

Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?

Demography, in the form of migration and fertility, has an obvious political impact on life in Israel, but few realise that its impact on Europe could be just as profound.

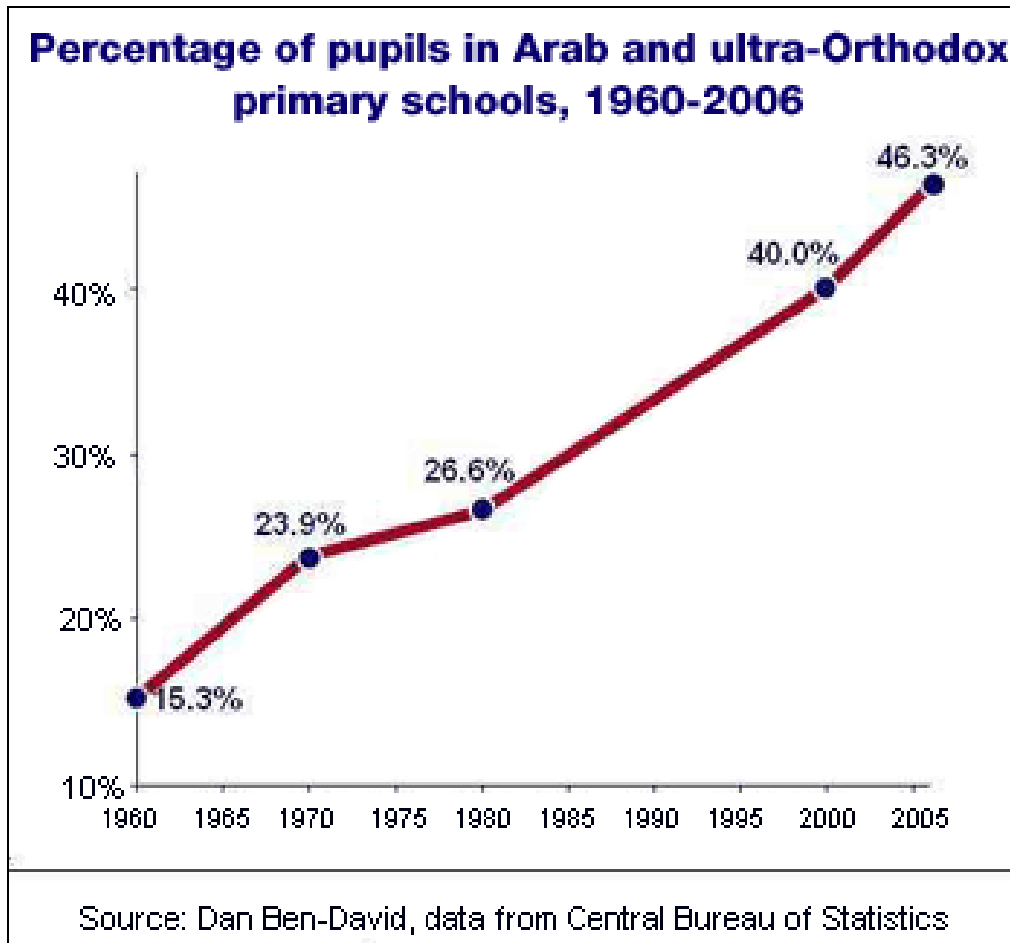
Jewish immigration and Palestinian emigration changed Palestine from an Arab to a Jewish society between the 1920s and 1949. The same outflow of Palestinians greatly increased the Sunni population of Lebanon and transformed Jordan. Later, high Palestinian fertility in the West Bank and Gaza resulted in an Arab majority in the Occupied Territories, which has altered the course of Israeli settlement policy. These tectonic changes are not limited to the West Bank and Gaza, but can take place *within*, as well as between, ethnic groups. On 8 February, 2007, Israeli economist Dan Ben David wrote in *Ha'aretz*:

It is difficult to overstate the pace at which Israeli society is changing. In 1960, 15 percent of primary-school pupils studied in either the ultra-Orthodox or the Arab-sector school systems (these are today's adults). In 1980, this rate reached 27 percent, and last year it was 46 percent.... If we don't find a way to integrate these populations into a shared Israeli narrative, and immediately, then in another generation or two - at most - the demographic balance within Israel will change the country beyond recognition.

