

ERIC KAUFMANN

SHALL
+ THE
RELIGIOUS
INHERIT
THE EARTH?

DEMOGRAPHY AND POLITICS IN
THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

'Brilliant and provocative ...
a book every liberal should read.'

JOHN GRAY

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CONTENTS

[*Acknowledgements*](#)

[*Introduction*](#)

[*1 The Crisis of Secularism*](#)

[*2 The Hidden Hand of History: Demography and Society*](#)

[*3 'A Full Quiver': Fertility and the Rise of American Fundamentalism*](#)

[*4 The Demography of Islamism in the Muslim World*](#)

[*5 Sacralisation by Stealth: Religion Returns to Europe*](#)

[*6 'A Scholar Society': The Haredisation of the Jewish World*](#)

[*7 Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?*](#)

[*Notes*](#)

[*Index*](#)

SHALL THE RELIGIOUS INHERIT THE EARTH?

T

he classical view of history is that it moves in cycles. This is influenced by a religious sensibility: there is a 'time for every season'; civilisations rise and fall like everything else in nature. Thomas Cole's magnificent, room-sized *Course of Empire* canvases at the Smithsonian in Washington graphically portray this epic. Civilisations emerge when youthful and vigorous and enjoy an efflorescence. But they eventually succumb to hubris and begin to decline, falling victim to more disciplined challengers. I vividly recall thumbing through my father's set of Arnold Toynbee's Civilisations series, with its green and purple textboxes, heavy clay-enriched paper and evocative illustrations. Toynbee held that a cultural 'schism in the soul' was the first intimation that a society had lost its way.¹ The sickness might be concealed for some time, but would inevitably expose itself in the material realm of the economy and war. Cole's painting *Course of Empire: Destruction* shows grand classical temples being ransacked and pillaged. A classy maiden plunges to her death. A great statue is decapitated. Others prefer the motif of plants growing around ruined monuments: high culture being reclaimed and rejuvenated by rude nature.

Classical scholars from Polybius and Cicero onwards contrasted the social cohesion, moral virtue and youthful vitality of tribal invaders with the individualism and decadence of high civilisation. Polybius, though Greek, warned that Roman youth were being corrupted by a seductive Hellenic culture. There was more. 'In our time all Greece was visited by a dearth of children and a general decay of population,' he lamented around 140 BC, as Greece was yielding to Roman domination. 'This evil grew upon us rapidly, and without attracting attention, by our men becoming perverted to a passion for show and money and the pleasures of an idle life.' Medieval Arab theorist Ibn Khaldun even claimed that invading nomads were periodically necessary to renew the demographic and moral basis of Muslim civilisation. Some, looking at Venice, sensed a connection between its thousands of nightly balls and eventual political implosion. Whether Romans displaced Greeks, Germanic barbarians sacked Rome or Turks and Mongols conquered Arabs, the pattern seemed distressingly similar.

At a time when most children died at birth, a civilisation's commitment to pronatalism furnished the demographic bedrock for its native military. Falling short in this department meant having to depend on allies and mercenaries, who might turn their guns on their paymasters. Native fertility could only be maintained through the ascetic denial of worldly consumption and freedom in favour of communal reproduction. 'Once a society grows cosmopolitan, fast-paced, and filled with new ideas, new peoples, and new luxuries... [the] connection to one's ancestors begins to fade, and with it, any sense of the necessity of reproduction,' argues Philip Longman of the centrist New America Foundation. 'When the ordinary thought of a highly cultivated people begins to regard "having children" as a question of pro's and con's,' Oswald Spengler, the German historian and philosopher, once observed, 'the great turning point has come.'²

Such interpretations have fallen out of favour among many historians as the circular, seasonal approach to time of the pre-modern era has been replaced by a linear or disaggregated view of history.³ Many hold that something has irrevocably changed since the Enlightenment. Demographic and moral theories of decline are labelled post hoc conservative fantasies, disguising the real, material causes of civilisational decline: new technologies, shifting resource supplies and modes of production; plagues, ecological collapses and other chance events; shifting alliances and political innovations, and so forth.⁴ Liberal theorists now believe that Enlightened civilisations can control their own destiny. Bertrand Russell, who penned his ideas a few streets away from me here in Bloomsbury, straddled the two perspectives. At the end of the Second World War he wrote:

Social cohesion is a necessity and mankind has never yet succeeded in enforcing social cohesion by merely rational arguments. Every community is exposed to two opposite dangers; ossification through too much discipline and reverence for tradition, on the one hand; on the other hand, dissolution, or subjection to foreign conquest, through the growth of an individualism and personal independence that makes cooperation impossible. In general, important civilisations start with a rigid and superstitious system, gradually relaxed, and leading, at a certain stage, to a period of brilliant genius ... as the evil unfolds it leads to anarchy, thence, inevitably, to a new tyranny, producing a new synthesis secured by a new system of dogma. The doctrine of liberalism is an attempt to escape from this endless oscillation ... to secure a social order not based on irrational dogma ... Whether this can succeed only the future can determine.⁵

