

Sacralization by Stealth: Demography, Religion and Politics in Europe

Eric Kaufmann

Reader in Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck, University of London

What are the political implications of differences in growth rates between secular and religious populations in western Europe? Dr Kaufmann's paper claims that demographic factors can lead to a reversal of the secularisation process and to growing religiosity in society even if religious apostates outnumber converts.

The secular population of western Europe might grow through defection from the religious population and from the minority of immigrants who are secular. But the main engines of religious population growth in western Europe are more powerful: religious immigrants and higher fertility. Native-born west Europeans who declare themselves 'religious' form about half the adult population in six north-western European countries studied by the author.

Meanwhile, immigrants also tend to be more religious and fertile than the secular host population. Western Europe's population will increasingly consist of (more religious) immigrants and their descendants, and this paper suggests a number of ways in which this demographic change may manifest itself politically. Ethnic cleavage between 'native' and immigrant may come to be replaced by a trans-ethnic religious divide between traditionalists and secularists—mirrored by a widening moderate/strictly Orthodox split among Jews—as has occurred in the United States since 1968.

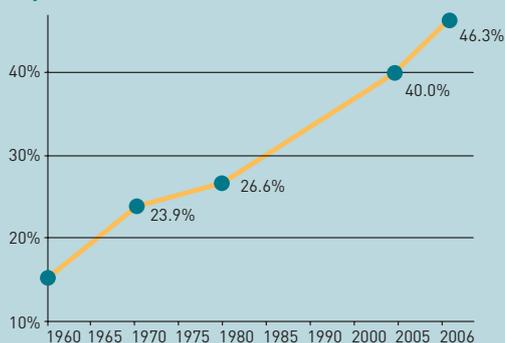
On 8 February 2007, Israeli economist David Ben David wrote in *Ha'aretz*: 'It is difficult to overstate the pace at which Israeli society is changing. In 1960, 15 percent of primary-school pupils studied in either the strictly Orthodox or the Arab-sector school systems (these are today's adults). In 1980, this rate reached 27 percent, and last year it was 46 percent.' The trends sketched by Ben David have radical implications in a society founded by secular Zionists¹ (see Figure 1). Both Israeli Arabs and the strictly Orthodox were opponents of the Zionist project prior to 1948 and are economically less successful than non-Orthodox Jews, yet both groups will be increasingly important players in the Israeli polity due to their growing demographic weight.² At present, the strictly Orthodox even hold the balance of power in the Knesset.

The Israeli case simply illustrates, *in extremis*, a dynamic whose effect moves from the demographic to the social and then to the

political sphere. Among strictly Orthodox Jews, for instance, fertility rates rose from an already staggering 6.49 children per woman in 1980–82 to 7.61 during 1990–96; among other Israeli Jews, fertility declined from 2.61 to 2.27 (Fargues 2000). In the absence of a large-scale 'switching' of allegiance by the children of the Orthodox, Orthodox Jews will increase their share of Israel's Jewish population from 5.2 per cent today to 12.4 per cent in 2025, with almost a quarter of the population under seventeen being strictly Orthodox at that time. The idea that Israel is becoming more secular is simply untenable in the face of these demographic trends. What, we might ask, does this mean for the future of Israeli policy with regard to land for peace, the settlements and the status of the holy places of Jerusalem?

In the United States, we see another version of the same phenomenon, in which religiosity and fertility are correlated, with more liberal theological attitudes corresponding with smaller family sizes. Mormons, for instance, have a total fertility rate of around 3 children per woman, compared with around 1.0 for secular Americans, 1.1 for American Jews, 1.4 for liberal Protestant denominations such as the Episcopalians, 1.7 for white Catholics

FIGURE 1 Percentage of Pupils in Arab and Strictly Orthodox Primary Schools 1960-2006



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

¹ By secular (and secularization), I mean those who a) seek to separate the political sphere from the influence of religious authority; and b) in their private life, do not regularly attend places of religious worship or believe in the sacredness of a particular religious belief system. See Bruce 2002 for the distinction between public and private secularism.

² Many strictly Orthodox Jews have come to embrace Zionism, though a minority remain anti-Zionist.