Both Israeli Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox were opponents of the Zionist project prior to 1948 and are economic underperformers, yet both groups will be increasingly important players in the Israeli polity due to their rising demographic weight. At

present, the ultra-Orthodox often hold the balance of power in the Knesset, rendering their growth even more politically consequential.

Figure 1



Source: 'The Moment of Truth', *Ha'aretz*, 8 February 2007

For those of us sitting in comfortable western living rooms, it is tempting to believe that demography can be kept comfortably at arm's length, but the reality is that we in Europe stand on the cusp of a demographic revolution. For thirty years, western European couples have been failing to reproduce themselves by having fewer than the magic 2.1 children between them. This didn't matter until now because the

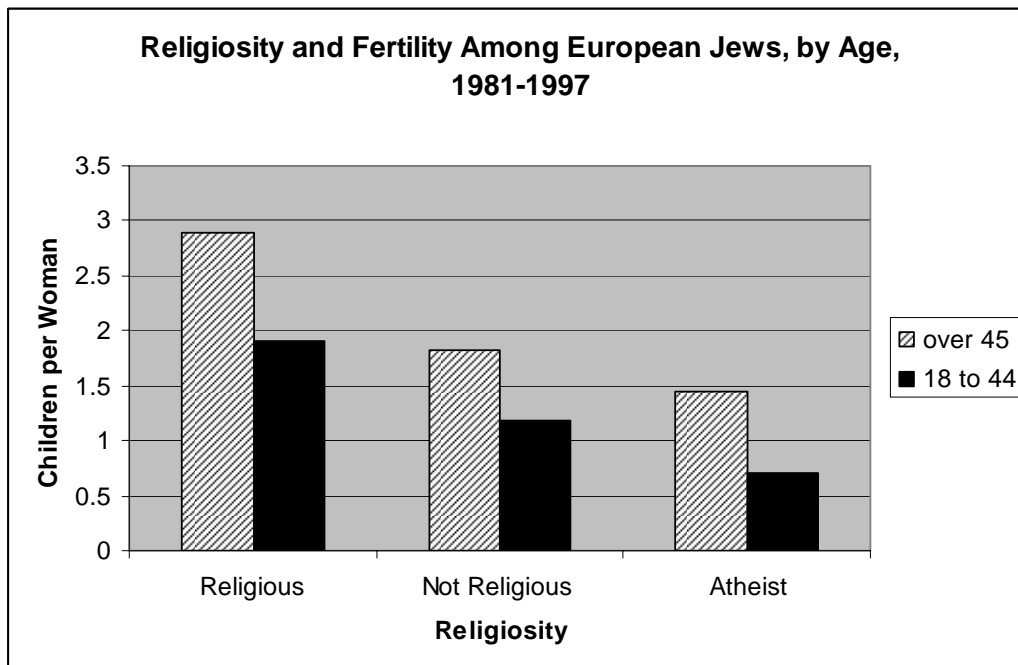
baby boom of the 1940s and 50s meant that many mothers were having their small number of children in the 1960s, 70s and 80s while the number of elderly dying off remained small due to increased longevity. This hid the aging structure of the total population behind rising total population numbers. Today, by contrast, western Europe's population would be falling without immigration. Eastern Europe is already experiencing rapid population decline, with Russia losing 750,000 from its population each year.

Today, the over-60s make up around 20 percent of western Europe's population. In 2050, this figure will be around 40 percent. The upshot: immigrants will be imported to replenish the working-age population and cover pension costs. As a result, those of non-European origin, who comprise little more than 4 percent of western Europe's population today, will make up 15-25 percent of the total in 2050, with higher concentrations among the under-35s and in urban areas. In the United States, the Census Bureau predicts that the proportion of non-European origin, which was around 10 percent in 1960, and stands at 30 percent today, will reach 50 percent by 2050.