Russell, a card-carrying member of the bohemian 'Bloomsbury Set', was an atheistic libertine, but a realist. His hope was that the political genius of liberal democracy could surmount the contradictions between cohesive narrowness and individualistic weakness. Talcott Parsons preferred an analogy with life on earth, which evolves from simple to more complex, 'higher' organisms. As a Yankee liberal who lived through the Second World War, Parsons named liberal institutions, markets and democracy as the most advanced institutions known to man.⁶ Francis Fukuyama was more specific: modern technology produces sophisticated economies and weapons systems. Since open, liberal societies are more technologically advanced, they are inoculated from the challenges posed by cohesive but backward 'barbarians at the gates'.⁷

Karl Marx and Friedrich Hegel take an intermediate position: history has a direction, but the path isn't straight. History's dialectic is caused by an antithesis which contradicts society's central thesis, leading to conflict. This produces a synthesis which allows for a more complex, higher stage of civilisation to emerge. In the long run, humanity passes through successive stages onward and upward, from primitive hunting and gathering through feudalism, capitalism, and, for Marx, socialism. This is an optimistic view, but a conflictual one. In the long run we will be fine, but in the short run we could be entering a phase of greater conflict and collapse before the new order emerges. This model seems to capture the current conflict between secularism and its fundamentalist antithesis.

Different dialectical thinkers cherished their own mechanisms of system collapse which would herald the rise of a new order. Marx thought capitalist society would implode of its own contradictions. Businesses would exploit the proletariat, absorbing the entire labour supply, and subsequently compete each other into penury. The collapse of profits and immiseration of the workers would spark revolution, leading to socialism. It didn't happen. Capitalism withstood communism and survived numerous booms and busts. Despite childish predictions of capitalist collapse in the wake of the Asian, dot.com and global financial crises, the system has proven shock-proof. Others agree, but maintain that cultural rather than economic collapse will bring liberal capitalism to its knees. Daniel Bell flagged the contradiction between capitalism's need for disciplined production and its promotion of instant gratification. He warned that the individualist ethos of modern consumerism would corrode the system from within, producing a 'great instauration' of religion to renew social cohesion and economic productivity.⁸ However, modern liberal societies have withstood the breakdown of the family, consumerism and rising crime rates without degenerating into anarchy.

It is less clear that the reigning liberal-capitalist 'end of history' model can surmount its demographic contradictions. Demographically powerful groups don't require superior technology to conquer their adversaries. The change, as in Israel, takes place peacefully over generations. Around

the world, secular individuals are in the forefront of the shift to below-replacement fertility rates which have swept the West and East Asia and, on UN projections, will encompass the entire planet by 2085. As the sea of humanity drains away, it will expose resistant fundamentalist wellsprings—the future of our species. Already we see early signs of this in the resistance of all devout populations to population decline. Old Order Anabaptists, Mormons, Haredi Jews, Laestadian Lutherans, Salafi Islamists and Quiverfull Protestants are rapidly increasing their share of a shrinking pie. These endogenous growth sects segregate themselves from modern society while encouraging large families, benefiting from both a fertility premium over others and a strong capacity to retain and transmit membership to their children. They are the archetype, but radical change can also come from slower-growing large groups such as mainstream Christian charismatics, Protestant fundamentalists or Islamists, all of whom are on the rise against demographically moribund seculars and moderates. As the growth of early Christianity shows, compound effects mean that even a small demographic advantage can lead to big changes over several generations.

Secularisation mainly erodes unconscious religion: the taken-for-granted, moderate faiths that trade on being mainstream and established. This explains the rapid decline of religion in Europe and, increasingly, the United States. On the other hand, religious fundamentalists have mobilised against secularism and moderate faith, self-consciously warning their members of its influence. Pronatalism and segregation, the core features of endogenous growth sects, are catching on: we already see conservative Christian theologians advocating these strategies. Mainstream fundamentalist Christians have above-replacement fertility rates and the most theologically zealous are considerably more fecund than average. Regular attenders of more moderate denominations have a fertility advantage over seculars but tend to be less effective at passing on their faith to their children. On the other hand, fundamentalists, combining both high retention and fertility rates, are the demographic equivalent of a coiled spring, whose energy has only recently become apparent.

Religious fundamentalism tends to flare for three reasons: insecurity, identity and demography. Insecurity, or what Adrian Wooldridge and John Micklethwait dub ‘the dislocations of modernity’, are only powerful motives in developing countries where people remain open to ‘enchanted’ responses to their condition.⁹ In such societies, rural populations are uprooting and moving to the cities in droves. Many are poor, and some have experienced violent conflict. This provides tinder for religious revival. In Europe, only a small number of isolated or vulnerable individuals, freed from secular peer pressure, come to faith this way. Some make up the volatile ranks of cults such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, which suffer rapid membership turnover.

