SHALL THE RELIGIOUS INHERIT THE EARTH?

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DEMOGRAPHY AND POLITICS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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My website on the political demography of religion contains links to relevant sites and academic articles, papers and presentations of mine which delve into more detail on the data and methodology behind sections of the book: http://www.sneps.net/RD/religdem.html.
A bomb rips apart a commuter train in Madrid. Scores are killed in a suicide attack in a crowded market in Baghdad or Peshawar. Another coalition soldier dies in Afghanistan. As a Canadian resident of London, I’m painfully aware of the steady drip of coalition casualties in both countries. The threat of terrorism is never entirely absent. Behind the scenes, Western societies wring their hands over profound cultural questions which cut to the core of who we are. How much should we bend liberal principles to accommodate religious practices? Is Islam off-limits to comedians and artists? How can we achieve security without trampling on suspects’ freedom from detention without trial? Can we attain a measure of unity in the face of growing diversity?

If I am correct, what we have witnessed over the past decade is the thin edge of a rising wedge which transcends Islam. Simply put, this book argues that religious fundamentalists are on course to take over the world through demography. We have embarked on a particularly turbulent phase of history in which the frailty of secular liberalism will become ever more apparent. In contrast to the situation today, the upsurge of fundamentalism will be felt more keenly in the secular West than in developing regions. This is because we are witnessing the historic conjunction of religious fundamentalism and demographic revolution.

The world is in the midst of an unprecedented shift from population growth to decline. Europe is leading the way, but East Asia is aging...
more quickly and may overtake it, while other parts of the world – especially India, Southeast Asia and Latin America – are treading the same path. These changes are driven by rising prosperity, women’s education, urbanisation and birth control. Europe’s fertility rate – i.e. the number of children the typical woman is expected to bear over her lifetime – has been below the replacement level for four decades. As a result, its native population has begun to fall in absolute terms – a slide which will accelerate over time. World fertility is predicted to sink below the replacement level by 2035. Global population decline will follow several decades later.

It may seem as if the world is in danger of being depopulated and left to the animal kingdom. People are increasingly failing to replace themselves and the openly non-religious among them are displaying the lowest fertility rates ever recorded in human history: sometimes less than one child per woman. However, this demographic transition relies on people’s desire to better themselves in this world, not the next one. Those embracing the here and now are spearheading population decline, but individuals who shun this world are relatively immune to it. Everywhere one looks, religious fundamentalists are successfully bucking the trend towards fertility rates below the magic 2.1 children per woman. Even if everyone else died off, homo religiosus would endure. In the West, fundamentalism is also growing because the religion of uprooted immigrants from demographically expanding parts of the world is being radicalised by its collision with Western secularism. Identity politics reinforces and protects faith.

Fundamentalism is a modern response to the threat of secularism. In their quest for religious certainty, Christian, Muslim and Jewish fundamentalists have elevated the most world-denying, illiberal aspects of their traditions to the status of sacred symbols. One badge of fundamentalist belonging is outlandish dress – be this the ultra-Orthodox Jewish sidelock, Salafi burqa or Amish hat. Often these innovations are quite recent. Fundamentalism thumbs its nose at secular modernity in other ways, too, such as by affirming traditional women’s roles. Large – sometimes unlimited – family sizes are typically part of the package, as exemplified by America’s Quiverfull Protestants. These practices mark out the true believers from the backsliders who have supposedly compromised, to a greater or lesser degree, with secularism.
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It is not that fundamentalists have suddenly begun to have more children. It is just that others are having fewer. In the past, when most children died before reaching adulthood, differences in family size had more to do with material factors. Any group trait which lowered infant mortality – African resistance to malaria, Christians tending their sick during plagues, superior Jewish hygiene, the wealthy being able to afford food and shelter – led the group to increase its share of the population. Only around 1900, for example, did European women of lower socio-economic status begin to have larger numbers of surviving offspring than the well-off. Fertility rates were also driven by the need for labour on the farm and insurance in old age, neither of which matters in wealthy societies. Finally, those with access to contraception controlled their fertility better than those without it. Today, however, people – especially in developed countries – are largely able to choose the number of children they have. Why they select as they do depends more than ever on their cultural values and lifestyle choices. This increases the fertility gap between seculars and fundamentalists, paving the way for revolutionary population shifts.

Might secularism’s salvation lie in luring away the children of the devout? This may work for the more open fundamentalist sects and cults, such as some American neo-evangelicals or the Jehovah’s Witnesses. But strong religions generate powerful motives for people to remain in the fold and powerful disincentives to leave. This makes them more successful than moderate faiths in keeping their flock from straying. Largely endogamous, or in-group marrying, religious fundamentalists such as the ultra-Orthodox Jews or Mormons have been improving their retention rates over the past century. Put high fertility and retention rates together with general population decline and you have a potent formula for change.

The Old Order Amish, for instance, double in population every twenty years. They numbered just 5,000 in 1900, but have close to a quarter million members today. In the period 1997–2003 alone, sixty-six new Amish colonies formed. Only the fastest-growing non-denominational megachurches can match their growth rate. The Amish are still a small group, and they live in the USA, a large country. Might growth and influence lead to moderation? This seems less likely today because
fundamentalists have effectively mobilised against the threat of secularism, which helps unify them and prevent moderating splits. Consider the ultra-Orthodox Jews, a larger group who – at least in Israel – occupy a much smaller pond. Once a trace element in the population, they now make up a third of the country’s Jewish schoolchildren and are on track to becoming a majority group in the second half of this century. Unless secular Zionists figure out how to arrest their growth in a liberal manner, the outcome is predictable. And it is difficult to see how the rest of the world can avoid succumbing to similar forces as the demographic revolution unfolds.