These ethno-demographic shifts are broadly accepted, and many European and North American elites feel that integration can help to assimilate newcomers into the norms of western societies. In short, the replacement of whites with nonwhites is uncontroversial - at least among western liberal elites. Yet few have considered the equally commonsense notion that a secular population could be replaced by a religious one. In Israel, for instance, fertility rates among the ultra-Orthodox rose from an already staggering 6.49 children per woman in 1980-82 to 7.61 during 1990-96; among other Israeli Jews, it declined from 2.61 to 2.27. All told, the ultra-Orthodox are on track to comprise at least a quarter of the under-17 population by

2025. This change is also occurring, in microcosm, within Jewish Europe. A recent study, 'Jews in Britain', by the Institute of Jewish Policy Research, found that while most British Jews were economically successful and tend to have an older population age structure than their neighbours, Jews in the ultra-Orthodox communities of Hackney and Gateshead, near London, and Salford, near Manchester were both younger and poorer than their British equivalents. In the authors' words, these Jews '...are bucking the demographic trend in a remarkable way. There can be little doubt...that the demographic makeup of British Jewry, and probably also its religious structure, will be very different in just a generation or so.' (p. 99) Across Europe, as figure 2 shows, Jews who respond that they are 'religious' report almost twice the number of children as those who consider themselves 'nonreligious' or 'atheists'.

Figure 2.



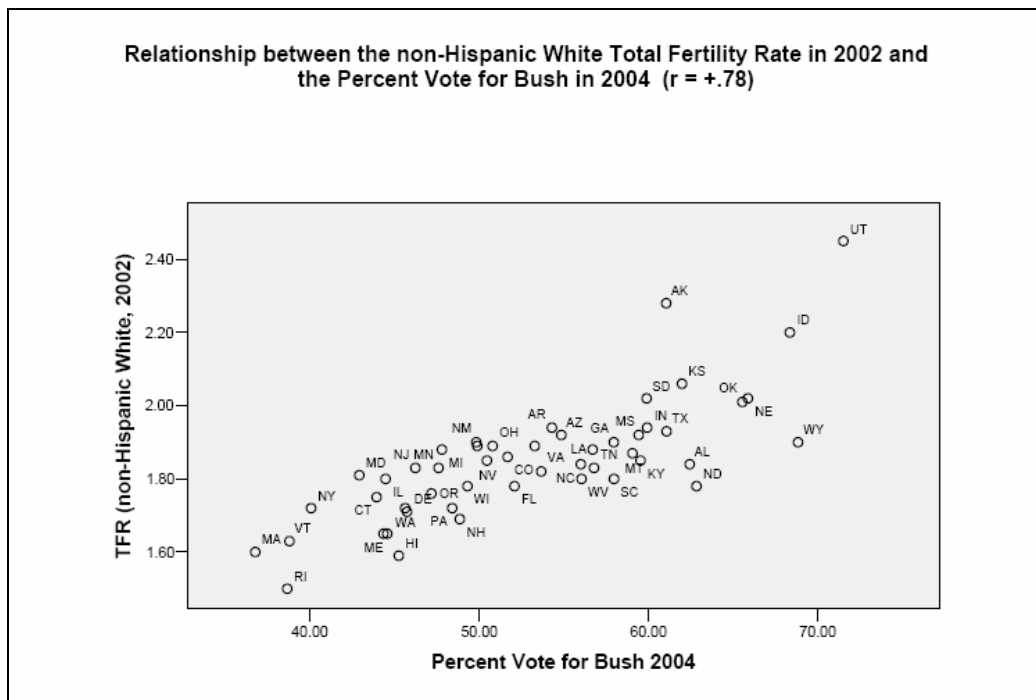
Source: Kaufmann, Eric. 'Sacralisation by Stealth', *Institute for Jewish Policy*

Research (JPR), June 2007

< <http://www.jpr.org.uk/publications/publication.php?id=197> >

A similar, if less rapid, story can be told about the rise of American conservative Protestantism and the Christian Right. Among white Protestant Americans born in 1900, only a third belonged to conservative 'evangelical' denominations like the Pentecostals or Southern Baptists. Among those born in 1975, two-thirds were conservative. The steady increase in the evangelical Protestant population led to a 'tipping point' in the late 1970s when Republican party strategists first mobilised the Christian Right. The underlying religious shifts had little to do with liberal Protestants switching to conservative denominations since three-quarters of the change is directly attributable to conservative Protestant fertility advantage over liberal denominations. The same is true of the Mormons, whose high fertility powered a population growth rate of 40 percent per decade over the past century. Among Americans born after 1945, there are now more Mormons than Jews. Thus a formerly fringe sect has overtaken a religious group once considered to be a pillar of American society. Today, Mormons and conservative Protestants are the backbone of the Republican vote, and there is a striking correlation between white fertility in a state and its vote for Bush in the 2004 election.