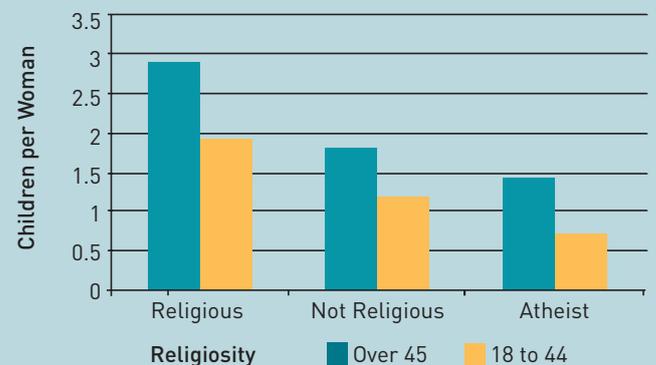
and 2.1 for conservative Protestants such as the Southern Baptist Convention (Roof and McKinney 1987; Sherkat 2001). None of this would matter if the children of members of conservative denominations could be expected to become more liberal with socio-economic advancement, as once had been the case. However, during the second half of the twentieth century, conservatives ceased 'switching' to liberal denominations in large numbers. This combined with conservative Protestant fecundity to remake the American religious landscape. Whereas conservative Protestants once occupied a minority position, comprising just a third of white Protestants born in 1900, they grew into a majority comprising two-thirds of white Protestants born in 1975.

The increase in the evangelical Christian vote under Reagan in the 1980s can be seen as the 'tipping point' at which the political potential of this growing constituency was first unleashed. Evangelicals are now the base of the Republican Party, making it a contender even in elections (such as 2004 and 2008) in which policy failures would ordinarily lead to rapid defeat. Indeed, there is an extremely strong correlation between white fertility rates, conservative values and a vote for the Republicans in 2004 (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2005). The growth of the evangelical Protestant community is not dissimilar to the growth of the early Christian community in the Roman empire between 30 and 300 C.E.: much of its success is attributable to demography rather than proselytization (Stark 1996). Others claim that high fertility rates among the religious is the primary reason for the world becoming more religious despite the fact that secularization is taking place in the developed world (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 22–23).

In my research, I make the case that, even in a highly 'secular' Europe, we can see an echo of the demographic trends that are occurring in the United States and Israel (Kaufmann 2006a). In the twentieth century (earlier in some cases), large numbers of Europeans began to leave their churches and synagogues and attenuate their religious beliefs. The spirit of secularism burned strongly throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and was linked to both liberalism and, often, nationalism. Thus secularism gained popularity from the spread of democracy, rights and national identity to the masses. The political victories of these secular movements took some time to percolate throughout society. For instance, though Mazzini had unified Italy around his liberal nationalism by 1870, the opposition of the Catholic Church was only overcome under Mussolini (Baycroft and Hewitson 2006). Nonetheless, these victories helped pave the way for large-scale religious decline in the second half of the twentieth century. This decline was a later development in Catholic countries like Ireland, Belgium and Spain, but was already well in train in France and Protestant Europe by mid-century.

In my research, I examined six of the most secular countries in Western Europe (France, Britain and all of Scandinavia bar Finland), paying close attention to indicators of both religious attendance and belief. These 'cutting-edge' secular countries offer us a vantage point from which we can glimpse the future of religion. Do we see the end of religion, or its rebirth? The evidence

FIGURE 2 Religiosity and Fertility among European Jews, by Age, 1981–97



Source: *European Values Surveys 1981, 1990, 1995–97 combined sample. Total of 852 Jewish respondents under 45, and 419 over 45.*

supports the latter. I found that, as of 2004, roughly half the population in these 'secular' European countries thought of themselves as 'religious' despite the fact that only 5 per cent bothered to attend a place of worship each week. Digging a little deeper, it became apparent that those who saw themselves as 'religious' (despite their non-attendance) had a 10–15 per cent higher fertility rate than the non-religious, even controlling for age, generation, marital status, income, education and other factors (Kaufmann 2006b, 2006c). We can see this in microcosm by looking at the relationship between religiosity and fertility in the European Jewish population during 1981–97 (see Figure 2). Moreover, even controlling for the usual background factors, the religious were significantly more likely than the non-religious to place themselves on the 'conservative' end of the ideological spectrum. Projecting forward, the results show that these northwestern European countries will be slightly more religious in 2100 than in 2000, with 2050 proving to be the nadir of secularism (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3 Projected Religious Population, Six Early Secularising Societies, 2004–2104