Even small fertility premiums can lead to impressive gains if maintained over generations. The Mormons should have been a shrinking minority in Utah by now. However, they increased their share of the state’s population from 60 per cent in 1920 to 75 per cent by the end of the century in the teeth of considerable non-Mormon immigration. Across the United States, the more numerous evangelicals grew from one-third to two-thirds of white Protestants during the twentieth century. In both cases, fundamentalists enjoyed no more than a one-child advantage over others, but maintained this over a century. Their success has not gone unnoticed and has spawned self-conscious pronatalism. The Quiverfull movement, for instance, which opposes family planning, has formulated a ‘two-hundred-year plan’ for domination. They may find Islamic fundamentalists in the way: some Islamists envision a demographic conquest of the West and victory ‘from below’ over the secular regimes of the Muslim world.

Though radical leftist writers assail liberal capitalism, the saga of ever-rising human progress – in science and human virtue – remains the central ideology of Western societies. Yet, as John Gray notes, liberalism is not necessary for modernity, and has largely won by historical accident. Human virtue, unlike science, winds back and forth rather than progressing ever upward. There is no necessary reason why the road ahead will not twist in an illiberal direction, leading to an outcome as violent as anything witnessed during the bloody twentieth century. Religious fundamentalism and demographic transition form a potent cocktail. They will fuel apocalyptic terrorism, but violence is not the main issue. Religious zealots are no more violent than socialists or anarchists. The
jihadist revolution even shows signs of having lost its way. The greater threat is cultural: that fundamentalism will replace reason and freedom with moral puritanism. As the recent experience of the Muslim world shows, the violent sting of fundamentalism can only be drawn by trading away secular thinking, women’s rights and expressive liberty.

All the same, for many of us, the storm takes place at a distance. We rarely meet a fundamentalist. We don’t know any victims of terrorism. We live our lives largely outside religion’s orbit. In our world, best-selling New Atheists like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett loom larger. The churches and synagogues we know haemorrhage members. We seem on the cusp of a new era of naked atheism. Denmark and Sweden are leading the way, writes Phil Zuckerman: ‘Worship of God can wane, prayer can be given up, and the Bible can go unstudied’, yet society runs smoothly, with little crime, excellent health and high levels of societal happiness. People in Scandinavia, he writes, live perfectly contented lives knowing that their consciousness will simply expire when they die and that life has no further meaning beyond the here and now.4

As Scandinavia shows, there is a strong case to be made that the least religious countries are the most advanced. Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart draw on decades of worldwide survey data to show that as income, education and equality increase, religiosity declines.5 Secularisation theorists add that more complex, differentiated societies tear the ‘sacred canopy’ of religion asunder, reducing its influence and plausibility in modern life.6 The Enlightenment and secular humanism transformed the consciousness of the West’s cultural elite after the mid eighteenth century. Today, nearly all leading scientists and intellectuals in the developed world are non-believers. In Francis Fukuyama’s terms, the secular ‘last men’ of today realise that their inherited religious tradition is simply one among many. Consequently, they no longer believe it to be the truth. Religious authority melts away under the glare of modern cosmopolitanism.7

In our politics, the great collective myths are on life support. Political parties now differ only by degree, competing on managerial competence rather than transformative ideology. We witness the ‘end of chiliastic hopes’ prophesied by ex-Trotskyist Daniel Bell in his End of
Ideology (1960). The great secular ideologies – socialism, nationalism and even the liberal anarchism of 1968 – have lost their grip. These ideas once served as surrogate religions, providing a storyline for societies akin to those we invent for ourselves each day. They told us where our societies came from and where we were going, anointing us as the chosen ones who would be gratefully remembered after death. Collective myths and symbols inspired many to sacrifice, helping people achieve a sense of transcendence. In contemplating the Arcadian golden age of our heroic ancestors or the utopia of a socialist tomorrow, we escaped the confines of our profane present.

Secularisation theorists plausibly argue that the lonely, alienated condition of modern society has not stimulated a return to faith in the developed world. In a fascinating model based on recent survey data, David Voas predicts that atheists and agnostics will prevail in Europe, but suggests this process may take a century or two to run its course. Religious revival has arguably succeeded only in the more deprived parts of the world where scepticism has yet to pour cold water on supernatural, enchanted modes of thinking. The upheavals of urbanisation, democracy and capitalism can only spark religious revival when the people remain, in Fukuyaman terms, ‘in history’. Failed states, corruption, inequality and civil war generate insecurity, which fuels fundamentalism.

This Whiggish analysis dovetails with a long tradition of thought from Auguste Comte to Friedrich Nietzsche, which says that the triumph of a secular worldview is only a matter of time. Charles Taylor correctly appraises it as an ideological ‘subtraction story’ that is not susceptible to empirical verification. ‘The Positivists,’ notes Stuart Hampshire, ‘believed that all societies across the globe will gradually discard their traditional attachments because of the need for rational, scientific and experimental modes of thought … there must be a step-by-step convergence on liberal values, on “our values” … We now know that there is no “must” about it and that such theories have a predictive value of zero.’ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke go further: ‘After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophecies … it seems time to carry the secularisation doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper “requiescat in pace.”’

These sceptics correctly skewer the idea that the end of religion is
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preordained, but they do not provide solid evidence of what will reverse its current Western free-fall. As Norris and Inglehart rightly remark, ‘Were Comte, Durkheim, Weber and Marx completely misled in their beliefs about religious decline? … Was the predominant sociological view during the twentieth century totally misguided? … We think not.’ They add that critics of secularisation focus largely on marginal anomalies such as the United States while the overall trend is still moving in a secular direction. Even Charles Taylor, who disavows secularisation, has written a fascinating chronicle about how Western thinkers slowly detached their philosophy from its religious training wheels.

