherit the earth, for quite a long while, because the populations of poor countries are growing much faster than the populations of rich ones. The believers are out-breeding the unbelievers. Figure 9.2 shows how much faster population growth is in religious countries than in less religious ones.

This effect is found within countries as well as in international comparisons: religious groups tend to have more children than their secular neighbours. In his book, *Shall The Religious Inherit The Earth? Demography and Politics in the 21st Century*, Eric Kaufmann, a professor at Birkbeck College in London, notes that the openly non-religious in developed countries "are displaying the lowest fertility rates ever recorded in human history".

Look inside any country, and the most striking changes in its religious make-up will often be the effect of variances in fertility. In Israel, for example, ultra-Orthodox families have three times more children than other Israelis; largely as a result of this, the ultra-Orthodox are on course to be in a majority in the second half of this century. Or consider Mormons, who not so long ago were a fringe sect. Thanks to their large families, they are about to overtake Jews in America, or may already have done so. Kaufmann reckons that about three-quarters of the sharp rise in conservative evangelical Protestants in America between 1900 and 1975 was due simply to their high fertility, not to conversion. Like other demographers, he expects western Europe to become markedly more religious in the course of the 21st century, as a result of immigration from poor countries and the relatively low fertility of unbelievers.

So, other things being equal, will the world become steadily more religious forever? Probably not, because the high birth rates of the religious may be expected to fall as their incomes rise. Sooner or later, if the past is any guide, immigrant populations will come to resemble their hosts, and poor countries will become less religious



Source: *World Values Survey*, 1981–2001 (from Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, op. cit., p. 58)

FIG 9.3 National religiosity by type of economy

and less fecund. There is a strong correlation between low economic development and religion, as Figure 9.3 illustrates.

Figure 9.3 pools data from 175 countries grouped according to their scores on the UN's human-development index, which measures GDP per person, life expectancy and education. The 97 ("agrarian") countries with the lowest levels of economic development are, by pretty much any measure, on average at least twice as religious as the 20 most affluent ("post-industrial") nations. And the 58 middle-ranking economies tend to be middle-ranking in religiosity too. (A strong correlation between poverty and religion also exists inside countries: the poorest citizens of each post-industrial country are on average almost twice as religious as their richest citizens.)

The American exception

According to the secularisation thesis, this trend will continue: religion will eventually weaken as countries develop. But in the past couple of decades, a minority of sociologists have begun to question this idea, mainly because of the apparently anomalous position of the United

States, which seems to buck the trend by combining wealth and piety. They argue that it is Europe, not America, which is the exception, and that the rest of the world will follow America's pattern, not Europe's. It is certainly true that economic development shows no sign of eradicating religion altogether, except perhaps in Scandinavia, where interest in religion is strikingly low. But it is not clear that any proponent of the secularisation thesis has ever believed that religion would disappear entirely. And it is bizarre to regard Europe rather than America as exceptional, because all the non-European rich countries except America – such as Canada, Japan and Australasia – are secularising on the European pattern.

Let us therefore take a closer look at religion in America. This will give a clearer picture of the ways in which religion changes and declines in the face of economic development, and may help us to see what is in store for other countries as they develop.

First, though, what does it mean to say that religion is declining in a society? It cannot be just a matter of how many people attend religious services, or say they believe in God, or maintain that religion is important to them. We should also look at exactly what people believe, what their attitude is to the religious beliefs of others and how their religious beliefs influence their moral and political ones. And we should look at the political power and cultural influence of religious institutions and groups.

Consider two imaginary societies, A and B. Suppose that in A, the established religion has the power to outlaw homosexuality and the teaching of evolution in schools, even though majorities of the population are in favour of permitting the former and mandating the latter. Suppose also that most people in A believe in the literal truth of their sacred texts and endorse supernatural beliefs, such as a belief in miracles. Again, suppose that most believers in A maintain that their own religion is the only valid one and that the adherents of other religions will suffer in the afterlife. Now imagine that none of these things is true in society B. The citizens of B, let us say, tend to believe that whenever sacred texts or religious traditions conflict with scientific evidence, science wins; that everyone finds their own path to God; that adherents of other religions will not necessarily suffer eternal torment; that God does not intervene in natural events

or create natural disasters as a punishment; that morality is primarily a matter of personal fulfilment or social responsibility rather than of following God's orders; and that religious authorities should not have the power to dictate policy in education, sexual morality or family life.

In which of these two imaginary societies is religion stronger? We do not need to know whether it is A or B that has higher church or mosque attendance, or more people who say they believe in God, in order to know that it is A in which religion is the more powerful force. It is in B that the effects of education, individualism and other modernising forces have evidently done the most to erode the styles of religious belief that were more or less universal 500 years ago. That would remain true even if more people in B than in A attended some sort of church each week. As societies develop, according to the secularisation thesis, they become less like A and more like B. And, despite its relatively high levels of professed belief in God, and the large amount of media attention given to the views of fundamentalist and conservative Christian denominations, America turns out to be no exception to this rule.

In 1966 Bryan Wilson, a British sociologist of religion, observed that while Europeans had secularised by abandoning churches, Americans had instead secularised their churches. In other words, Americans continued to pay lip service to religion, but their religion became less religious. As Steve Bruce, another British sociologist, shows in his book, *Secularization*, the focus of American faith has "shifted from the next world to this one and from the glorification of God to the satisfaction of human needs". Bruce notes that there was a transformation in mainstream American Christianity from around the 1930s as religion began increasingly to be presented as a matter of personal growth. (One of the most influential pioneers of the modern American self-help movement, Norman Vincent Peale, was the minister of one of New York's biggest churches.)