Identity dynamics are also important in explaining religious resurgence in the developing world. When much of the world is poor and religious while the wealthy are mostly secular, religion becomes a symbol of resistance, something most apparent in the global Islamic revival. Muslim morality is contrasted with Western licentiousness. The religion grows inadvertently through population explosion among the poor. Once again, the demographic revolution of our time increases the power of fundamentalism by boosting the ranks of the devout. We have a long way to go before all regions of the planet complete their demographic transitions – resulting in a population surge whose scale dwarfs that of the West’s milder explosion of 1750–1950. By the time the transition runs its course in the twenty-second century, the secular nations of the planet will account for a much smaller share of the world’s population than they do today. And this assumes the West will remain as secular as it is now, which is unlikely.

The wide disparity – economic and demographic – between the West, East Asia and ‘the Rest’ is interacting with globalisation to bring the demographic revolution on to Western city streets. The fact that most immigrants are culturally and racially, as well as religiously, different from the majority associates religion with ethnic difference. This produces ethno-religious self-consciousness, which insulates religion from decline. This is especially true of Islam, which acts as a potent marker of ethnic identity, even for lapsed Muslims. Declaring oneself a ‘Muslim’ in Europe makes a modern statement which can pave the way for deeper spiritual commitment. Ethnicity and religion play off each other to resist secular assimilation.

The ‘browning’ of the West is injecting a fresh infusion of religious blood into secular society of the kind that has allowed immigrant London to buck Britain’s secularising trend. The success of religion in urban Europe – where secularisation is most intense – demonstrates the power of religious demography. While white Christians suffer ridicule from the secular majority, European Muslims in ethnic neighbourhoods gain community approval for their beliefs. The children of nominal Muslims therefore take a more positive view of religion than their Christian counterparts.

In the near term, identity-driven religion, borne by the Third World poor, brought north on the backs of immigrants and spread by their relatively large number of children, will be the most important source of religious vitality in Europe. However, immigrant Christian and Muslim birth rates are falling. Inter-marriage, secularisation and assimilation will steadily melt non-white Christians and work away at the edges of the moderate Muslim majority. Muslims will not take over Europe, but will stabilise at somewhere around a fifth of the West European population in 2100. At the same time, native Europeans are becoming more resistant to the charms of secularism, with white Christianity retrenching into a charismatic and fundamentalist core. In a generation or two, most white Europeans who wish to become secular will have done so: religion is no longer declining in the most godless parts of the continent such as France, the Czech Republic and Scandinavia. With input from immigrant Christians and Muslims, religion will begin to grow again. At some point between 2020 and 2070, demography will reverse aggregate religious decline in European societies which have been in train for decades or even centuries. Interfaith structures could incubate a shared social conservatism uniting conservative Muslims with Christians, Jews and others. This could mesh with the incorporation of minorities into mainstream parties to set the stage for a new era of religious politics, an unprecedented European desecularisation.

Slowly but surely, ethnic enmities will be cross-cut by an American-style ‘culture wars’ cleavage which distinguishes moral conservatives of all faiths from secular liberals. Beyond 2050, European and Israeli fundamentalist growth may increasingly follow the American pattern, where the central tendency is towards *intra*-ethnic politics. In our age of migration, ethnic conflict is very powerful, and it is difficult to see beyond it. But in liberal societies, things change when minorities breach a threshold beyond which their ballots count for more than anti-immigrant votes. As the experience of the United States and some of Europe’s most diverse cities shows, moral politics is both more acceptable and more lucrative for conservative parties than white nationalism.

Religious conservatism has the same demographic advantages in the Muslim world, though these are currently being obscured by the socially driven upheavals of the Islamic revival. According to Second Demographic Transition theory, the growth of cities and conquering of infant mortality remove the material incentives for women to bear large numbers of children. Prior to modern medicine, both the secular and religious had to have large families, and value choices had less impact on total fertility rates. The religious fertility premium only begins to increase when seculars are free to exercise their demographic preferences and contraceptives become widely available. Religious fundamentalists maintain high fertility as others transition to lower TFRs, opening up a demographic divide. Seculars and moderates marry later than fundamentalists and are more apt to choose smaller families. Values come to strongly condition growth rates.

In the Sunni Muslim world, Islamists are slowly losing the battle against family planning clinics to determined authoritarian regimes, just as they have lost their struggle for Islamic revolution. Their future strategy may involve pronatalism ‘from below’ to grow their own. Such words are already on the lips of their leaders, from Turkey to Iran and Pakistan. In the freest and most modern Muslim contexts, Islamists have an impressive fertility advantage over other Muslims. Fundamentalists’ fertility advantage over the non-religious will persist into the foreseeable future, unlike the ethnic fertility gap between Muslims and Christians, which will go the way of Catholic–Protestant differences. At the same time, like all fundamentalists,

Islamists have self-consciously mobilised against secularism to ensure that boundaries between themselves and the profane world remain vigilantly policed. The combination of higher fertility and superior retention rates produces the endogenous growth of strong religion in all Abrahamic societies.