Sceptics and proponents alike fail to probe the soft underbelly of secularism: demography. Norris and Inglehart are aware of its power. They observe that less developed countries tend to be more religious than rich ones and have faster growing populations. Population explosion in the developing world creates many more religious people than secularism can digest. The secular West and East Asia are aging and their share of world population declining. This means the world is getting more religious even as people in the rich world shed their faith. Notwithstanding these trends, the authors feel confident that secularism will eventually win out as income and education tame religious fertility in the Third World.

The swift pace of the demographic transition in Asia, Latin America and even the Middle East lends some credence to this prediction. However, I find such hopes to be misplaced. If anything, the developing world is more likely to modernise in an American than European way, retaining its faith as it becomes wealthy. The most perceptive secularisation theorists allow that religion can resist decline when it serves the secular function of maintaining identity. Catholicism distinguished Poland from Orthodox-cum-communist Russia, Brittany from secular Paris. Developing countries cling to their religion as a badge of pride in the face of ‘westoxification’. This is most evident in Islam, but the fast-growing Protestants of the global South also brandish their faith, often as a riposte to their Muslim, Catholic or Hindu neighbours.

As globalisation makes us more similar, we become increasingly sensitive about our differences. This raises the importance of identity politics. The world’s tropical denizens are set to increase their share of
the world’s population and will repopulate an aging West. When non-white religious people encounter the disdain of white secular natives, religion and ethnicity reinforce each other, insulating religion from the assimilating power of secularism. Some rebel by shouting their identities from the rooftops. In Europe, surveys of second-generation minorities confirm that only the children of Christian immigrants are susceptible to the charms of secularity. Muslims resist it almost entirely. Immigration makes Europe more multicultural and more religious. Just look at immigration entrepôts such as London and Paris, which – against all expectation – are among the most religious spots in their countries. Imagine a provincial English evangelical of the nineteenth century coming to London to experience the Bible Belt! All of which shows how religious demography can trump secularisation.

Religious demography moves in direct ways as well. All three Abrahamic faiths encourage people to ‘go forth and multiply’ and extol the virtues of motherhood, marriage and family. This was largely redundant when material necessity compelled everyone to have large families. First, most children died before they reached the age of ten. Second, young hands were needed to work the land and serve as one’s old-age pension. Today, by contrast, modern medicine and sanitation have conquered infant mortality. In the city, children are more a burden than a boon. Contraception is readily available to limit fertility. Birth rates are consequently much lower. Under these circumstances, value choices have a bigger impact on fertility, and, by extension, the composition of the population. In other words, those biblical injunctions to reproduce now matter. Across the world, surveys find that the religious – especially fundamentalists – marry earlier and have children sooner and more often than their secular counterparts. This holds even when we narrow our focus to women at identical income and education levels. The difference is most dramatic in modern pluralistic societies, where value choices matter most for family formation.

Fertility rates of the religious may be important in the developed world, but can they keep their kids in the fold? If pious children simply assimilate into the secular mainstream, the radical effect of religious fertility quickly dissipates. This is where fundamentalism enters the picture. It developed in explicit opposition to secularism. Jewish and Christian
fundamentalists insisted on the most demanding readings of scripture and tradition as a bulwark against secularism and ‘secularised’ faiths such as Reform Judaism and Anglicanism. Islamic fundamentalism was born out of resistance to secular ideas of nationalism, socialism and liberalism which were once admired by anti-colonial and post-colonial Muslim elites.

Bracketing immigrant religiosity for the moment, what is fascinating is how well certain fundamentalists have protected their boundaries. Modernity has empowered them to build a parallel world apart from the mainstream, complete with schools and universities, media and even separate beaches, hotels and shopping malls. Of course, joining a fundamentalist American church, Salafi mosque or ultra-Orthodox kollel involves sacrifices. Even for those born into the sects, the appeal of the outside world is strong. However, members’ social ties are often completely bound up with the sect. Should they choose to exit, they leave behind friends, family and identity – a much bigger step than dropping a moderate religion that forms just one part of a multifaceted life.

Modernity allows institutions to extend their reach, get organised, keep better records and more effectively monitor and communicate with their members. This is why the modern state is so much more effective than pre-modern empires and has well-defined borders. Religious groups also benefit: fundamentalists are increasingly able to sharpen their boundaries and retain members while winning converts from moderate religions. The established, inherited, moderate religions which used to reign unchallenged are being dismembered by secularism and fundamentalism. Once secularism rears its head and fundamentalism responds with a clear alternative, moderate religion strikes many as redundant. Either you believe the stuff or you don’t. If you do, it makes sense to go for the real thing, which takes a firm stand against godlessness.

There are several varieties of fundamentalism. Some rely on conversion. In order to proselytise most effectively, their members need to be integrated into the wider society so they can meet as many potential converts as possible. The risk of course is that retention will fall as members interact with the outside world. The open evangelical approach of Pentecostalists or Jehovah’s Witnesses is effective in building membership in developing countries but fares poorly in developed societies where the pull of secularism is strong. In the modern West, the most
successful groups are what I term *endogenous growth sects* – those that segregate themselves from society and grow their own. The Hutterites, Amish, ultra-Orthodox Jews, Salafist Muslims and American Mormons are the best-known examples. They benefit from the strong communal boundaries and membership retention that ethnic groups possess, but supercharge it with a universalist fervour. This sense of divine mission encourages the sacrifices needed to rear larger families. Because Western populations are flat or declining, all are increasing their share of the population at unprecedented rates.

