

# GLOBALISED RELIGIONS FOR A GLOBALISED WORLD

This is a time of great religious vitality for Christianity and Islam, explains **Gregory Melleuish**

**U**ntil the presidency of George W. Bush and September 11, 2001 there was not a great deal of public interest in the place of religion in the contemporary world. True, Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis had excited some interest in a possible conflict between the West and Islam. In general, however, with declining church membership and attendance in most Western countries it was assumed that the developed world, with America the only major exception, was slowly, but inexorably, on the road to complete secularity. This meant that discussion of religion tended to focus on such matters as the decline of Christianity, the possibility of female and gay priests and 'moral' issues such as abortion.

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The recent and sudden interest in both Christianity and Islam has been fuelled by the threat that their more robust forms, generically labelled 'fundamentalism', are believed to pose to the stability and comfort of the secularised West. Consequently discussion of religious matters has tended to take on an 'Us and Them' character with 'Us' being seen as the calm and reasonable children of the Enlightenment and 'Them' as fanatics and barbarians, be they Christians, Muslims or Jews. This is not to say that there is not a small hard core of extremists amongst these 'fundamentalists'. Rather it is to point out that the use of a term such as 'fundamentalism' obscures rather than illuminates when it is used to encompass the beliefs of millions, even billions, of people.

The Western fixation, particularly amongst its intelligentsia, on secularisation as the inevitable fate of humanity has obscured the fact that we are currently living in one of the great ages of religious vitality and mission, in both the Christian and Muslim worlds. Much of this religious activity is

happening in Africa, Latin America and Asia, far from the eyes of the Western media, just as much of the 'clash of civilizations' between Christianity and Islam has occurred in places such as Nigeria and the Sudan and has been reported only sporadically elsewhere.

Over the past 40 years both Christianity and Islam have become globalised religions. Much of their progress has occurred outside the view of the West. The consequences of this globalisation are only now coming to be fully appreciated. The heart of Christianity no longer lies in the West. Moreover the forms that Christianity is taking in Africa, Asia and Latin America are often quite different from those currently prevalent in the West.

Fundamentalism is essentially propositional in nature, that is to say it is founded on a number of propositions to which one is meant to give assent. European and American Protestantism has often taken a propositional form as it has focused on the Bible as the defining scripture supplying the 'fundamentals' of belief. Alongside what can sometimes be a somewhat emotionally arid form of religion there also developed other forms that have focused more on the immediacy of spiritual experience. Methodism, and in some ways its offspring Pentecostalism, have been forms of Christianity that have emphasised experience.

Both of these forms of Christianity are present in the current Christian revival. But while fundamentalism is perhaps the dominant form of religiosity in America, it is Pentecostalism that has won over many Christians in the Third World. It has been estimated that there are half a billion Pentecostalists in the world today.<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that Pentecostalism appeals to many Africans because they live in a world that is inhabited by a range of spirits, including evil ones that can be subdued by Jesus. Moreover they are strongly attracted to the Old Testament while many liberal Christians in the West find it an embarrassment. Jenkins has argued that in many ways these Third World Christians are close to the early Christians who also believed in the reality of spirits around them.<sup>2</sup> Exorcism was commonplace in the early Church. Moreover as these Third World Churches place so much emphasis on experience some of them run the risk of moving beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless there can be little doubt that the source of much of the vitality in Christianity in the 21st century will come from Africa, Latin America and Asia. Apart from America the West is in demographic decline and its numbers of believers is declining at an even faster rate.

It can be argued that this religious explosion in the more deprived areas of the world really affects the secularisation thesis.

Norris and Inglehart have argued the following:<sup>4</sup>

1. The publics of virtually all advanced industrial societies have been moving toward more secular orientations during the past 50 years. Nevertheless,
2. The world as a whole has more people with traditional religious views than ever before—and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population.

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They relate religious belief to security and prosperity.<sup>5</sup> The more affluent and secure people are, the less need they have for things outside this world. One could, of course, put it another way: the more prosperity a people has the more likely they are to stray from the path of righteousness.

Norris and Inglehart come up with some interesting findings. One is that the Protestant work ethic in the contemporary world is weakest in cultures that are derived from Protestantism; it is prevalent amongst Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Another is that secularised countries are far more liberal regarding sexual matters and gender equality than religious countries, especially Muslim ones.<sup>7</sup> At the same time countries that are strongly religious have a much higher birth rate than secular ones.

Thus we are confronted by the rather stark dichotomy: a secular, developed world with both a declining birth rate and a decreasing appetite for hard work versus a religious and growing developing world. Norris and Inglehart would seem to imply

that this is primarily a function of the relative security of the two worlds and that, when every human being lives in a European-style welfare state, what Marx termed the 'opiate of the masses' will be no more.

