

# Breeding for God

BY ERIC KAUFMANN

*In Europe, the fertility advantage of the religious over non-believers has historically been counterbalanced by the march of secularisation. Not any more. Secularisation in Europe has reached saturation point, and Islam continues to grow. We will soon enter a new age of religious resurgence*

THE MODERN WESTERN world is inseparable from the idea of secularisation. From Socrates's refusal to acknowledge the Greek gods to Copernicus's heretical idea that the earth revolved around the sun to the French revolution's overthrow of religious authority, the path of modernity seemed to lead away from the claims of religion. In our own time, the decline in church attendance in Europe is seen as evidence that secular modernity has entered the lives of ordinary people. Some optimistic secularists even see signs that the US, noted as a religious exception among western nations, is finally showing evidence of declining church attendance. But amid the apparent dusk of faith in Europe, one can already spot the religious owl of Minerva taking flight. This religious revival may be as profound as that which changed the course of the Roman empire in the 4th century.

In his remarkable book *The Rise of Christianity*, the American sociologist of religion Rodney Stark explains how an obscure sect with just 40 converts in the year 30AD became the official religion of the Roman empire by 300. The standard answer to this question is that the emperor Constantine had a vision which led to his conversion and an embrace of Christianity. Stark demonstrates the flaws in this "great man" portrait of history. Christianity, he says, expanded at the dramatic rate of 40 per cent a decade for over two centuries, and this upsurge was only partly the result of its appeal to the wider population of Hellenistic pagans. Christian demography was just as important. Unlike the pagans, Christians cared for their sick during plagues rather than abandoning them, which sharply lowered mortality. In contrast to the "macho" ethos of pagans, Christians emphasised male fidelity and marriage, which attracted a higher percentage of female converts, who in turn raised

more Christian children. Moreover, adds Stark, Christians had a higher fertility rate than pagans, yielding even greater demographic advantage.

The ancient sources which Stark draws upon are open to question. Less contestable is the fact that many latter-day religious groups have thrived thanks to high fertility. The Mormons, for example, like Stark's early Christians, have maintained a 40 per cent per decade population growth rate for 100 years. They remain 70 per cent of Utah's population in the teeth of substantial non-Mormon immigration, and have even expanded into neighbouring states. In the 1980s, the Mormon fertility rate was around three times that of American Jews. Today the Mormons, once a fringe sect, outnumber Jews among Americans under the age of 45.

Demography is also critical to explaining the rise of the religious right in America. An important recent article in the *American Journal of Sociology* by Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley and Melissa Wilde examines trends in American religious denominational growth in the 20th century. The authors find that conservative Protestant denominations increased their share of all white Protestants from one third among those born in 1900 to two thirds for those born in 1975. Three quarters of the growth of white conservative Protestant denominations is demographic, since they have maintained a fertility advantage over more liberal denominations for many decades. As with the rise of Christianity itself, slow-moving sociological pressures created the conditions for a political "tipping point" to occur. This time, Republican strategists played the role of Constantine's advisers, who saw which way the wind was blowing and moved to exploit the new social trends.

Outside the US, there is further evidence for this thesis. In Israel, the growth of the ultra-Orthodox proportion of the Jewish population is all but assured because of their threefold fertility advantage over secular Jews. Elsewhere in the middle east, the relative decline of Arab Christians—especially in their

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Lebanese heartland—has nothing to do with conversion and everything to do with demography.

The share of the world's population that is religious is growing, after nearly a century of modest decline. Much of this effect has been produced by the younger generations in the developing world rejecting secularisation, combined with higher religious fertility levels. Throughout the world, the religious tend to have more children, irrespective of age, education or wealth. "Secular" Europe is no exception to this rule. In an analysis of European data from ten west European countries in the period 1981-2004, I found some surprising results. Next to age and marital status, a woman's religiosity was the strongest predictor of her number of offspring. Numerous other studies have found a similar relationship, and a whole school of thought in demography—"second demographic transition theory"—suggests that fertility differences in developed countries are underpinned by value differences, with secular men and women unwilling to sacrifice career and lifestyle aspirations to have children and have them early.