Nowhere is this amazing growth more evident than in the Jewish world. Ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, Judaism – which some claim to be no more than a century old – was disproportionately savaged by the Holocaust. At the end of the Second World War, the Haredim looked to be a fading relic. The new state of Israel and the wider Jewish diaspora indulged their needs, largely out of pity and nostalgia. Then, in the 1950s, the Haredim began to cordon themselves off and their fertility advantage over other Jews increased. With increasing retention of members and three times the birth rate of other Jews, their share of world Jewry began to skyrocket. In Britain, they constitute only 17 per cent of Jews but account for 75 per cent of Jewish births. In Israel, they have increased from a few per cent of Jewish schoolchildren in 1950 to a third of all Jewish pupils. In both places, the majority of Jews may be Haredi by 2050 and certainly by 2100.16

Fundamentalists have less of an edge in other faiths, but even a small fertility advantage in the presence of high membership retention is enough to ensure compound increase over generations. The early Christians of the Roman Empire grew from forty converts in AD 30 to six million in the year 312. Their growth rate was 40 per cent per decade, somewhat less than the Mormons have enjoyed since 1850. Evangelical Protestants increased – mainly through higher fertility – from a third of American white Protestants born in 1900 to two-thirds of those born in 1975. In all parts of the world, fundamentalist fertility exceeds moderate religious fertility, which in turn outpaces secular fertility. As the world’s population levels off and begins to fall with the demographic transition, this throws fundamentalist pronatalism into sharper relief. As they resist population decline, they will begin, like the Haredim, to increase their share of the total.17
The most visible aspect of today’s demographic revolution is the changing ethnic composition of Western populations. But demography moves in mysterious ways. Ethnic fertility levels are rapidly converging in the West: Muslim family sizes are shrinking swiftly, just as Catholic fertility declined to Protestant levels during the twentieth century. The long-term action therefore lies within each faith, where fundamentalists are pulling away from moderates and seculars. Unlike ethnic fertility gaps, the religious–secular divide is, if anything, widening. This makes perfect sense when you contrast secularism’s individualistic women’s liberation ethos with the pronatalism and traditional gender roles that fundamentalists extol.

Even more remarkable is that fundamentalists are making common cause across lines of faith tradition. In the United States, many white and black conservative Protestants, Mormons, white and Hispanic Catholics, Jews, and, prior to 9/11, Muslims, back the Religious Right’s agenda. Their combined effort helped defeat the legalisation of gay marriage in California in 2008. In Europe, interfaith coalitions challenge liberal abortion and blasphemy laws. Inside the bureaucratic corridors of the UN, the Vatican, American Protestant fundamentalists and Islamists are joining hands to fight family planning and women’s rights. As Islam grows in Europe, there is a good chance that Europe will follow the American path away from native–immigrant ethnic spats to trans-ethnic ‘culture wars’ over concerns such as abortion and gay rights.

Where, we might ask, is this process taking us? Marx predicted that the contradictions between labour and capital would result in the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Thesis and antithesis collide in a dialectic of change, and a higher stage of social evolution is reached in socialism. Daniel Bell spotted socialism’s weaknesses by the 1930s, and instead offered a culturalist version of Hegel’s dialectic. The discipline required to work, save and accumulate capital, which Calvinism first produced, is contradicted by capitalism’s hedonistic ethos. The antinomian individualism of capitalism ultimately destroys the system. Yet capitalism seems to have adapted to libertinism rather well. Severe social problems like crime, homelessness, indebtedness and family breakdown have not caused it to fail.

Francis Fukuyama believes that liberal capitalism has outlasted its
challengers to emerge as the final form of human organisation. Though Fukuyama is often superficially criticised as a Pollyanna, the idea that liberal capitalism is the apotheosis of human development remains current. As John Gray laments, it ‘is still widely believed. It shapes the programmes of mainstream political parties … guides the policies of agencies.’ 18 This contrasts with the classical view that the invasion of advanced societies by more ‘vigoroust’ barbarian ones is a constant of human history. Medieval Arab historian Ibn Khaldun believed that nomadic incursions were a necessary part of a cycle in which the social cohesion of decadent civilisations was renewed. Fukuyama, however, holds that military technology insulates liberal capitalism from that fate.

Does it? Demographic sluggishness was one aspect of decadence which Khaldun, like Cicero and Polybius before him, decried. Hundreds of years later, none other than Adam Smith, paragon of the Scottish Enlightenment, would remark that ‘Barrenness, so frequent among women of fashion, is very rare among those of inferior station. Luxury in the fair sex, while it inflames perhaps the passion for enjoyment, seems always to weaken, and frequently to destroy altogether, the powers of generation.’ 19 When one considers the demographic deficit of liberalism, it is hard not to conclude that religious demography is its Achilles heel. Religious fundamentalism cannot conquer from the outside with guns blazing, but it can achieve power gradually, over generations, from within. Liberalism’s demographic contradiction – individualism leading to the choice not to reproduce – may well be the agent that destroys it. In a sense this is a modification of Bell’s argument: individualism is fatal, but its effect is mediated by demography.

This is not the only possibility, of course. If liberalism manages to seduce enough religious children to its message, it could yet prevail. The excess children of the faithful might even complement the demographic deficit of the non-religious. I hope to show that in an age of desiccated secular creeds, the chances of attracting sufficient fundamentalists to secularism are low. And while fundamentalists can be smashed by Soviet or Nazi-style repression, this contradicts liberalism’s very own principles. Secular liberalism is on the horns of a dilemma. The secular Zionist attempt to woo the Haredim using the carrots and sticks of integration may not succeed. The Haredim are an extreme case, but in the long run,
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liberalism will have to face up to the gauntlet that fundamentalists have thrown down. We are all Zionists now.