Source: *European Values Survey 1981, 1990, 2000; European Social Survey 2004. For technical details, see Kaufmann 2006b and Kaufmann 2006c.*

Demography is important here: the under-45 religious population is more likely to be female than male, and tends to have more children, both of which result in faster growth of the religious. But a more important trend is the decline in the rate of secularization in Western Europe among the post-1945 generations: secularism seems to have lost its way and is having trouble attracting the children of religious Europeans. One might surmise that this results from both the lack of a galvanizing secularist project and the religious mobilization against secularism.

The Role of Immigration

These projections greatly understate the speed and magnitude of the de-secularization of Western Europe because they fail to take immigration into account. Most immigrants to northwestern European countries are more religious than the already settled population. This is especially true of Muslim immigrants. Research on trends in ethnic minority religious behaviour throughout Europe demonstrates the absence of any significant secularizing trend among Muslims. Whether we look at attendance, belief or affiliation, levels of Islamic religiosity remain high across the generations, as well as among the European-born 'second generation'. Though Afro-Caribbean Christian immigrants are much more likely than Muslims to become secular in the second generation (and to intermarry), they also arrive with high rates of religious adherence. Without immigration, Western Europe would already be experiencing population decline. Since immigration can be expected to continue in the future, non-European immigrants and their descendants will form an increasing proportion of the population: around 15–25 per cent of the Western European total by 2050 (Coleman 2006). Over time, then, the secular population of Europe will begin to decline and age, while the religious population will grow, due to immigration, higher fertility and lower rates of secularization.

Political Effects

Studies of non-European immigrants in Europe suggest that this group tends to vote for left-wing parties, but has more conservative social attitudes than the host society (Dancygier and Saunders 2006). The same profile characterizes Hispanic immigrants in the United States, who tend to vote Democratic while holding conservative moral and religious beliefs. Despite this identical profile, the two groups have been approached very differently by conservative parties in their respective societies. In Europe, conservative parties have campaigned on a platform of tighter immigration controls and the defence of national identity. In the United States, by contrast, the Republican Party has made a concerted effort to reach out to Hispanic immigrant voters by connecting with their moral conservatism. Thus the Republican elite under George W. Bush and his chief strategist Karl Rove has strenuously tried to downplay and contain the party's anti-immigrant 'paleoconservative' wing so as not to alienate Hispanic voters. For instance, Bush has tried to introduce an amnesty for illegal immigrants and has largely avoided taking a strong position on bilingual (i.e. Spanish) education. The religious right, namely the Christian Coalition, joined Bush by promoting a generally pro-immigrant message that embraced both Hispanics and religious Muslims (Kaufmann 2004).

This reflected an American society in which an interfaith religious coalition was forming. 'If my argument is correct,' argued Robert Wuthnow, 'the major divisions in American religion now revolve around an axis of liberalism and conservatism rather than the denominational landmarks of the past' (Wuthnow 1989: 178). The strategy worked in 2004, with Bush netting 40 per cent of the Hispanic vote and a majority of the votes of both American-born Hispanics and the significant Hispanic-Protestant population (Guth *et al.* 2005). Prior to 9/11, the Republicans also won a majority of the Arab-Muslim vote. The Republican elite has managed to keep the idea of an amnesty for illegal Mexican immigrants alive even today, despite strong congressional Republican opposition.