The growth of religious fundamentalism shapes patterns of political violence. Salafi-jihadists will continue to occupy centre stage, despite their current setbacks in the Muslim world. Religious Zionists will resist attempts to dismantle settlements and make territorial concessions to the Palestinians. Christian fundamentalists are currently the least violent, notwithstanding Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army. But American fundamentalists will continue to support religious Zionism and a messianic foreign policy, which may indirectly lead to conflict. Occasionally, they will spawn an anti-abortion terrorist. This means our world will be more dangerous than if we all morphed into Fukuyaman 'last men', but not necessarily more so than if the great secular creeds of the twentieth century were to rise again.

To be fair, religious traditions contain important restraining forces which may set limits to violence. In South West Africa in the late nineteenth century, German missionaries lobbied against settler genocide against the Herero, and in Northern Ireland, Catholic clergy largely opposed the message of the Marxist IRA while Protestant ministers discouraged their flock from joining secular loyalist paramilitaries. Today, Saudi Salafists are helping to deradicalise many potential jihadists, even though many jihadis spring, unofficially, from their ranks. Islamists like Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah, are strong supporters of democracy. Those such as Tony Blair who call for us to use faith-based solutions to resolve conflicts are on to something.

Religious violence is therefore less of a worry than the fundamentalist threat to basic liberties. Their ascent will cast a pall over freedom of expression, science, sumptuary liberty and minority rights. This is strikingly evident in much of the Muslim world, where rulers have coopted the Islamist social agenda to head off the threat of revolution. The imposition of sharia places restrictions on liquor, television, female attire and expressive freedom. Often secularists, liberals, converts and minorities live in fear of their life. In the Jewish world, restrictions on dress, food and mobility are only imposed in Haredi neighbourhoods, but will spread as Haredi power increases. The ultra-Orthodox also control Israeli burial and marriage, censor advertising and seek to determine who counts as a Jew. In American Christendom, restrictions are milder: dry counties in Utah and the South or Sunday closing are as ascetic as it gets. Even so, fundamentalist pressure is nipping at abortion rights, gay rights, family planning and the science curriculum. Atheists are unelectable and 'god talk' pervades many political campaigns.

Religion, human nature and ideology

Taking a step back from it all, one might ask: what does the demographic rise of religious fundamentalism tell us about our cultural condition at the dawn of the third millennium? Some might conclude that we are seeing evolution playing out before our very eyes. Evolution works through fertility and mortality differences. Given certain environmental pressures, those with adaptive traits are naturally selected to have more surviving children than those without them. Religious belief could be one such trait. It might operate at the level of our genes. A number of twin studies suggest that, regardless of upbringing, twins tend to strongly resemble each other in their religious behaviour. The conclusion is that religiosity is partly inherited.¹⁰ The problem with genetic theories of religion, however, is that they have a hard time explaining changes in religiosity over time and place. Unless, that is, we presume that Danes lack religious genes or somehow have undergone mutation since 1850!

Another possibility is that religion is a self-replicating cultural trait, or meme, which helps individuals to compete in the game of cultural evolution. Its DNA is encoded in its holy texts, priesthoods and rituals. Those possessing the religious meme will gradually displace seculars the way monotheists replaced animists. Throughout human history, people have been almost universally religious, unlike our closest relatives, the chimpanzees. Some argue that religious rituals and a belief in the supernatural helped humans to cooperate. We thereby gained the upper hand over other species and humans who did not adopt religion. Talcott Parsons adds that religion is an 'evolutionary universal' of human progress – a stage all developing societies must pass through – because it legitimates power and the social order. Without it, anarchy ensues.¹¹ Like our other emotions, existential curiosity and a desire for meaning, transcendence and community may be an evolved part of human nature. Cognitive neuroscience may one day identify the precise mechanisms in the brain that produce a state of nirvana or intensity when stimulated by religious thoughts and rituals.¹²

The question this begs is why we are not all Hutterites. One answer is that we are on our way there. Another is that a fast-reproducing strategy does not always win out. There is now an extensive literature on the evolutionary origins of religion, and it shows that there are two routes to evolutionary success, 'r' and 'K' strategies.¹³ An r-strategy is to have lots of children and invest very little in each. Bacteria and rabbits use this approach very effectively. Birth and death rates are high and those with lower fertility die out. Another option is to run with a K-strategy: bear fewer children but invest a lot in each to ensure they have low mortality. Elephants and humans do this quite well. Scientists find that in times of change, as with a forest fire, the r-strategy does best. In burnt-over areas, fast-growing plants such as weeds have the advantage. Once vegetation matures and plants have to compete with each other for resources, K-strategies take over. This favours larger plants and animals. Sometimes we find a combination of strategies, as with trees that grow large but spread many seeds.