**W**E ARE now living through the first modern decade in which Europe's population has declined for reasons other than war or disease. This represents the delayed demographic reaction to the arrival of below-replacement fertility some 30 years ago. As Europe's population stock declines, it will in part be replaced by new populations. It is easiest to see the effect of population replacement in ethnic and racial terms, because non-white immigrants are very visible in Europe's host societies. The idea that one ethnic group can demographically replace another within a territory is widely accepted, and social scientists even use terms like "neighbourhood transition" or the "browning of America" to describe this.

Yet immigrants bring higher religiosity as well as ethnic diversity. Many seem to find the idea of religious populations replacing secular ones more difficult to accept than ethnic change. Part of this has to do with the invisibility of religious growth: most of the religious people in Europe and America are white Christians and their growth comes through slow-moving demographic processes which are less dramatic than immigration. The same dynamic operates in the developing world, where the faster-growing religious population is often of the same ethnic background as the secular one.

In a series of controversial articles, Phillip Longman of the New America Foundation has drawn attention to the political ramifications of religious demography in the US, pointing to the sizeable fertility advantage enjoyed by more religious "red" states over the Democratic "blue" states. As Arthur Brooks of Syracuse University recently wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, "if you picked 100 unrelated politically liberal adults at random, you would find that they had, between them, 147 children. If you picked 100 conservatives, you would find 208 kids. That's a 'fertility gap' of 41 per cent. Given that

about 80 per cent of people with an identifiable party preference grow up to vote the same way as their parents, this gap translates into lots more little Republicans than little Democrats to vote in future elections." Many liberals challenge this logic. Surely many of the children of the religious in the US will become secular, as they have in western Europe for generations. And in Europe, religion counts for less in elections than it ever has, and Catholic Europeans from Dublin to Barcelona are still embracing secularism with gusto. Even in the US, there has been an appreciable growth in the "no religion" population over the past decade to 14 per cent. Seizing upon this evidence, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, two leading political scientists, advance the argument that the world is still heading in a more secular direction. They accept that the reverse is occurring in the short term, but claim that modernisation will result in increased wealth and security in the developing world, lowering religiosity and fertility. Secularism will eventually trump religious fertility.

They have a point. Phillip Longman is correct to identify religious fertility as important, but has neglected the "apostasy" side of the equation. If fertility is always the main mechanism of social change, we would expect much higher populations of Amish, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and other sects with very high fertility. Yet we know that these sects suffer very high "defection" rates—even the Mormons lose a higher percentage of their children than most American denominations. A religious population is more porous than an ethnic population, because conversion or abandonment of the faith can take place rapidly and easily. And as long as the rate of abandonment is high enough to compensate for the religious fertility advantage, there is no threat to sec-



ularism. European data show that the religious have had a demographic advantage over their secular counterparts for several generations, but also that this advantage has been balanced out by the secularisation of many of the children of Europe's faithful. Bearing this in mind, I developed a more sophisticated model of religious change that accounts for both religious fertility and abandonment of faith in western Europe.

I found that the classical secularisation trend does not work as it used to. The case of the US sheds some light on this. Much of the 20th-century growth of conservative Protestant denominations could have been lost to secularism or to more liberal, higher status sects like the Episcopalians, as conservative Protestants became better educated, wealthier and more urban. What impeded such an "assimilation" of conservative Protestants into more liberal theologies was a disruption of the pattern linking social and religious mobility. Conservative Protestants, once content to be led by an urbane liberal-Protestant elite, became increasingly conscious of their group identity. They began to reject the leadership of liberal Protestants, starting in the 1920s with their secession from the Federal Council of Churches. This intensified after 1970 with the so-called "culture wars." Liberal theologies and secularism came to be typecast as the malign "other" against which true Christians should mobilise. As evangelicals gained in self-consciousness, they increasingly erected communal boundaries—such as their own media—which could bind the generations regardless of education or wealth.