Therefore, what we see is that American conservatism is religious and trans-ethnic in appeal, while European conservatism has been nationalist and mono-ethnic. Unlike its American counterpart, the European right has downplayed religious themes so as not to alienate secular white nationalist voters. The American population is about 30 per cent non-white, and the US electorate is around 15–20 per cent non-white. In Europe, these proportions are far lower, with non-white voters accounting for well below 5 per cent of the electorate in most countries. What will happen as the proportion of visible minorities (notably Muslims) in the European electorate rises? One possibility is that European conservative parties will strengthen their current emphasis on defending dominant-group ethnicity by promising tighter immigration controls and a more vocal defence of national identity. By contrast, a more 'American' option would involve conservative parties attempting to capture tradition-minded immigrants (and their descendants) by stressing religious and family values and downplaying anti-immigrant themes. Is this as fanciful as it seems? Consider the shift in American politics: much of American political history has been dominated by a Protestant-Catholic cleavage (along with the familiar Black-White and North-South divides). However, this began to change after 1945 when anti-Communism and religiosity became more important than anti-Catholicism (and antisemitism) in defining the country. In Western Europe, the slow rebound of the white religious population after 2050 will make it more likely that religious Christians and Muslims may join forces in opposing secular Europeans. So it is certainly possible that the main fissure in European politics could shift from ethnicity to religion, although this is probably a longer-term development.

In the medium term (to 2050), we are probably going to see an increasing polarization between the ethnic majorities of Europe, who largely identify with secular nationalism, and Muslims, who tend to be religious and anti-nationalist. This will put a strain on tolerance and democracy in many Western European societies, highlighting the difference between a multicultural liberalism based on the toleration of *group* rights and a classical liberalism based on *individual* rights. In many ways, we already see this in debates over multiculturalism and the degree to which a liberal society can tolerate group practices (such as arranged marriages) that violate liberal individualist norms. The objections to group rights currently revolve around the ethical ideals of liberal individualism. Yet these universal ideals are also signs of dominant-group identity that

distinguish the ethnic majority from less individualistic groups like Muslims. So the conflict is ethnic as well as ethical.

Low rates of Muslim intermarriage and secularization will lead to more conflict in relations between Muslims and the dominant ethnic groups in the states where they reside. On the other hand, the high degree of assimilation and secularism associated with Afro-Caribbean groups and Jews will mean that these groups should experience lower levels of discrimination. That said, roughly 10 per cent of the UK Jewish population is strictly Orthodox, and this proportion will expand significantly due to its higher fertility rate *vis-à-vis* secular, Reform and even Conservative Jews. In the United States, the strictly Orthodox predominantly vote Republican, and most are part of the religious traditionalist bloc. If the American example is any indication, the strictly Orthodox can be mobilized to vote for conservative parties.

On the face of it, the idea of strictly Orthodox Jews, conservative Muslims and Christians forming a coalition seems absurd. But let us not forget that the Republicans managed this balancing act in the United States prior to 9/11. It becomes possible because politics is local, and so long as orthodox Jews and Muslims largely inhabit different constituencies, party machines can insulate these groups from having to face each other and can mobilize them against liberals/secularists instead. This is the essence of 'resource mobilization theory,' which stresses the need to allow ideological diversity across local party organizations. In Britain, for instance, the Labour Party allows conservative Muslims to dominate some Labour constituencies while feminists, gays or white male trade unionists dominate in others. The party prevents these glaring contradictions from fragmenting support by devolving divisive policy debates to the local level and ensuring unity around more general goals at the national level. The Tories could do likewise with Christians, Muslims and Orthodox Jews. The result, however, would be a widening moderate/strictly Orthodox split within the Jewish community that mirrors the secular/Christian divide within the majority community. Such intra-communal fractures may be unpleasant for Jews but since the wider societal battle lines will also pass through their community, they should lessen, rather than increase, antisemitism.

Of course, much can change. Muslims can begin to assimilate more quickly and immigration can slow down or change its source. The 'war on terror' can abate. However, the greatest likelihood is that ethnic cleavages will become more important in Western European politics as the Muslim minority grows. In the long term, the reversal of secularization and new electoral calculations by European conservative parties will allow religiosity to displace ethnicity as the major cultural divide in society. This would see religious Christians and Muslims unite against the secular population. Precisely such a shift, from ethnic to religious conservatism, took place in the United

States in the second half of the twentieth century. However, current trends would suggest that this is unlikely to occur in Europe much before 2050.

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