

Rural and religious fuel the world's population boom

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Last Monday, the world's population reached 7 billion. The significance of this number is being hotly debated. Malthusians warn of the material constraints on growth. Cornucopians point to mankind's ability to find technological detours around these obstacles. Neither has factored religion into their scenarios, yet it could prove the decisive factor.

Cornucopians correctly observe that fertility rates are tumbling in the developing world as people move to cities and women become better educated. But World Values Survey results reveal that a woman's religiosity is almost as important as her education in predicting how many children she has.

In some countries it is more important. Young, well-educated urban women who are religious have significantly higher birth rates than young, well-educated urban women who are not religious.

In fact, it is precisely in the most modern parts of the developing world that the pious possess the greatest fertility advantage. In the countryside, children are required to work the land, religion is a matter of communal conformity and contraception is hard to come by.

In cities, children are expensive and contraception is widely available. The material drivers of fertility fall away and differences in family size reflect value choices. This argument, associated with the Second Demographic Transition school, amplifies the fertility difference between the religious — especially fundamentalists — and the secular.

In cities of the Muslim world, for example, women who are most in favor of sharia law bear twice as many children as women who most oppose it. In the countryside, the difference is less marked.

Therefore we cannot blithely assume that urbanization and women's education will solve the population-resources equation.

The area bounded by Israel and the Palestinian territories offers a paradigm. This urbanized parcel of land, where Jewish and Arab women are both well-educated, has seen its population balloon from under 5 million in 1990 to almost 8 million today. Natural increase, not immigration, lies behind the trends.

Though partly reflecting ethnic competition between Arabs and Jews, the persistence of high fertility increasingly springs from religion. Consider the fantastic growth of Israel's ultra-Orthodox Jews. Like other fundamentalist sects that rely on high birth rates and strong communal boundaries to expand, they resist the charms of the secular mainstream.

With each ultra-Orthodox woman bearing an average of 7.5 children as against secular Jews' 2.2, the ultra-Orthodox are reshaping the soul of Israel and driving its population ever upward. In 1960, they formed just 3 percent of the country's Jewish first grade class. Now they represent a third of pupils. In 1948, they were granted 400 military exemptions for youths of draft age, many going unused. By 2007, this had mushroomed to 55,000.

The Hutterites and Amish of North America pursue a similar strategy. As a result, both are ranked among the fastest growing denominations in the United States, and double in population every 30 years. Quiverfull, a Protestant movement, proscribes contraception. Its leaders, such as Doug Phillips, avow a fertility-fueled "200-year plan" to transform America into a neo-Calvinist utopia.

The logic of population growth is written into religion's DNA. "Allah will provide." "Go forth and multiply." "Marry women who are prolific." Birth control is considered a sin. The minority of believers who take these pronouncements at face value tend to produce large families. Since strict religions typically lose few members, this generates a steady increase in their influence, and, ultimately, a source of renewed population growth.

In much of the Muslim world, from Pakistan to Syria, fundamentalist opposition has delayed the introduction of effective family planning, stalling the transition to lower birthrates. In Afghanistan, the Taliban kills family-planning workers and targets clinics. Meanwhile, at the U.N. population conference

in Cairo in 1994, a rainbow coalition of Sunni Salafists, Shiite mullahs, American evangelicals, Mormons and the Vatican campaigned against support for family planning. Successive Republican administrations bowed to this agenda, withdrawing funding for overseas family planning soon after attaining office. This slowed the demographic transition in many parts of the developing world.

The one bright spot in the story is that fundamentalists who take power eventually face a day of reckoning. After the Iranian Revolution, in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini castigated the Shah for introducing contraception, driving down birth rates. Ten years later, in the wake of the Iran-Iraq war, he realized that Al-lah would not provide health and jobs for Iran's burgeoning young population. Fearing a ticking time bomb, he promptly secured the proper fatwas from his clerics to endorse contraception. The result was a collapse of fertility, from 7 to just 1.9 children per woman in a generation.

Ironically, the world will have to be ruled by fundamentalists before dogma is mugged by reality. By then, it may be too late.

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