The stakes are high. Fundamentalist revolution, as in Iran, Sudan or Taliban Afghanistan, is not the primary threat. The authoritarian states of the Muslim world have crushed their Islamist challengers who in turn have lost popularity. Rather, the greatest danger comes from the gradual seepage of puritanical mores into society: restrictions on freedom of expression, science, recreation, the rights of women, minorities, heretics, gays and converts – even a return to barbaric punishments.

Muslim governments have swiftly implemented sharia to defang their jihadi adversaries. In the United States, the religious have a monopoly on the highest public offices and the rising waters of fundamentalism lap against foreign policy, foreign aid, abortion and the curriculum. In Israel, the government yields on yeshiva subsidies and civil marriage, while corporations bend to Haredi boycotts and moral censorship. At least the Zionists have a powerful secular nationalism to deploy against their fundamentalists. Though it has lost some of its shine in recent decades, the Zionist dream becomes relevant with every Palestinian rocket or Iranian nuclear advance. If, or rather when, Europe and North America face similar challenges, seculars will not have the ammunition to respond so robustly. I cannot see a way out.

Evolutionary psychologists marvel at the resources that primitive societies expended on religion. Surely these were extraneous to the process of survival. Some, including Richard Dawkins, maintain that religion served a series of important functions in prehistory. It ensured a high degree of group cooperation for collective goals. Those who were part of hunting and gathering bands that possessed religions had superior survival rates to those who were governed purely by their passions and self-interest. Religious groups passed their genes on more effectively. In the process of natural selection, our ancestors developed a religious sensibility, even a need for it.20

The mechanism of natural selection is demography. Demographers Ron Lesthaeghe and Dirk van de Kaa have developed the theory of the second demographic transition (SDT), where values rather than material constraints come to shape fertility and much of society fails to replace itself.21 Might it be the case that the second demographic transition is
a population bottleneck through which only the devout can pass? One would not have to resort to a genetic argument, though twin studies show a significant inherited component to religion.\(^{22}\) Instead, it may just be that religious ideas, so-called ‘memes’, are destined to be selected. In Michael Blume’s words, when it comes to Creationism vs. Intelligent Design, ‘evolutionary theorists brought up far more scientific arguments – but committed believers in supernatural agents brought up far more children’.\(^{23}\) Scott Atran reminds us that no human culture has survived without some form of religion for more than two generations.\(^{24}\)

Those who claim that religion is destined to vanquish secularism forever are no more accurate than those who predict that secular reason will eventually smoke out religious ‘superstition’. Sixty years ago, when Orthodox Jews were slaughtered like sheep while their more worldly co-ethnics sometimes survived, one would have returned a different verdict. As the social environment – what Dawkins calls a ‘memeplex’ – changes, so do the criteria of natural selection and therefore the fittest creed.\(^{25}\)

What is today’s environment like? We see the collapse of the great secular religions of the twentieth century; the growing importance of values in determining fertility; an uneven demographic transition which is reshaping Western populations; the rise of global identity politics: all this in an atmosphere of multicultural toleration. The confluence of these currents creates a nutrient-rich breeding ground for religious fundamentalism.

In what follows, I hope to show how the demography of fundamentalism is beginning to transform the United States, Europe, Israel and the Muslim world. We are still in the early stages of the process, but once trends are in full swing, population momentum will carry them forward for generations. ‘If no solution is found,’ warns Philip Longman in *The Empty Cradle* (2004), ‘the future will belong to those who reject markets, reject learning, reject modernity, and reject freedom. This will be the fundamentalist moment.’\(^{26}\) Our social environment is unlikely to change any time soon. Liberals are simply too committed to the ideal of presentist individualism for themselves and tolerance for others. In matters of demography, they insist on a politically correct laissez-faire. This redounds to the advantage of fundamentalists. Yet to do otherwise would be to act against liberal principles, selling one’s soul in order to win. Secular liberalism lies hoist on its own petard.
The ascent of an outspoken atheism, borne aloft by superstars like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett, has re-energised the long-running culture war between religion and secularism. The ferocity of the debate didn’t emerge in a vacuum. It was fanned by the global revival of religion. Progressive thinkers of the past two centuries have regularly pronounced faith to be dead, with the proviso that it might take a little time for the news to filter down to the plebs. As socialism and mass consumption spread in the twentieth century, they promised large-scale modernisation, leading many to bring forward the date of religion’s demise. Until the 1980s, few intellectuals predicted the rebirth of religion as a social force. Then came the Khomeini and Reagan revolutions of 1979–80, followed by the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat by Islamist militants in 1981. Ultra-Orthodox Judaism grew sharply in Israel and the diaspora. Pentecostalism exploded in Latin America, Asia and Africa in the early 1970s to become the second largest branch of global Christianity after Catholicism. All of which gave pause to previously unquestioned assumptions. Peter Berger, a leading sociologist of religion who foresaw the inevitable demise of American religion, recanted in the 1980s.

Religion is a belief system which holds that supernatural forces operate in our world. It provides a ‘theory of everything’ which answers questions about the cosmos, meaning and existence that science cannot.
Strictly speaking, it need not involve more than this, but it invariably does. The supernatural is typically personified by one or more transcendent gods, who exist outside time and space and become the object of devotion. This worship gives rise to rituals, symbols, institutions and monuments. With the advent of writing after 10,000 BC, religions came to be inscribed in holy texts. Clerics penned theological interpretations of scripture which separated sacred objects, practices and texts from profane ones. Their pronouncements underpinned ethical codes such as sharia and Canon law which support the social order. Fundamentalist religious movements uphold the primacy of mores based on holy texts. They argue that these should supersede profane motives such as custom, pragmatism and liberalism. This challenges the legitimacy of the nation state, with its pragmatic policies and reliance on secular nationalism.