But the reality is somewhat more complex than that. In his recent book *The Twilight of Atheism* Alister McGrath argues that in fact it is atheism that is on its last legs in the West. Atheism was largely a by-product of European radical politics that emerged during the late 18th century.<sup>8</sup> Its heyday was the Marxist era and its function was to announce that one was in revolt against the existing order. The demise of communism has also probably brought about the demise of atheism, though not religious indifference.

In a recent article in *Christianity Today* the existence of a small but growing evangelical movement was revealed in that bastion of secularism,

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France. Over the past 50 years the number of evangelicals in France has grown from 50,000 to 350,000. The number of evangelical churches has increased from 760 in 1970 to 1850 today.<sup>9</sup>

And of course America stands as the prime example of a Western country with a majority of its population professing a belief in Christianity. It also has a higher birth rate than other Western countries and is less enamoured of the welfare state.

There is an interesting paradox here. Western societies, including parts of America, are becoming more secular. Certain types of Christianity, especially evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, are growing even in the most secular parts of the West, including France. At the same time the mainstream churches are undergoing decay as their membership declines and they struggle to remain relevant to the contemporary world. In many ways these mainstream churches have become little more than another arm of the secular establishment. As such their leaders have effectively become members of the secular elite more interested

in contemporary politics and denouncing their evangelical (i.e., 'fundamentalist') rivals than matters of a more eternal nature.

This can be seen in two recent books, Marion Maddox's *God Under Howard* and Michael Nothcott's *An Angel Directs the Storm*. Both books are concerned with denouncing what they see as the insidious influence that the 'Religious Right' exercises over, the first case, John Howard and in the second, George W. Bush. Although these writers both come from religious backgrounds, they express the same disgust with fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity that one might expect from the secular elite. They also tend to see the influence of the Religious Right in conspiratorial terms.

It is interesting that holding these 'extreme' beliefs in no way impedes one's capacity to function in a technological society. One can, like many Americans, be both a believer in creation science and a highly competent engineer; or an extreme Islamist and an able computer scientist. Contemporary 'fundamentalists' live effectively in a secular and scientific universe and not one, like our African Pentecostals, full of spirits and magic.

An answer to this apparent paradox can be found in the work of French philosopher Marcel Gauchet. Gauchet argues in *The Disenchantment of the World* that humanity has been on a secular trajectory ever since it left the holistic and embedded spiritual world characteristic of hunter-gatherer society. Gauchet believes that the creation of the first states involved the sundering of that world into a heaven above and a world below.<sup>10</sup> The consequence of that division in the longer term has been the creation of a secular world that we all inhabit. The world may no longer be religious but, for Gauchet, this does not imply that people have ceased to be religious.<sup>11</sup> Rather the challenge is how to be religious in a secular world.

Much of contemporary religion, especially in the West, makes sense when viewed in these terms. Our world is a disenchanted and secular one. Our religion is no longer to be found in nature but in the hearts of men and women. Generally it is a religion that has been quarantined from the larger reality in which we live our lives. Religion has become just another specialised element of our rather fragmented culture in which individuals pursue a rather bewildering range of interests.

One consequence of this fragmentation is that religious knowledge and training, especially for evangelicals and Pentecostals, is no longer conducted within the context of the broader culture but has become, like everything else, a specialised form of technical training. As we noted earlier modern religion tends to reduce its beliefs to a series of abstract propositions. This is in accord with the argument of Michael Oakeshott that in the modern world the technical part of knowledge becomes dominant while the implicit knowledge or skill in which the technical knowledge was traditionally embedded fades away. There was once a time when a Bachelor of Arts from Oxford or Cambridge was the preferred training for an Anglican priest.

In this sense these modern forms of religion have ceased to be part of the wider public culture (insofar as such a public culture still exists) but form their own subcultures, usually outside the radar of the media. Only when their activities have an impact on the public life, as in the case of Family First in the last federal election, is any attention directed their way. Generally their activities in providing a self-help community for their adherents and others, much after the fashion of the early Church, do not figure in public discussion. For example it has been claimed that the activity of the French evangelical churches in helping poor newcomers to France has played a role in lessening the appeal of radical Islam to these people.<sup>12</sup>

Just as Christianity is being transformed through its global encounters, the same is true of Islam. Neither religion is a fixed entity locked in a timeless mould. Just as the critical developments in contemporary Christianity may be occurring in Africa, so the crucial changes in Islam are taking place in its encounter with the West in the West. In his *Globalized Islam* Olivier Roy points to the encounter with Western values in Western societies as the central transforming element in contemporary Islam and in the creation of Islamism.