The value changes of 1960s America proved a high-water mark of cultural mobility that has been replaced by a cold war of value stasis. The pool of unselfconscious or moderately religious people is on the wane as the "extremes" of fundamental religiosity and secularism grow. When battle lines become firmly drawn, potential converts, like floating voters, dry up. In this context, demography becomes more important than proselytism. A similar process seems to be occurring in Europe—as the religious become increasingly self-conscious of their unusual identity in a secular society, they become more resistant to secularisation.

EUROPE—ESPECIALLY western Europe—is seen as the world leader in secular modernisation, and is used as the model by Norris and Inglehart for their theory of secularisation. But if western Europe really is the trend-setter for secularism, there is a problem: secularisation appears to be losing force in its own backyard. Western Europe can broadly be divided in two. On the one hand are Catholic countries like Spain or Ireland, where religiosity is still high—

around 60 per cent of the Irish population regularly attend church—and secularisation (in terms of religious beliefs and attendance) arrived only in the second half of the 20th century. On the other are the largely Protestant nations (including Britain) and Catholic France, which secularised far earlier. But survey data from 1981–2004 show that in these latter nations, on average, postwar generations are no longer becoming more secular. It seems as though western Europe, with the possible exception of Italy, will eventually converge towards a church attendance rate of little more than 5 per cent. However this will mask a much larger proportion—around 50 per cent—who continue to describe themselves as religious and affiliate with a religious denomination.

These people, described by Grace Davie as "believing without belonging," are seen by some as carriers of a flimsy faith which will soon disappear, and which doesn't affect behaviour or attitudes. But if this is the case, how do we explain the fact that these non-attending believers have fertility behaviour much closer to church attenders than to non-believers?

The non-attending religious are also significantly more likely than non-believers to identify themselves as ideologically conservative, even when controlling for education, wealth, age and generation. The religious population has two important

demographic advantages over its non-believing counterpart. First, it maintains a 15–20 per cent fertility lead over the non-religious. Second, religious people in the childbearing 18–45 age range are disproportionately female. Offset against this is the much younger age structure of secularists.

The pivotal question is where the balance lies between religious fertility and religious abandonment in the secular cutting-edge societies of France and Protestant Europe. The population balance in these countries stands at roughly 53 per cent non-religious to 47 per cent religious. My projections, based on demographic differences between the populations and current patterns of religious abandonment, suggest that the secular population will continue to grow at a decelerating rate for three or four more decades, to peak at around 55 per cent. The proportion of secular people will then begin to decline between 2035 and 2045. The momentum behind secularisation in the most secular countries is a reflection of the religious abandonment of the pre-1945 generations, which overwhelmed the fertility advantage of the faithful. The end of apostasy in more recent generations suggests that religious demography will begin to assert itself, resulting in a population more religious at the end of the 21st century than at its beginning. Just as in the case of the Mormons or early Christians,

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demography rather than mass conversion will be the main agent of change.

This slow shift against secularisation would have only a very gradual impact on the spirit of European society were it not for immigration. Immigration from Latin America has enabled American Catholics to grow despite losing far more communicants to other denominations than they get in return. In Europe, immigration will similarly power the rise of the religious population, especially its Islamic part.