The analogy does not translate seamlessly into human behaviour. Even Hutterites have very few children by rodent standards, and the Amish and Haredim inhabit well-populated, competitive environments. Endogenous growth sects invest considerably in their children's religious education, often at the expense of themselves. Retention is high. So they use both K-and r-strategies. Much therefore depends on selection pressures obtaining in a particular situation. A Hutterite r-strategy would doubtless be optimal in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust or if we had new planets to colonise. It would be of little use in a world of intolerant high-tech powers such as Nazi Germany. Had my grandfather been an Orthodox Jew instead of a sceptical, mobile, assimilated Jewish chemist, I would probably not be sitting here. So context matters. What is true now may not hold for all time. All of which suggests that fundamentalist religiosity may be on the rise because it successfully exploits a social niche characterised by liberal toleration and demographic transition. As the Nazis showed, secular persecution can bring fundamentalist growth to an abrupt halt.

There is another possibility which may offer a more optimistic scenario: symbiosis. Consider an equilibrium in which religious pronatalism is counterbalanced by low secular fertility, where religious defections to the secular population precisely offset the religious fertility advantage. Fundamentalists produce the excess children who resolve the demographic contradictions of secular individualism. The largest groups of religious fundamentalists – Islamists, evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics – have only a modest fertility advantage over others. An increase in defections to secularism is all that is needed to maintain a steady state.

Perhaps the rise of fundamentalism is no bad thing. In our glitzy consumer world of status competition and hedonism, you have to admire the restraint of world-denying fundamentalists. (Here I speak of real fundamentalists, not America's soft neo-evangelicals with their prosperity gospel!) There is unquestionably an optimum degree of hedonism, sexual permissiveness and freedom beyond which we no longer derive added value. I would rather this point be determined by reflective choice than theological fiat, but maybe fundamentalism can replenish the social fibre and demographic capital that seculars expend. This is also the liberal ideal. Let a thousand lifestyles bloom. Fundamentalists can happily do their thing

without affecting secular hegemony in culture, science and education. The open society will endure as we remain perfectly free to consume and express ourselves. Fundamentalists could even be a source of new cultural experiences and ideas as liberal cosmopolites 'slum it' by soaking up the piety of Meah Sharim, Riyadh, Provo or Nashville.

Sound too good to be true? It probably is. Dry atheism, even with the leaven of humanism and modern art, can never compete with the rich emotions evoked by religion. This was recognised by the German-Jewish Marxist Ernst Bloch, who asked, 'Why is it ... that this remote language [of the ancient Bible] is never boring?' He warned that myths bore a truth that atheistic communism ignored at its peril, and implored the movement not to abandon its Utopian eschatology in favour of dry historical materialism: 'Man must be able to see the Kingdom of heavenly freedom as his ... Utopia.'¹⁴ Secularism, shorn of ideology, cannot inspire a commitment to generations past and sacrifices for those yet to come. The spread of liberal democracy is not, contra John Gray, a genuine secular faith. It only animates a small number of internationally minded neoconservatives and Wilsonian liberals. It promises no radical change in the lives of most Western people. Neoconservatism's power sprang not from liberal-democracy's own myths, symbols and rituals but from its association with Christian Zionism and American nationalism, genuine emotive creeds.¹⁵

Ideologies can inspire a sense of trans-generational commitment. But the so-called 'secular religions' of socialism and anarchism, which fired the emotions of some as recently as the 1980s, are exhausted. Political parties in the West have abandoned ideology and moved towards incrementalism and managerialism. The Green movement is a partial exception, but lacks a cultural and political vision that can mobilise large numbers of ordinary people. Could secular individualism be its problem? As James Lovelock, founder of Gaia theory, laments, Greens have failed to stir the mass altruism and collective sacrifice that curbing emissions require. He looks to a nationalist-style emotional outpouring to bring the sacrifices needed to save the planet.¹⁶ Romantic nationalism is perhaps the only realistic alternative to religion, but lost credibility after the excesses of fascism. It has since been subjected to relentless assault. The Islamic revival strikingly demonstrates how religious fundamentalism has rushed into the void left by secular nationalism.

Among some left-wing elites, the radical cultural transformation of society from relatively mono-ethnic nation states into beehives of multicultural 'transgression' is a form of chiliastic ideology, but this utopia barely extends beyond bohemian enclaves and university districts. It does, however, dovetail with the casual attitude of many to far-reaching demographic change, with their disenchanted 'here for a good time not a long time' approach. If one is nonplussed about society being demographically transformed by non-Western cultures, surely it is no great leap to throw one's hands up at the demographic encroachment of religion.

Still, one might argue, reports of secularism's demise are greatly exaggerated. All of today's fast-growing religious sects are minorities, many of which, like the Laestadians, are very small. As they grow in confidence, they will lose their siege mentality and their high fertility. Growth will produce splits and moderating 'sect-to-church' movements. A taste of power will bring pragmatic moderation and a hunger for the goods of this world rather than those of the next. As more powerful fundamentalist movements collide with competing fundamentalisms rather than secularism, they will begin to join hands with secular allies rather than religious ones.