Islamist movements are the most dramatic forms of politicised religion. Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, political Islam has become a leading source of global insecurity. The end of the Cold War and the rise of transnational jihadi terrorism in the 1990s brought religion to the fore as a leading organising principle of international relations. The axis of conflict is not so much Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’ between Christianity and Islam as it is a battle between fundamentalism and secularism. Countries like Pakistan are bribed or cajoled to stand with the West and against transnational Islamist insurgents (and their sponsors) in the global ‘War on Terror’. The planet’s new religious divisions return us to a state of affairs we haven’t witnessed since the Wars of Religion in the 1600s when the Protestant/Catholic cleft organised politics. It takes us back to a time before the Enlightenment, which introduced the liberal, industrial and scientific revolutions of the modern age.

Away from the headlines, a quiet revolution in Islamic practice and theology has shaken the cultural foundations of the Muslim world. Mosque-building is soaring. A new generation of young women is donning the headscarf, often admonishing their more laissez-faire parents. But they are not alone. Young Orthodox Jews in the United States claim the same moral superiority over their less stringent parents. Young American Christians, too, are being drawn into fundamentalist movements which champion traditional women’s roles. These trends alarm many secular intellectuals and a wide swathe of the Western populace.
The Crisis of Secularism

For atheists like Dawkins and Harris, nothing less than the future of human reason and progress, be this in science or ethics, is at stake. The Enlightenment and modernity are imperilled and Western society must act against the new threat. Ironically, this drama is portrayed by secularists in quasi-religious terms: the forces of light are being eclipsed by a veil of ignorance akin to the barbarian invasions which cast classical civilisation into the Dark Ages. In the United States, evangelical Christianity is the villain; in Israel, ultra-Orthodoxy and religious Zionism. Elsewhere, fundamentalist Islam presents the main challenge. Even Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist fundamentalists are riding high, though their moral mantras are saturated with ethnic nationalism.

It is worth considering the story of the barbarians in more detail, because so much of Western liberal culture hinges on the intertwined ideas of progress, civilisation and modernity. From the outset, secular reason set its face against religion. Socrates chose to drink hemlock poison and speak the truth rather than worship the gods of ancient Athens. During the Renaissance, Copernicus shocked the religious sensibilities of his contemporaries by claiming the earth revolved around the sun. Iconoclastic philosophers from Spinoza in the seventeenth century to Hegel in the nineteenth had to tread carefully to avoid raising the hackles of the Church. Charles Darwin went to great lengths to defend the theory of evolution from its outraged religious critics as late as the mid-nineteenth century. Those seeking to apply science to society’s problems through secular education and health care (including birth control) had to struggle against dogmatic religious opponents. The mid-twentieth century saw the overthrow of archaic models of gender relations and repressive sexual mores, a new chapter in the long Whiggish story of human progress. Having won our freedom to reason, say the New Atheists, we must stand on guard against the religious barbarians prowling outside our gates.

There has been no shortage of threats in recent times. On 31 May 2009, anti-abortion activist Scott Roeder assassinated abortion doctor George Tiller inside the Kansas Lutheran church where Tiller was serving as an usher. This was the same state in which the Board of Education tried to introduce Creation Science into the school curriculum. Nationally, successive Republican administrations withdrew funding for global
family planning, causing demographic transitions to stall and women’s reproductive health to worsen all over the world. Meanwhile, in Taliban Afghanistan, women were forced by the virtue police to cover themselves head to toe (apart from a mesh screen) and walk silently lest their footfalls ‘arouse’ male passers-by. Arab governments bent over backwards to curtail liquor, television, women’s liberties and even hairdressing in an attempt to head off the challenge of Islamist populism. In Israel, ultra-Orthodox Jews stoned vehicles on a major Jerusalem thoroughfare, injuring a child, to protest against driving on the Sabbath. Some of their ostensibly more moderate Modern-Orthodox cousins could be found fanning the flames of conflict with the Palestinians as religious Zionist Settlers or overzealous Israeli Defence Force recruits in the Occupied Territories.

The global revival of religion has been chronicled in a number of important new books. But revivalist accounts must reckon with the claim of sceptics, who rightly point out that the big engines of revival are nearly all in developing countries. Pentecostalism, Seventh-day Adventism, Mormonism and the Jehovah’s Witnesses win most of their converts in Latin America, China and sub-Saharan Africa. Islamism is surging mainly in Muslim countries, few of which sport modern differentiated economies. Religious revival can therefore be explained away as the birth pangs of modernisation, not so very different from the Baptist, Methodist and Pietist revivals that took place in the United States and Western Europe in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. One could also make the case that the developing world remains, in Francis Fukuyama’s terms, ‘in history’, or, in Max Weber’s phrase, ‘enchanted’. That is, susceptible to the charms of heroic storylines and myths in a way we jaded Westerners are not. Many in the Muslim world, for instance, believe in Zionist and American conspiracy theories that would be laughed out of court in the West. The true test of religious revival, therefore, is whether it can thrive in Europe, Japan, North America and Australasia. So far, there is little evidence of genuine revival in these parts of the world.