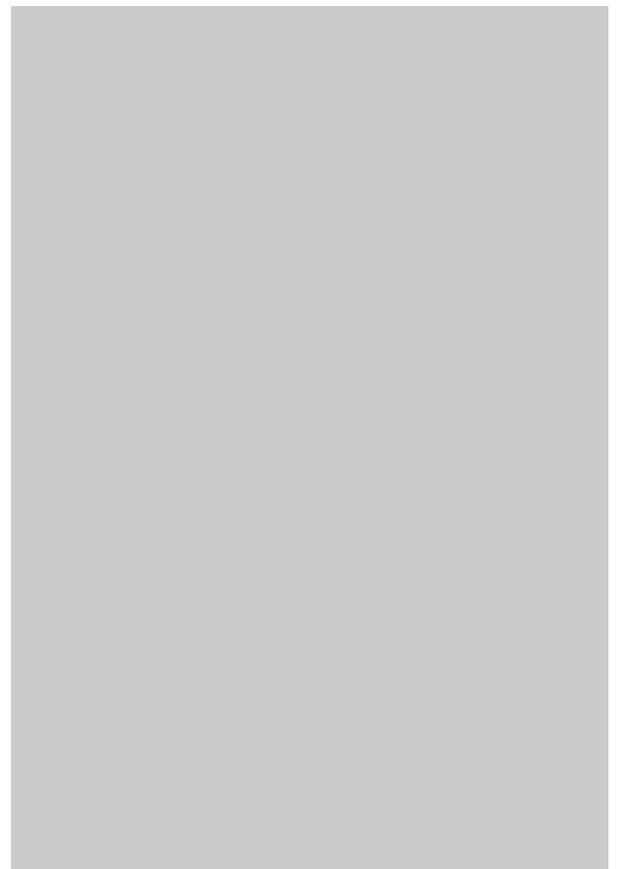
In the US, we know that the population will be less than 50 per cent non-Hispanic white by 2050, but it is difficult to predict what proportion of Europe's population will be of non-European descent in the future, because few European countries collect census data on ethnicity and religion. The occasionally cited figure of 30 per cent ethnic minorities in western Europe by 2050 is little more than an educated guess. One of the few countries to collect ethno-religious census information is Austria, where a recent projection—based on a conservative estimate of 20,000 immigrants a year and various assumptions about religious abandonment and fertility—predicted that Muslims would make up between 14 and 26 per cent of the population in 2050, up from around 4 per cent today. Secularists are projected to grow from their current level of 12 per cent in the same period, but their future is far less certain.

Muslim secularisation would certainly alter this picture and forms a cornerstone of the Norris-Inglehart secularisation thesis. But a glance at the surveys of ethnic minorities in Europe reveals little evidence of this. In Britain, for instance, second-generation Afro-Caribbean and eastern European Christians are substantially less religious than their parents. Though their religiosity remains much higher than that of the wider population, these communities may approach the secular British norm and provide a source of growth for the non-religious population. On the other hand, for a number of reasons there is virtually no change in the religiosity of Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslims between the first and second generations. A recent study of Dutch ethnic minorities paints a similar picture—religious retention among second-generation Muslim groups but secularisation among Dutch-born Caribbean Christians.

The future response of Europe's lapsed Christian population to the growth of European Islam is difficult to gauge. Muslim growth may prompt a more strident secular nationalist response, as it seems to have done in France and Holland, or it may lead to a renewed emphasis on Christian identity (see the recent speeches of Pope Benedict). David Voas and Steve Bruce have found evidence for the latter in the 2001 British census, where the proportion of white British respondents describing themselves as Christian (rather than "no religion") was higher in districts with large Muslim populations. Christian identity

does not equate to growing religious belief, but it eventually might. In ethnically divided Northern Ireland, religious conflict fuels far higher religiosity than in other parts of Britain. In either case, the combination of a fast-growing Muslim community and a stable or slowly growing Christian population will squeeze the non-religious, causing a major reversal of the secularising trends of the past 50 to 100 years.

Western Europe will initially emerge as a more religious society, but not a fundamentalist one. Even so, religiosity—as belief rather than attendance—significantly predicts a more conservative ideological orientation. Though we are unlikely to see the rise of evangelical Christian politics in Europe, we may find a long-term drift towards more conservative social values. European publics will become more "traditional" on moral issues like pornography, abortion, family values, religious education and gay marriage. Inter-faith co-operation between Christians and Muslims on these issues is hardly beyond the realm of the possible since ecumenical structures are already in place in most countries to facilitate joint platforms. The ease with which conservative Protestants and traditionalist Catholics and Jews have co-operated in the US, and the fact that most Muslim Arabs in America voted Republican prior to 9/11, may be taken as evidence. Much will depend on how these ideological synergies are channelled by parties and electoral systems in different countries, but by the mid-21st



century, the peak of secular European politics will be long past. As in America, politicians will need to stay on the right side of religious sentiment to ensure they are not outflanked by their opponents.

