

What's Happening to the Global Islam Project?  
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Islam as a global religion is having a crisis. Despite years of propaganda that began with the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the boast that Islam is on a roll around the world needs to be revised.

I have long rejected the mantra that "Islam is the world's fastest growing religion," the illusion that people are rushing to convert. We really do not have any reliable numbers on how many people belong to a faith (modern censuses do not ask this question) so we must get the numbers from religious organizations.

Getting numbers of members from churches, mosques, and synagogues are guesses, since many people who claim to be religious are not members of any official organization. Even in our own country where numbers are more reliable than in the lesser developed world, people claim to attend church weekly, yet investigators find the parking lots half deserted on Sundays.

In the case of Islam, the first question that needs to be asked is "what kind of Muslim?" How many are observant (or literal believers), how many cultural, as many modern people in the US and Europe are, people who attend a religious service once or twice a year, and how many (like many modern Muslims) acknowledge Muslim roots but do not practice at all?

As people modernize, all religions lose their grip on their nominal adherents. Today's American life, for example, shares little with the fixation of our first settlers for whom religion was the center of their lives. The attempts by a few sects to revive the piety (and fear) of religion as once practiced has not increased religious numbers. The sects remain small, their growth depends on birthrate increases among women who have no control over their fertility.

Islam in Iran faced the same problem as the country modernized and emancipated its women under the late Shah. The Revolution was the product of a handful of Machiavellians who took power too quickly for modernists to react. A referendum (always a public rip-off) gave the Iranians a choice: Yes or No to an Islamic Republic. Pious Islam rules Iran more by force than by piety. An anti-Islamic Revolution simmers as an underground movement that periodically probes retaking the country. They will succeed in Iran's future as the Islamic Revolutionary rulers, the Ayatollahs, age out.

Saudi Arabia, one of the most repressive and backward countries in the world, promotes an impossibly rigorous Islamic cult. This country, and its religion, would have remained a pathetic backwash had they not been sitting on a vast pool of petroleum. Suddenly they became a backward, ignorant, pious country with money and ambition to spread their sort of Islam around the world.

Saudi money spawns brainwashing memorizing schools everywhere that Muslims are living, particularly in the poorer of countries, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, but even in richer ones such as Malaysia and Indonesia. These "schools" enforced memorization of the Koran, which for non-Arabs is in a language they do not speak. Other instruction is aimed at producing militants who are willing to kill (and die) for Saudi-style Islam.

The challenge for Islam in most of the 20th century was how to modernize yet keep the faith relevant. Muslim-majority countries tried monarchy, dictatorship (secular or Islamic), socialism, and attempts at democracy. Most such attempts have failed, largely due to distaste for modern institutions (political diversity and freedom, free press, religious toleration, and emancipating women). Most vexing of all is one of the oldest vices of the Muslim world, political and financial corruption.

Saudi Arabia, the fomenter of the worst sort of Islam, is in a serious crisis of modernization. For the first time in more than a century, they have a young prince, the heir apparent of a growingly senile father, who is in a hurry to modernize those things that can earn him Western praise: women driving and permitting cinemas.

But his reigning in of the fanatical clerics may get backlashed. Also, the savage assassination of a mildly critical journalist has roused the world's ire. Conflict between modern and medieval values threaten every Muslim-majority country, and bodes ill for Islam.

684 words

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