This rosy scenario will eventually take place, but only when fundamentalist religion decisively buries the ghost of secularism which created it, defined it and has haunted it for the past two centuries. Until that point, secularism will continue to provide the 'other' against which fundamentalist religions valiantly struggle. This focus will unite the movement across lines of sect and even civilisation. Secularism will revive, but only when it becomes marginal. Ironically, secular success breeds its fundamentalist contradiction by driving out moderate religion. Until a new synthesis is found that can recapture some of the soulful elements provided by fundamentalism, demographically turbo-charged piety will continue to flourish.

The demographic challenge of strong religion raises searching questions that strike at the heart of liberalism. Liberty, according to Isaiah Berlin, can take negative or positive form. Negative liberty consists of value-neutral procedures and institutions. People can do as they please as long as they don't violate the freedoms of others. Positive liberalism refers to an ideal about what one ought to do with one's liberty.¹⁷ Most liberals emphasise that the good life consists of being an autonomous individual, making free choices and developing one's potential. Multicultural liberals counter that individualism is no more valid than choosing to identify with communal traditions. They claim that society should not privilege autonomy over community, and urge us to tolerate or even 'respect' fundamentalist groups.

Liberals are aware that tolerating illiberal groups is risky. In John Rawls's words, 'justice does not require that men stand idly by while others destroy the basis of their existence.' However, Rawls urges liberals to tolerate the intolerant unless they pose a threat to the institutions of liberty.¹⁸ The problem arises when illiberal groups such as religious fundamentalists demographically increase to the point where they are able to threaten the freedom of others. This is principally true in Muslim societies and Israel. But even in Europe, Islamic extremists such as Mohammed Bouyeri can effectively silence critics of Islam and restrict the liberty of Muslim women. In the United States, Christian fundamentalists may respect liberal institutions, but if given a chance, the neo-Calvinists among them would constrain the freedom of women, hedonists and gays and challenge the hegemony of secular education and science.

Liberals could crack down by curtailing the freedom of illiberal groups, just as the American government did when it banned polygamy and theocracy in Utah. But it is difficult to justify prohibiting democratically chosen conservative policies on abortion, pornography, gay marriage, Creationism, driving on the Sabbath, and so forth. Furthermore, as Karen Armstrong notes, repression can radicalise fundamentalists, as in Nasser's Egypt and the Shah's Iran.¹⁹ In these cases, the best remedy for those wishing to defend Enlightenment ideals is to win over fundamentalists to their point of view. There is fragmentary evidence that Hutterites, for example, can be wooed to neo-evangelicalism, and thence into mainstream society.²⁰ Israel is currently trying to integrate the Haredim into the economy and military in the hope that birth rates will fall, and it is worth making the effort to do so. Another option is to incentivise seculars to have more children or encourage secular immigration.

But unless this is matched by a concomitant decline in religious fertility, it raises an ecological problem. The earth's growing population is combining with economic development to produce unsustainable levels of carbon emissions. In the present climate, a falling global population may be exactly what the doctor ordered – at least until we find the technological fix required to meet our energy needs while cooling the planet. Populations can sustain a period of decline: oddly, steady decline will eventually produce a younger, more stable population. This will occur after 2050, when we, the generations born during the demographic transition, die off. This will remove the bulge from the top of the population pyramid leaving a more even age structure. In the long term, population decline is suicidal, but it is far from disastrous over the span of a century or two. A population footrace between seculars and fundamentalists that fuels environmental catastrophe is a much greater threat to human existence.

According to Andrew Watkinson of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, three-quarters of climate change is caused by population growth. This was recently recognised by the UN Population Fund in its 2009 report, *The State of World Population*. Coming just a month before the Copenhagen conference on climate change, the report broke fresh ground in challenging its decades-long reticence about broaching the population– environment link. 'Fear of appearing supportive of population control has until recently held back any mention of "population" in the climate debate,' the report admits. Negotiators, notably the EU, have tentatively suggested that it should be discussed at the summit. The UN report also hints that family planning could be the most effective green policy of all. UN projections suggest that world population will rise from 6.8 billion

today to between 8 and 10.5 billion at mid-century. If fertility cuts reduce world population by a billion in 2050, this would achieve the same effect as the daunting task of constructing all new buildings to the highest energy-efficiency standards or replacing all coal-fired power plants with wind turbines. One study found that, dollar-for-dollar, investing in family planning and women's education reduces emissions as much or more than investing in nuclear power or wind energy.²¹

The stakes are especially high in the developed world, where fundamentalist growth and religious immigration are most pronounced. The typical citizen of the developed world emits as much as thirty times the carbon of those in the poorest countries. In November 2009, Alex Renton called for a reduction in rich world population to combat climate change. 'Are condoms not the greenest technology of all?' he dared ask. This resulted in a campaign against his 'war on the human race', orchestrated by American religious conservatives, which attracted nearly 10,000 Google hits. 'Alex Renton has declared war on mankind, in general, and Western man, in particular,' charged blogger Reverend James Heiser of Salem Lutheran Church in Malone, Texas.²²

