

What is the future of religion around the world?
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The United States is, and has long been, a religious country, sometimes to the point of obsession. Our safety net is having no officially recognized state religion; we have instead vigorous competition among faiths so that no one can dominate.

Around the world there seems to be an explosion of Islam, thanks to rampant population growth and prison conversion. But demographers already note that fertility rates around the world have peaked and are in decline. Muslim countries follow the patterns of the developed world as their economies improve and the influence of modern culture (through TV, cinema, and Internet) reduces the birthrate and frees women for modern life.

But is modernization the enemy of religion? We have already seen the decline of religious adherence in Europe and Japan since the end of World War II and with drastic decline of fertility rates. As Europe prospered, birthrates declined. Yet European governments do subsidize their beautiful cathedrals and cultural Christianity survives in annual celebrations. Churches are busy twice a year.

Islam is going through what Christianity suffered four centuries ago\227when the explosion of new sciences, discoveries, and technologies (printing press and telescope) challenged the traditional worldview of hitherto all-powerful religion. The Catholic Church lost its monopoly of power and Christianity splintered into multiple Protestant sects. Two centuries of unending war between Catholics and Protestants finally yielded to the 18th century \223Enlightenment.\224 Educated people turned away from religious fanaticism and with that turn, participatory government was born.

Islam slept for the past 500 years, during which time Muslim power declined and Western power rose. It is now awake and struggling for identity. Muslim countries have tried monarchy, fascist dictatorships, a resurgence of ugly militant Islam, and now the revolt of the young and educated more interested in having the good western life than a religion that has not helped them to thrive.

Shiites, the minority Muslim sect, overthrew modernizing Iran and is now trying to do the same in Iraq and the Persian Gulf. However, the world has witnessed what modern young Iranians think of Shi\222a Islam in their revolt against the last fraudulent election and the stranglehold of religious fascism in their lives. When the smoke of conflict clears, Iran will not be an Islamic republic.

The \223puritans\224 (Saudi Wahhabis) have spent a great deal of oil money trying to sell their version of Islam around the world\227but to know them is not to love them. This cult may not even be able to maintain its clutch on Arabia in the next 50 years.

Two recent books explore the future of religion: Sam Harris\222s The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values, and Nicholas Wade\222s The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures. Harris finds religious \223belief\224 the \223low hanging fruit of irrationality.\224 He does not believe that religion is the only force that can keep us civilized and moral; our increasing knowledge in brain science finds that a sense of morality is intrinsic in the normal human brain and can be educated and strengthened by one\222s society.

Wade, on the other hand, considers the religious instinct hard-wired into the human brain. He believes that religion has been a key to human survival. Harris counters that some religious beliefs, such as the suppression of women, guarantee overpopulation and economic backwardness, not survival. But Wade connects religion to community\227something essential to human life. Pure reason, such as atheism, cannot create community as religion can. Where will we find community without it? My own view may not please either my religious or nonbelieving friends.

\223Community\224 can arise through a new way of being religious, from which belief in the irrational has been removed. In the future, we can enjoy and revere the stories preserved by our ancestors, enjoy the timeless religious celebrations connected with the natural world, and relish the metaphors of religion without adherence to outdated beliefs and practices. One can be Jew, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and even Pagan this way\227enjoying satisfying spirituality without slavish adherence to outmoded beliefs.

674 words

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