Over the *longue durée*, the fundamentalist component of Europe's population may begin to increase for the same demographic reasons as in America. The diversity of religious groups in Europe will guarantee a separation of religion and state, but this cannot protect secular public policies from being eroded by a coalition of religious groups who have agreed to submerge their differences. Religious lobbyists couching their claims in the rhetoric of relativism and diversity will ask why the secular point of view on issues like abortion, blasphemy, pornography and evolution is the only one taught, aired or "respected."

Much will depend on whether conservative political parties opt for a multi-ethnic religious platform or instead downplay religion and mobilise a white nationalist majority across the secular/religious divide. The religious path is currently viewed as the more acceptable one. For the past 20 years, the Republicans have tried to unite whites and non-whites under the banner of religious conservatism and traditional values. Notwithstanding the current illegal immigration furor in the US, the party elite will almost certainly continue with this agenda. Many European conservatives will advocate a similar strategy as the only acceptable face of cultural conservatism in an increasingly multicultural society.

**D**EMOGRAPHIC CURRENTS are carrying Europe towards a more American model of modernity. They also signal that current theories of secularisation need revision. Fertility in the developing world is falling rapidly due to urbanisation, but the World Values Survey finds that religiosity in these countries shows no sign of declining. The religious continue to have higher fertility than their secular brethren in the developing world, regardless of income or education. Though China will probably remain more secular than western Europe, this is unlikely to be true of Latin America, south Asia or the middle east. For them, modernisation is more likely to result in a US-style religious society.

Taking a step back from the figures reveals how the revival of religiosity in the west in the 21st century may reconfigure the Enlightenment belief in rational individualism. Thus far, liberal optimism has soundly defeated the naysayers. Marx's warning of cataclysmic economic contradictions between capital and labour proved as wide of the mark as Daniel Bell's fears a century later of the cultural contradiction between workplace discipline and consumer hedonism.

Even rising crime rates and the breakdown of the traditional family do not threaten the liberal order. This brings us to Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" in which liberal democracy and capitalism prevail. The idea is premised on the superiority of western military technology, which enables individualistic societies to inoculate themselves against the challenge from more cohesive "barbarian" ones. Fukuyama is right. We may suffer terrorism, but terrorists cannot bring about the collapse of our complex societies. Yet all this assumes the demographic sustainability of liberal capitalism. If Fukuyama's "last men" cannot replace themselves, they will be succeeded by those with a more traditional outlook.

The liberal-capitalist idea spread widely in the 19th and 20th centuries in part because it reduced mortality and freed the minds and resources of societies, allowing them to develop the advanced technology with which to defeat their religious and socialist rivals. It also enabled the demographic expansion of the west as infant mortality fell, prosperity resulted in earlier marriage and family formation, and new lands were settled.

A recent study by Walter Scheidel, Vegard Skirbekk and Hans-Peter Kohler shows that wealthier (presumably more "modern") individuals had higher fertility than the poor in Europe until the late 19th century. But starting in the late 19th century, the

authors demonstrate that the European poor began to have larger families than the wealthy. Today, many of the demographic advantages that once accrued to liberalism have fallen away. Mortality is largely conquered, technology is globally diffused and the secular west is becoming a demographic ant.

Perhaps we are entering a new stage in world history in which the demographic flaws in liberalism will become more apparent, paving the way for the return of a communitarian social model. This may still leave democracy, procedural liberalism and mixed capitalism intact. But it will seriously challenge modernism, that great secular movement of cultural individualism which swept high art and culture after 1880 and percolated down the social scale to liberalise social attitudes in the 1960s. Cultural modernism has accompanied technological modernisation in the west, while the non-western world has generally modernised its technology rather than its values. Daniel Bell prophesied that modernism's antinomian cultural outlook would prompt a "great instauration" of religion as people sought spiritual solace from the alienation of modern life. Bell has so far been proved wrong, but history may yet vindicate him as we bear witness not to spiritual revival, but to a religious *reconquista* based, ironically, on the nakedly this-worldly force of demography. ■

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## We are unlikely to see the rise of evangelical politics in Europe, but we may see a drift towards conservative values

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