Though Renton rightly draws our attention to rich world population growth as a vehicle of climate change, his call for those in the developed world to have fewer children is not realistic given the developed world's below-replacement TFR. Moreover, what Renton and the UNFPA report deliberately fail to mention are the taboos of immigration and religious fertility. Without (largely religious) immigration and the impact of religious fertility, the American population would be closer to 300 million in 2050 instead of its projected 400–500 million. Western Europe's population would be falling instead of soaring. Immigration is more visible, since it transports people from the low-emitting global South to the energy-hungry North. However, most immigrants are moderate in their religious orientation and their fertility rates fall rapidly after their arrival. Domestic religious fertility, on the other hand, is resistant to decline and will eventually produce unsustainable carbon growth.

Seculars and moderates can encourage the fastest-growing fundamentalists to integrate, pointing out that high fertility is a political act which, for the sake of harmony, should be moderated. All the same, we must be prepared for the possibility that religious demography cannot be killed with kindness. Israel will reach the breaking point around 2050. This may explain their use of policy sticks alongside carrots, such as Haredi work placement. Policies can remain liberal as long as they do not explicitly discriminate against a group. For instance, Danish spousal migration restrictions affect all citizens, not just Muslims, so do not contravene liberal principles. Limiting child benefits to the first three children is another example of a neutral policy that might lower Haredi birth rates – though I have my doubts. Removing military exemptions and instituting workfare are more drastic possibilities. Secular Jews need to expend political capital now to address these matters before Shas and UTJ foreclose this option for ever. This may not be enough, but more drastic policies such as gerrymandering or disenfranchising the Haredim from power would contradict the very principles that many seculars defend.

At some point, secular Jews in Israel may face a stark choice: make the best of it as a minority or try to organise for separation. The minority strategy is no disaster. Deists such as Thomas Jefferson made common cause with sectarian religious groups to separate church from state. In Europe, seculars and moderates may one day act as a swing vote between literalist Muslims and Christians. What seculars would do in Muslim, Jewish or Christian majority countries is less clear. Separatism is a possibility, but is difficult without a territorial base. Many of its benefits could, however, be achieved through power sharing. These might include constitutional guarantees for secular schools and media, as well as exemptions from liquor control and censorship laws of the kind foreigners enjoy in many Muslim countries.

The rationality of faith?

That we are even having this conversation tells us we need to revisit the old Enlightenment story of reason conquering superstition. I am at least a third-generation secularist. A family story concerns the local rabbi of Prostějov, Czechoslovakia, who paid a visit to my grandfather's home. He asked for a copy of his Bible, at which point my grandfather replied, 'I don't have a Bible.' 'You don't have a Bible,' gasped the rabbi. 'NO, I DON'T HAVE A BIBLE!' responded my grandfather with irritation, a perfect product of the Jewish Enlightenment. My mother was raised Catholic but has long since abandoned religion. My wife and her father were non-believers. I even notice that my children are repeating the mischievous 'I don't believe in God' mantras in their Church of England-run public school that I once trotted out when I attended Catholic school for a year.

Having said this, and notwithstanding the New Atheists, one has to admit that religion is more rational than unbelief. The root of the word rational is *ratio*, in which we weigh up a number of alternatives, calculate a ratio of how well each satisfies our end, and decide accordingly. As a utilitarian, I believe that the maximisation of collective happiness is the proper end of humanity, and on that score, religion seems more rational than irreligion. A growing body of research suggests that the religious live longer and are happier than sceptics. Noted British economist Richard Layard, a pioneer in the field, writes, 'One of the most robust findings of happiness research [is that] people who believe in God are happier. At the individual level one cannot be sure whether belief causes happiness or happiness causes belief. But since the relation also exists at the national level, we can be sure that to some extent belief causes happiness.'²³

It is less clear that one's religion is good for other people. Some argue that religion has prosocial effects, stimulating philanthropy and greater male responsibility.²⁴ On the other hand, secular Scandinavia is a model of progress while the pious Middle East and Africa are mired in poverty. Human development in a country increases as religiosity falls. This could be a legacy of the link between religion and scientific progress, with more secular societies achieving better social outcomes than more religious ones. It might be a spurious correlation caused by the unique history of Europe and East Asia in relation to the rest of the world – in which case the relationship will disappear as pious India, Latin America and the Muslim world develop. As a utilitarian, I would need to weigh up the effects of religion on collective happiness against its benign impact on my individual wellbeing before deciding which way to cast my vote.