Figure 3.



Source: Lesthaeghe, Ron & L. Neidert. 2005. 'The "Second Demographic Transition" in the US: Spatial Patterns and Correlates', ID working paper
<http://www.vub.ac.be/SOCO/Lesthaeghe.htm>

History tells us that these kinds of demographically-driven social changes are nothing new. In fact, Rodney Stark, an American religious sociologist and author of *The Rise of Christianity* (1996), argues that the Mormon-like fertility, female-dominated sex ratio, and lower mortality of early Christians as compared with pagans allowed them to expand exponentially from 40 converts in 30 A.D. to some 3 million by the year 300. When the Roman emperor Constantine cast about for a religion for his empire, Christianity had achieved a 'tipping point', a presence that led to its adoption as Rome's official religion.

Charles Darwin's grandson, coincidentally also names Charles, penned a book in 1952 entitled *The Next Million Years*. In its pages, he prophesied that whoever still inhabited the planet a million years from now would display a high degree of religious

solidarity as those were the traits required for long-term evolutionary success. A latter-day disciple of Darwin's is Philip Longman, who warns, in his *Empty Cradle* (2005), that if the secular West doesn't relearn the habit of having children, they will soon be replaced by religiously-committed natives and religious immigrants.

The logic behind this argument is compelling, but the obvious counter to it is that so long as enough children of the religious can be seduced by secularism, there is no issue. It all comes down to which force is more powerful: religious fertility or secularisation. Looking at the recent European past, we find a situation in which religious people have consistently outbred the nonreligious even as secularism has surged ahead by converting the children of the religious in much larger numbers. If this continues to be the case, secular Europe can continue to outsource much of its childrearing duties to the religious while maintaining its vitality.

There are two major problems with this vision. The first fly in the ointment is the falling rate of secularisation. It may come as a surprise to some, but secularisation is running out of steam in northwestern Europe. In France, due to the Revolution, Britain, and in the rest of Protestant Europe, people began to leave religion earlier than elsewhere on the continent. These are 'cutting edge' secular countries, and luckily for researchers, they have been consistently covered by European social surveys since 1981. My research looked specifically at France, Britain and four Scandinavian societies. I found that the level of religiosity and church attendance fell every generation between those born in 1900 and the generation born 1935-45. However, since the 1935-45 birth cohort, subsequent ten-year cohorts remain as religious as the previous generation. In Catholic countries like Spain or Ireland, secularisation is proceeding rapidly, but in the mainly Protestant places where secularism has been taking place the longest, it has been stuck in neutral among younger generations for a

quarter century. The death of more pious older people is depopulating the pews and making it look as if secularisation is still taking place, but among the rest of the population, religion is holding steady. Rates of church attendance are low, at around 5 percent, but roughly half the population considers itself 'religious'.

This group, which British sociologist Grace Davie refers to as 'believing without belonging' is not merely embracing the ghost of past beliefs. It turns out that those who believe but do not belong have a 10-15 percent fertility advantage over nonbelievers even when age, income, education and other factors are taken into consideration. They also consistently place themselves to the right of nonbelievers in ideological terms. The relatively fertile and female character of religious people in the childbearing age range, combined with the end of further secularisation, will, on current projections, lead to a more religious northwestern Europe at the end of the twenty-first century than today.

These trends sketch a pattern of stability rather than religious resurgence, and are not revolutionary unless we consider them in combination with religious immigration and Muslim religious retention. Most immigrants to western Europe are more religious than their host societies. By 2050, we noted that as much as a quarter of the population of certain western European nations like Britain will be of non-European origin. This will produce a far more religious continent than today. In 2001, according to one British survey, almost 40 percent of foreign-born Muslims, 50 percent of Afro-Caribbean immigrants and 25 percent of foreign-born white Christians attended services each week, as opposed to just 13 percent for native-born white Christians. Mosque attendance already outstrips attendance at Church of England services and in the future will likely dwarf the C. of E. The foreign-born also

have higher fertility and a younger age profile than the native-born, though immigrant fertility will probably converge with that of the host society over several generations.

The prognosis for secularising the new immigrants is mixed. Ethnic minority surveys which have an adequate sample of the second generation (available only from Holland and Britain) report that children *are* less religious than their parents.