Does this mean the New Atheists can rest easy? Not quite. For, hidden among the weeds of the global religious revival are some sturdy new growths which are resistant to the charms of Western secularism. The winning formula is not that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who convert
many but suffer from high turnover and have limited appeal in the Western core. Instead, the Enlightenment-resistant strain of religion is that of the Amish, ultra-Orthodox Jews and North American Mormons. All have thrived in the most individualistic, profane Western societies. Their model combines rapid population growth with high membership retention. Like many ethnic groups, they practice endogamy, or in-group marriage, and maintain community boundaries by largely living apart from other groups. Inflow from conversion is limited. Some members are lost to the ‘outside’, but fertility and immigration are more than sufficient to propel religious expansion in a world of falling fertility. The success of what I term endogenous growth sects – religious groups that grow their own – has not gone unnoticed. Mainstream religious fundamentalists already encourage aspects of this strategy. Increasingly, they are coming to understand that the endogenous-growth business model holds the key to success in the ‘disenchanted’ world. They are, in Daniel Dennett’s terms, backward-engineering their faith by learning from religious evolution. This sectarian blueprint has certain features in common with religions-turned-ethnic groups like the Druze, Armenians, Sikhs and Jews. The difference is that unlike ethnic groups, which are content to just be themselves, endogenous growth sects are expansionist, claiming that their truth is the universal one for all humanity. Growth provides proof of chosenness. How did we get to this state of affairs? Ironically, modern secularism helped create the very life form which may come back to haunt it.

Secularisation
To understand religion we need to begin with its opposite, secularism. Secularisation has two dimensions: the public separation of religious institutions from those of politics (‘church from state’) and the decline of private piety. The United States exemplifies a society which has high public secularism (the constitutional ‘wall of separation’) but low private secularism. England is the opposite: the Anglican Church is publicly established, but the piety of the population is very low. Other countries are more uniform: Saudi Arabia, for instance, has little public or private secularism. Personal piety consists of three related but distinct dimensions: affiliation, belief and attendance. Someone might identify their
affiliation as ‘Christian’ on a census form, but no longer believe in the divinity of Jesus or attend church. They might affiliate as Christian and attend church for social reasons, but still not believe in the Bible. The three dimensions of piety – affiliation, belief and attendance – strongly influence each other, but also remain somewhat independent. Consider the views of Jordan, a tenth-grader from the north of England: ‘I don’t believe in owt [anything]. I don’t believe in any religions … I’m Christian but I don’t believe in owt.’ Here the ‘Christian’ label functions as a largely inherited aspect of identity among those who have been brought up Christian or wish to distinguish themselves from Muslims and other non-Christian groups. Much the same is true of many inner-city French ‘Muslims’ involved in the 2005 Banlieue Riots, who are loyal to ‘Team Islam’ but often lead secular lives.6

This book considers both private and public secularism, but focuses more on private piety. This is because strong private faith provides a springboard for public religion even in officially secular societies such as America, whereas a weak substratum of piety, as in Europe, undermines the influence of religion in public life. Anglican bishops in the House of Lords do not a religious England make. Secularisation is a word that stirs great passions. The idea of the inevitable decline of religion culminating in its disappearance sticks in the throat of many religious intellectuals. Even secular multiculturalists and radical postmodernists reject secularisation. It is viewed as passé, part of an unquestioning Western belief in progress and reason which is out of step with the times. Charles Taylor derides the idea of secularisation as a misguided ‘subtraction story’ in which human reason and liberty grow as religion recedes. This notion, he argues, is based not on hard evidence but on a ‘master narrative’ of progress. José Casanova views secularisation as inseparable from religion: theologians first developed the category of ‘secular’ time, and only against the backdrop of faith can we discern what belongs in the here and now and what transcends it.7 Yet while many scholars contest the theory that religion will ultimately disappear, most accept that religious fervour can rise and fall, and that it has been in decline for some time in Western Europe.
Secularisation in the West

One of the most breathtaking developments of the past half-century is the collapse of religious piety in the West. Among advanced Western countries, only the United States seems to have bucked the trend. In 1970, over 40 per cent of the combined population of France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Germany went to church weekly. In 1998, just 22 per cent did. Across a wider range of ten Western European countries, the numbers fell from 38.4 to 16.6 per cent between 1975 and 1998. Those who remained in the pews were disproportionately elderly and female, raising questions about the future viability of the church. As one devout American serviceman related to me, when he took his family to church in Belgium the congregation consisted of his family and a ‘bunch of old people’. Across the continent, churches are dwindling and closing, with many being converted into apartments, homes or even dance bars like ‘the Church’, a popular London club. Consider the pace of decline in England: in 1957, 20 per cent of English adults attended services weekly. This fell steadily: to 12 per cent by 1979 and 7 per cent in 1998. The 55,000 churches of 1961 declined more gently, to 47,600 by 2005 with another 4,000 projected to go by 2020. And this in spite of generous government grants to maintain them.

Elsewhere, the pews have emptied even faster: Irish attendance plunged by 17 percentage points between 1981 and 2001. Luxembourg’s dropped by 21, Portugal’s by 17, Spain’s by 15, and Belgium and the Netherlands’ by 12. Countries with significant Catholic populations experienced the most dramatic collapses. In Eastern Europe, religion imploded for political reasons. Coercive socialist atheism – extending to sanctions, punishment or even murder – was the rod that broke religion’s back: a reconstruction of Russian church attendance rates shows a decline from roughly 40–50 per cent attendance in 1920 to 2–3 per cent by 1990. In all Soviet Republics, be they Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim or Protestant, the proportion of people affiliating with their religion fell sharply between 1900 and 1970. These numbers rose slightly after 1989, but generally failed to recover.