Lest I be accused of deserting my secular inheritance, I should say that I applaud Richard Dawkins when he writes, 'As long as we accept the principle that religious faith must be respected simply because it is religious faith, it is hard to withhold respect from the faith of Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers. The alternative ... is to abandon the principle of automatic respect for religious faith.' His lampooning of certain madrasa students as 'demented parrots' is masterful. When he cites Bertrand Russell's 'open windows of science' and speaks of a world unburdened by religious superstitions, one feels a great sense of liberation. I can even concur with his advocacy of a rational humanist ethics, though I have doubts about whether this will work in the most dysfunctional corners of society. But where Dawkins is least convincing is in his assertion that God's consoling role can be supplanted by science, art, humanism or a 'love of life in this world'. Dawkins expresses his thrill 'to be alive at a time when humanity is pushing against the limits of understanding'. Perhaps because I have always been underwhelmed by Carl Sagan's 'billions and billions', I can't see how scientific wonder gets us any closer to filling the God gap.²⁵

Dawkins is correct that even if religion were essential to human wellbeing this wouldn't make it true. Sam Harris insists that those like Blaise Pascal who pragmatically believe in God offer us no more than an epistemological Ponzi scheme.²⁶ Yet we could say the same about free will and the Self. From a scientific perspective, both are illusions – indeed, the idea of free will has its roots in monotheism, which places humanity at the

centre of the world.²⁷ Since our every act is a result of physical, chemical, biological, psychological and social structures, we aren't free. Self-consciousness may be just a useful evolutionary adaptation. Be that as it may, none of us are going to abandon our subjectivity any time soon. More than that, we will continue to indulge in the habit of narrating our life as a story in which we overestimate our good points and understate the bad. The more sceptical, realistic approach is actually considered psychologically unhealthy and results in depression. No wonder atheists such as Daniel Dennett consider it so vital to reconcile scientific materialism with free will.²⁸ There are limits to this process: an inflated sense of our own importance will make us overbearing and self-centred. The same seems true for religion. Beliefs, like fire, warm us when taken in moderation, but are antisocial if pushed to an extreme. Perhaps religion has too many malign social effects for us to indulge in it.

There may be another way forward. There is a strong utilitarian case for reason and scientific truth: wilful ignorance opens up a Pandora's box which leads to Jehovah's Witnesses refusing blood transfusions and Socrates being sentenced to death. This means that Creationism, or claims that a man lived to 969 and our planet was founded in 4004 BC, should remain minority views. But luckily, if we restrict ourselves to dogmas that do not violate empirical evidence, beliefs can run free without affecting progress. Scientific laws and mathematical formulae tend to reach logical paradoxes when taken to infinity. Scientific truth requires empirical evidence, which can never be infinite. So a moderate faith that combines a belief in God with an allegorical approach to holy texts poses no threat to the Enlightenment—even if it becomes the norm. As Charles Taylor and Karen Armstrong note, fundamentalists who challenge science by taking their holy texts literally are actually applying a scientific sensibility to traditions that were meant to be approached through art, ritual, allegory and contemplation. Ironically, Taylor treats fundamentalism as one in a long series of 'secularising' steps which began when the monotheisms of the Axial Age first poured cold water on our belief in the spirit world.²⁹

Human happiness should be sacralised. Religion's problems would instantly evaporate if all holy books began with, 'And the Lord decreed that His highest purpose is the wellbeing of mankind and that everything in this Book must be interpreted in that light.' The more sentient of animals could also be afforded some worth in this scheme. The common good could be viewed as a divine signal, around which all else should pivot. This does not necessarily point in a secular direction. The poetic, mythical stories of religion may be more effective in inculcating morality than secular methods. Regular attendance at worship and belief in God may improve societies. Or perhaps they may cause more harm than good. But whatever the case, a lively debate would emerge between secularists and the religious that would be anchored in scientific evidence.

The fact that religious researchers such as those based at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University are trying to make the case for religion or faith-based policy in secular terms – citing improved health and social capital, reduced crime and the like – is a positive development. Whether they are scientifically correct is beside the point. They may be wrong, but their arguments are potentially falsifiable, whereas those of the anti-abortionists (and, one might add, most pro-choicers) –who make no argument about pleasure, pain or psychological effects –are not. This is akin to Sam Harris's 'science of good and evil', harnessing scientific progress for our moral advancement.³⁰ However, contra Harris, this would not, in principle, rule out a religious society. Full-orbed biblical inerrancy will be marginalised, but parts of scripture may come through unscathed. There is probably no utilitarian limit to fundamentalism about the Golden Rule.

Yet all this seems a vain hope. Moderate faith is being squeezed by both secularism and fundamentalism, its contradiction. Furthermore, the titanic struggle between secularism and fundamentalism takes place on a battlefield tilted in favour of faith. We inhabit a period of ideological exhaustion. The great secular religions, with their utopian dreams, have lost their allure. Relativism and managerialism rise in their stead. At the same time, we are entering a period of unprecedented demographic upheaval. It will be a century or more before the world completes its demographic transition. There is still too much smoke in the air for us to pick out the peaks and valleys of the emerging social order. This much seems certain: without an ideology to inspire social cohesion, fundamentalism cannot be stopped. The religious shall inherit the earth.