However, this is generally true only for Afro-Caribbean and East European Christians. In Britain, the native-born children of these immigrants retain higher religiosity than the UK average despite being less religious than their parents. Since these groups also intermarry with natives at high rates, we should expect assimilation over several generations. By contrast, British-born Muslims show identical rates of mosque attendance to their parents and, across Europe, survey evidence demonstrates that young Muslims are every bit as faithful as those over the age of 55.

The various pieces of the puzzle can now be assembled into a coherent overall picture for northwestern Europe. Higher fertility, a female under-45 population skew and religious retention among native white Christians will combine with Muslim religious immigration and retention to produce religious expansion. This will only partially be offset by the gradual secularisation of the Afro-Caribbean and East European-origin populations. Overall, the equation strongly favours the religious population throughout the twenty-first century, and could transform the nature of European culture. The taken-for-granted primacy of the secular Enlightenment may give way to a more multipolar public square in which Muslim and traditionalist Christian voices demand more airtime.

Politically, this raises many questions, but the principal one is whether traditionalist Muslims, Jews and Christians could cooperate to form a conservative religious bloc akin to the Christian Coalition. The Coalition, after all, styles itself a

non-denominational lobby and has built real bridges to pious Muslims, Catholics and Jews. A similar religious coalition in Europe would require traditional values (over school prayer, marriage, family, homosexuals, abortion and evolution) to trump ethnic and sectarian ones. At present, this seems a tall order, but consider what happened in the United States. Between the 1830s and 1968, 'native' white Protestants in the northern United States feared and politically opposed the power of Catholics and Jews concentrated in the large cities. Catholics faced riots in the 1840s and 50s and Ku Klux Klan revival, Prohibition and immigration restriction in the 1920s. Northern Protestants voted Republican while Catholics and Jews voted Democratic. JFK's election in 1960 as the first Catholic president - on the back of many northern Protestant votes - opened up a new era, and in the coming decades, moral values took over from ethnicity and sectarianism as the ordering principles of American politics in the North. As Robert Wuthnow remarked in 1989, 'the major divisions in American religion now revolve around an axis of liberalism and conservatism rather than the denominational landmarks of the past'.

Prior to 9/11, most Arab Muslims in America joined orthodox Jews, evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics and Mormons in voting for the Republican Party. Meanwhile, the enormous jump in the Hispanic population from 1 percent in 1960 to 14 percent today has, by and large, led to only a muted white nationalist response. Instead, Hispanic voters have been wooed by moral conservatives like George Bush, who won 40 percent of the Latino vote in 2004 by appealing to their traditional values. European conservatives are a long way from embracing Muslim voters with a message of moral traditionalism. In this respect, Europe resembles the pre-1968 US. However, Muslims still only comprise a tiny fraction of the electorate, punching below their demographic weight. Over time, as

their population grows and voting participation increases, we may see an epochal shift in European conservative thinking as the immigrant vote begins to overtake the anti-immigrant vote as a swing force in certain elections. This will be helped by today's discursive climate in which it is much more respectable to be a moral conservative than an ethnic nationalist.

Parties are often loose coalitions of diverse constituencies, especially in first-past-the-post systems like Britain or the United States. So long as divisive issues are confined to the local level, a united front is possible. Just as Labour manages to insulate trade unionists, champagne-swilling New Labour professionals, Islamists and feminists from each other, so too European conservatives could disperse potentially explosive conflicts by sequestering them at constituency level. Bradford Muslim traditionalists need never meet their Christian or Jewish counterparts so long as they vote the same ticket. Across Europe, religious demography has the capacity to remake the electoral map in the twenty-first century and bring religion back into the public realm. In the United States and the Middle East, religious fertility is also playing an important role in helping to propel fundamentalist Christian and Islamist views toward the political centre.

Worldwide, the march of religion can probably only be reversed by a renewed, self-aware secularism. Today, it appears exhausted and lacking in confidence. Notwithstanding Richard Dawkins, reason alone is unlikely to win the hearts of the masses. Secularism's greatest triumphs owe less to science than to popular social movements like nationalism, socialism and 1960s anarchist-liberalism. Ironically, secularism's demographic deficit means that it will probably only succeed in the twenty-first century if it can create a secular form of 'religious' enthusiasm.