Unlike Christians, Muslims for a long time were uneasy about living outside the realm of Islam, after all how was it possible to live a righteous life in a society run by infidels? In recent times, however, there have been a significant number of Muslim migrants to both Europe and America, although as Roy points out those going to America have been of

a higher socio-economic status. It has been out of this encounter that much of contemporary radical Islam has been born.

In part, according to Roy, radical Islam was created by an input of Western ideas and values into Islam. For example, traditionally Islam was not particularly concerned with issues such as abortion and homosexuality but it has taken over these moral issues.<sup>13</sup> At the same time the training of Islamic clerics has become more exclusively concerned with technical religious issues. As in the West this training is no longer embedded in a particular cultural tradition but has been reduced to a number of technical propositions. The Islamic equivalent of the Western liberal education is being expelled from Islamic theological education.<sup>14</sup>

The result is an Islam that belongs nowhere and everywhere, a globalised Islam that can be carried from place to place, just as it can be argued that there is a globalised form of Christianity that is no longer linked to any particular culture. More importantly

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this 'fundamentalist' Islam is not a 'medieval' religion. In fact just as evangelical Christians seek to convert Catholics to Christianity so Islamists want to get rid of the traditional rural Islam founded on saints and sufis. It is a thoroughly modern religion acceptable to scientists and engineers.

Both contemporary Christianity and contemporary Islam have elements that can be described as 'Jacobin'. They adhere to a series of propositions that define the good life; those propositions are not tied to a particular place or time or culture. It is ironic that at a time when the 'Jacobin' political traditions of the West, including Communism, have exhausted themselves it is in the two most vital world religions that these 'Jacobin' tendencies should have re-emerged.

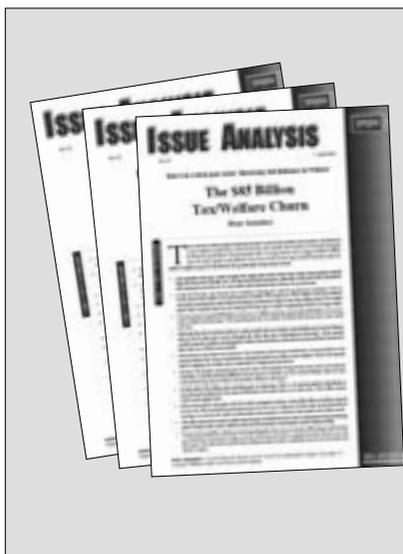
What does this mean for the world of the 21st century?

1. The first is that Norris and Inglehart are correct at one level. There will continue to be a growing divergence between a largely secular and demographically declining developed world and a developing world that will grow in both numbers and religiosity.
2. There will continue to be religious conflict of the 'clash of civilizations' variety but much of it will occur in the developing world between Christians and Muslims.
3. There will be a growing divergence in the developed world between liberal Christians on the one hand and evangelicals and Pentecostals on the other. As one group of Christians in the West slips into a liberal position that is not clearly distinguishable from secularism so another group will become much more determined in its defence of orthodoxy. The result will be a largely secular society with a significant 'saving remnant' that will continue to be extremely active.
4. One consequence of the fact that if one is religious they must be so in a secular world is that the biggest impact of religion on the wider society will continue to be when moral issues come up for public discussion. On many of these issues Islam lines up with evangelical Christians and traditional Catholics. One should expect that increasingly there will be political alliances between these groups on such issues.

I should like to conclude with one final observation. From both a Muslim and an evangelical Christian perspective it is not they who are strange and perverted but the modern world. It is between the religious and the non-religious that the fundamental 'clash of civilizations' is occurring in the 21st century.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London: Rider, 2004), 214.
- <sup>2</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 129.
- <sup>3</sup> As above, 120.
- <sup>4</sup> Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.
- <sup>5</sup> As above, 239.
- <sup>6</sup> As above, 163-9.
- <sup>7</sup> As above, 154.
- <sup>8</sup> McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*, 21-47.
- <sup>9</sup> Agnieszka Tennant, 'The French Reconnection', *Christianity Today* 49:3 (2005), 28-35.
- <sup>10</sup> Marcel Gauchet. *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, Trans. Oscar Burge, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 33-46.
- <sup>11</sup> As above, 200.
- <sup>12</sup> Tennant, 'The French Reconnection', 35.
- <sup>13</sup> Olivier Roy. *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 32.
- <sup>14</sup> As above, 162.



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