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By Eric Kaufmann

Newsweek International

Nov. 13, 2006 issue - The modern western world is inseparable from the idea of secularism. From Socrates' refusal to acknowledge the Greek gods to Copernicus' heretical idea that the Earth revolved around the sun to the French revolution's overthrow of clerical authority, the path of modernity has seemed to lead away from the claims of religion. In our own time, the decline of church attendance in Europe is seen as evidence that secular modernity has entered the lives of ordinary people. 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 fourth century.

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In his remarkable book "The Rise of Christianity," the American sociologist Rodney Stark explains how an obscure sect with just 40 converts in the year 30 A.D. became the official religion of Rome by 300 A.D. Standard histories point to Constantine's conversion; Stark looks to Christian demography. Unlike the pagans, he reports, Christians cared for their sick during plagues rather than abandoning them, which sharply lowered mortality. They emphasized male fidelity and marriage, which in turn attracted a higher percentage of female converts, who raised more Christian children. Moreover, says Stark, Christians had a higher fertility rate—yielding an even greater demographic advantage.

Latter-day religious groups have thrived for similar reasons. The population of Mormons, for example, has grown at a rate of 40 percent per decade for the last 100 years—three times faster than, say, Jews. Once a fringe sect, the Mormons today outnumber Jews among Americans under the age of 45. Demography also helps explain the rise of the religious right in America. A recent article in the American Journal of Sociology by Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley and Melissa Wilde finds that conservative Protestant denominations have increased their share of all-white Protestants

from one third among those born in 1900 to two thirds for those born in 1975. As with the rise of Christianity itself, slow-moving sociological forces led to a political "tipping point." 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.

This effect is duplicating itself around the world. After a century of modest decline, the share of the world's population that is religious is growing—for the simple reason that the religious tend to have more children, irrespective of age, education or wealth. Nor is "secular" Europe an exception. In an analysis of data from 10 European countries for the years 1981-2004, I found that next to age and marital status, a woman's religiosity was the strongest predictor of her number of offspring.

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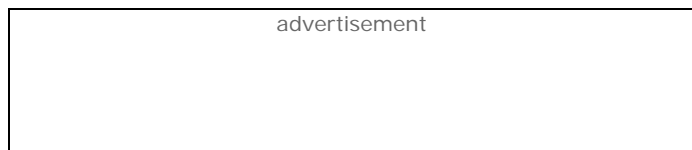
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Europe—especially western Europe—is seen as the world leader in secular modernization. Yet secularization is losing force in its own backyard. Western Europe can roughly be divided in two. On the one hand are Catholic countries like Spain or Ireland, where religiosity is still high (around 60 percent of the Irish regularly attend church) and secularization arrived relatively late. On the other are the largely Protestant nations (including Britain) and Catholic France, which secularized early and are the least religious. The population balance within these "cutting edge" secular countries stands at roughly 53 percent nonreligious to 47 percent religious.

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The religious half of the population has two demographic advantages. First, it maintains a 15-20 percent lead in fertility. Second, religious people in the child-bearing 18-45 range are disproportionately female. My projections suggest that northwest Europe's secular population will continue to grow at a decelerating rate for three or four more decades, peaking at about 55 percent before beginning to decline between 2035 and 2045. Bottom line: more Europeans will be religious at the end of the 21st century than at its beginning.

This slow shift would have only a gradual impact on the spirit of European society were it not for immigration, especially its Islamic component. In the United States, we know that the population will be less than 50 percent non-Hispanic white by 2050. But few European countries collect census data on ethnicity and religion. One of the few to do so is Austria, where a recent projection estimated that Muslims would make up between 14 and 26 percent of the population by 2050, up from 4 percent today. This would matter less if Muslims became as secular as everyone else. But significantly, a survey in Britain finds 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.

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 nationalism, as in France and Holland, or it may lead to a new emphasis on Christian identity. (See the recent speeches of Pope Benedict XVI.) Researchers have found evidence for the latter in the 2001 British census, where the proportion of white respondents describing themselves as Christian was higher in districts with large Muslim populations. In ethnically divided Northern Ireland, sectarian conflict fuels far higher religiosity than in other parts of Britain.

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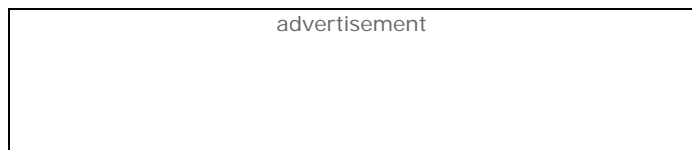
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Western Europe will initially emerge as a more religious society, but not a fundamentalist one. Though we are unlikely to see the rise of U.S.-style evangelical politics, we may experience a long-term drift toward more conservative social values. Europeans will become more "traditional" on moral issues like abortion, family values, religious education and gay marriage.

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Interfaith cooperation between Christians and Muslims on these issues is quite possible, since such ecumenical structures are already in place. The ease with which conservative Protestants and traditionalist Catholics and Jews have cooperated in the United States may be taken as evidence. Much depends on how these ideological synergies are channeled by parties and electoral systems in different countries. As in America, politicians will stay on the right side of religious sentiments to ensure they are not outflanked. Religious lobbyists will increasingly ask why the secular point of view on abortion, blasphemy, pornography and evolution is the only one taught, aired or "respected."

Demographic currents are carrying Europe toward a more American model of modernity. The revival of religiosity may reconfigure the Enlightenment belief in rational individualism. It will most likely leave its fundamental tenets—democracy, liberalism and mixed capitalism—intact. But it will deeply challenge our definition of what it is to be modern.

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Kaufmann, a professor at Birkbeck College, University of London, is author of "The Rise and Fall of Anglo-America."

This article is abridged from the current issue of Prospect magazine in Britain.

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