Perhaps the most telling indication of this shift in American religion is to be found in the reasons people give for attending religious services. According to one study of an American city in the 1920s, the most popular reason given for going to church was that obedience to God required it; but when the study was repeated in 1977, the most popular reason was instead "pleasure". Another sign that American

religion is becoming a lifestyle choice like any other can be found in the drastic decline of the idea that adherents of rival religions will be damned. By the 1970s, Americans were far less likely than they had been in the 1940s to say that Christianity was the one true religion and that everyone should adopt it. By 2008, about 70% of religious Americans agreed instead that "many religions can lead to eternal life". American beliefs have also become significantly less fundamentalist and more vague. The proportion of Americans who claim that the Bible is literally true has fallen dramatically, from 65% in 1964 to 26% in 2009. And in 2007, according to polls by the Pew Forum, nearly a third of American believers saw God as "an impersonal force", whatever that means, rather than as the traditional supreme personal being.

Non-believers and adherents of liberal denominations tend to be dismayed and baffled by the apparent strength of fundamentalist beliefs and the "religious right" in the United States. But the power of literalist and conservative denominations is exaggerated by what could be called the headline fallacy: fundamentalist groups are newsworthy precisely because their views are not the norm. And religious conservatives campaign noisily because they are losing all their battles ("Winners don't protest," as Bruce puts it). The "Moral Majority" movement was started by television evangelists in the late 1970s because conservative Christians felt, quite rightly, that a tide of secularism and liberal values had turned against them.

Since then, the religious right has failed to achieve any of its aims: homosexuality and even homosexual marriage are more widely accepted, not less so; the criminalisation of sodomy is being swept away; abortion remains constitutional; more women with children work outside the home; more unmarried couples cohabit; creationism and "intelligent design" have not won equal billing with evolution in schools; America's strict barriers between church and state have not been eroded at all. The only battle in which the religious right has made any headway is the one over abortion, which is now harder to obtain in some places. But it is worth noting that this is one part of the religious right's agenda for which there is some support in the broader population.

So the apparent strength of old-time religion in the United States is not as great as it may appear to be. Furthermore, all broad measures

of the country's religiosity are steadily declining. In 1948, just 2% of Americans said they had no religion, but by the end of the 1990s polls put the figure at 12–16%. Regular attendance at a church, synagogue or mosque was claimed by 41% of the population in 1971, but by just 31% in 2002, according to the National Opinion Research Centre. The future looks disappointing for American believers, because today's young are less religious than today's old, and degrees of religiosity tend not to change after early adulthood. In 2007, according to the Pew Forum, 57% of those aged 65 or older, but only 45% of those aged 29 or younger, were absolutely certain of the existence of a personal God. And each generation was less likely than its predecessor to claim a religious affiliation.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Americans are, on average, significantly more religious than the inhabitants of other large, rich countries. Many explanations have been offered for this. One of the most plausible invokes the source of community that churches provide for an extremely mobile, ethnically diverse and immigrant population. Nearly 12% of people in the United States were born in another country – usually a poorer and more religious one than America – and the recently arrived turn for social support to churches used by other members of their ethnic group. More than two-thirds of these immigrants are from Christian countries, so they tend to strengthen the local religious institutions; in Europe, by contrast, most immigrants are Muslims or Hindus. Even native-born Americans are much more likely than people in other developed countries to live far from their families and friends: the average American moves home nearly 12 times in a lifetime, and America is a very large place. Churches provide an instant community for recent arrivals.

Aspects of poverty

No doubt several cultural, historical and demographic factors play a role in America's religious life. But from the point of view of the secularisation thesis, the most important fact about America is that, in many respects which are relevant to religion, it is more like a poor country than a rich one. Life is much tougher in the United States than in any other developed nation.

Consider first the most basic measure of human welfare, which is life expectancy. America is not in the top ten countries ranked by this criterion; it is not even in the top 20 or the top 30. It ranks 34th out of the UN's member states. It is the only developed country without universal health care: well over 40m people have no health insurance, and illness often means financial ruin, even for the relatively well-off. Welfare safety nets are poor by European standards: lose your job, and you may well lose everything. Poverty and economic inequality are strikingly high. It is a violent country: the murder rate is by far the highest in the developed world – twice as high as in the next most murderous country – and a much larger proportion of Americans are incarcerated than in any other rich nation. In short, Americans live closer to disaster than the citizens of other rich countries. They are especially in need of God, because nobody else will help them.

According to a refined version of the secularisation thesis developed by Pippa Norris of Harvard University and Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan, "feelings of vulnerability ... drive religiosity", and it is a sense of security, economic and otherwise, that is strongly correlated with a secular outlook. This would explain why religion has a greater presence in America than in other rich countries: America's wealth has not generated the security that economic development usually brings. (It is notable that the poorer Americans are, the more likely they are to say that religion is important to them, and the more often they are likely to pray.)

So it seems that the secularisation thesis is broadly correct, in which case the world's developing nations can be expected eventually to follow the patterns of the past and, in the long run, grow less religious as they become richer and life becomes more secure. Of course, nobody knows how quickly poor countries will become richer, or which ones will eventually provide their citizens with the levels of security that seem to encourage a European style of secularisation rather than an American one. But to bet that religion will eventually weaken in the developing world is perhaps safer than betting on the arrival of a messiah.