In France, where Catholicism was vanquished by the Revolution of 1789, and in Protestant Europe, where attendance peaked around 1850, congregation numbers have stabilised. But regular attenders typically
make up little more than 5 per cent of the population of these countries. Given its current rapid rate of decline, Catholic Europe is set to catch up with Protestant Europe in a generation or two. Despite this evidence, scholars such as Grace Davie aver that religion maintains its power because many who no longer attend continue to ‘believe without belonging’. For instance, across ten European countries in the year 2000 European Values Survey, half claimed to be ‘religious’, though just 7 per cent regularly attended services. Europeans also tend to hold a positive view of religion and are willing to fund it. The British, for example, are broadly willing to see their tax money go towards restoring churches and paying for faith schools. In Scandinavia and Germany, the overwhelming majority of Lutherans pay a tax to support the church despite never attending. They do so in the belief that religion is an important resource for morality, identity, birth, marriage and death. People do not participate in religious services but imbibe their religion ‘vicariously’ through the acts of committed believers and the pronouncements of religious public figures. The paternalist ‘Thought for the Day’ from religious leaders, broadcast on Britain’s public BBC Radio 4, may seem horribly out of place in a secular society but arouses little protest.

Nevertheless, further decline may be in the offing. On a scale of 1 to 10, the proportion from the above ten countries (Scandinavia minus Finland, France, Britain, Holland, Spain, Ireland and Belgium) claiming to be in the top three most religious categories in the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2004 was more than twice as high among those over 65 than among those aged 18–24. In England, half the population aged 18–34 say they identify themselves as non-religious while among those over 55, just 20 per cent do. Patterns across the entire European continent show the same age-graded pattern of decline encompassing affiliation, belief and attendance. Even belief in God, the indicator most resistant to erosion, is starting to fade. Across ten Western countries sampled in 1947 and 2001, those answering ‘yes’ to the question ‘Do you believe in God?’ fell from 85 to 72 per cent. Naturally this varies by country, age and education. Virtually all Irish believe in the deity, but only half of Swedes and two-thirds of Dutch do. Once again, the drift of the data points towards decline since the youngest are most prone to defection. For instance, in a sample of ten West European countries in 2000, the ‘God gap’ between
those over 60 and under 30 was 20 percentage points. This suggests that as today’s young generations age, European societies will become more like Sweden and less like Ireland. We cannot know for sure, because there is some evidence that people return to belief (but not attendance) as they age, but the generational trends all seem to slant in a declining direction.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{American secularism?}

Many see the United States as the great exception to the rule of secularism.\textsuperscript{16} The proportion of Americans claiming to be members of a church, regardless of their attendance, rose steadily after independence, from 17 per cent in 1776 to 69 per cent in 2005. This trajectory wasn’t smooth: ‘great awakenings’ of religion took place during 1725–50 and 1800–1840, and the upward trend was punctuated by occasional declines such as the ‘religious depression’ of 1925–35, sparked by economic collapse and internal rifts within mainline Protestantism.\textsuperscript{17} The trend has stabilised in recent decades, which is verified by detailed post-Second World War survey research. Roughly 40 per cent of the American population report that they attend services weekly, a figure which has held steady for half a century. This has little to do with being an immigrant nation occupying a vast terrain where religion counters rootlessness. Consider how different things look north of the border: in Canada, church attendance in 2004 stood at just half the American rate. Almost 20 per cent of English-speaking Canadians – the spiritual or actual descendants of American Tory settlers – described themselves as having no religious affiliation, up from 12 per cent in 1985.\textsuperscript{18}

Though the United States is treated as the great exception to the rule of Western secularism, it has not remained unaffected. The proportion of Americans with no religious affiliation was less than 5 per cent in the early twentieth century. Thus today just five per cent of Americans born before 1925 are unaffiliated and, until about 1992, this was also true of those born during 1925–45. In the early 1990s, the baby boomer generation, born 1946–65, had twice the rate of non-affiliation – 10 per cent – of their parents. But the policy overreach of the Christian Right in the late 1980s and early 1990s struck a serious blow to faith, tugging all generations in a secular direction, especially youth. By 2007, 15 per
cent of boomers and 20 per cent of Generation Xers declared their religion as ‘none’. Among the youngest, ‘Nexter’ generation just entering the electorate, rates of non-religion are running at European levels, i.e. in the 35–40 per cent range. Previous work shows that religious identities tend to crystallise in early adulthood and persist through the life course. This suggests that the United States could resemble Western Europe in one or two generations.

Harvard’s Robert Putnam, one of the researchers on the above project, told me that he views the post-1992 upswing in non-affiliation as purely political, unrelated to any secularising processes. He considers secularisation a steady, gradual phenomenon, one which by definition cannot account for rapid declines in religious identity. He also mentions that most unaffiliated Americans continue to express high levels of religious belief, and will be lured back to organised religion by astute religious entrepreneurs such as megachurch pastor Rick Warren or liberal evangelical Jim Wallis. Megachurches and modern, hip prayer styles will win the day, but the evangelical message, cautions Putnam, needs to be modified in line with the liberal political preferences of the new generation. Mike Hout and Claude Fischer reached the same conclusion. They show that 60 per cent of Americans who declare themselves to be religious ‘nones’ pray, two-thirds believe in a higher power and half believe, at least some of the time, in God. One of the strongest predictors of an unaffiliated individual is a liberal political preference. Other studies claim that liberals are exaggerating their non-religiosity on surveys in deference to local norms, just as conservatives overstate their religiosity.

Be that as it may, the evidence for American secularism is too powerful to ignore. Sudden political drivers of religious decline are just as real as the steady drumbeat of economic and cultural change. This is certainly the position of David Martin, one of the most sophisticated secularisation theorists, who shows how religions gain or lose adherents depending upon which secular horses they bet on. Catholicism in Ireland backed the popular cause of Irish nationalism and thrived, while in France it sided with the hated ancien régime and sank. In America, religion per se was never closely associated with an unpopular regime, as it was in much of Europe. Religion proved broad enough to offer a brand to