

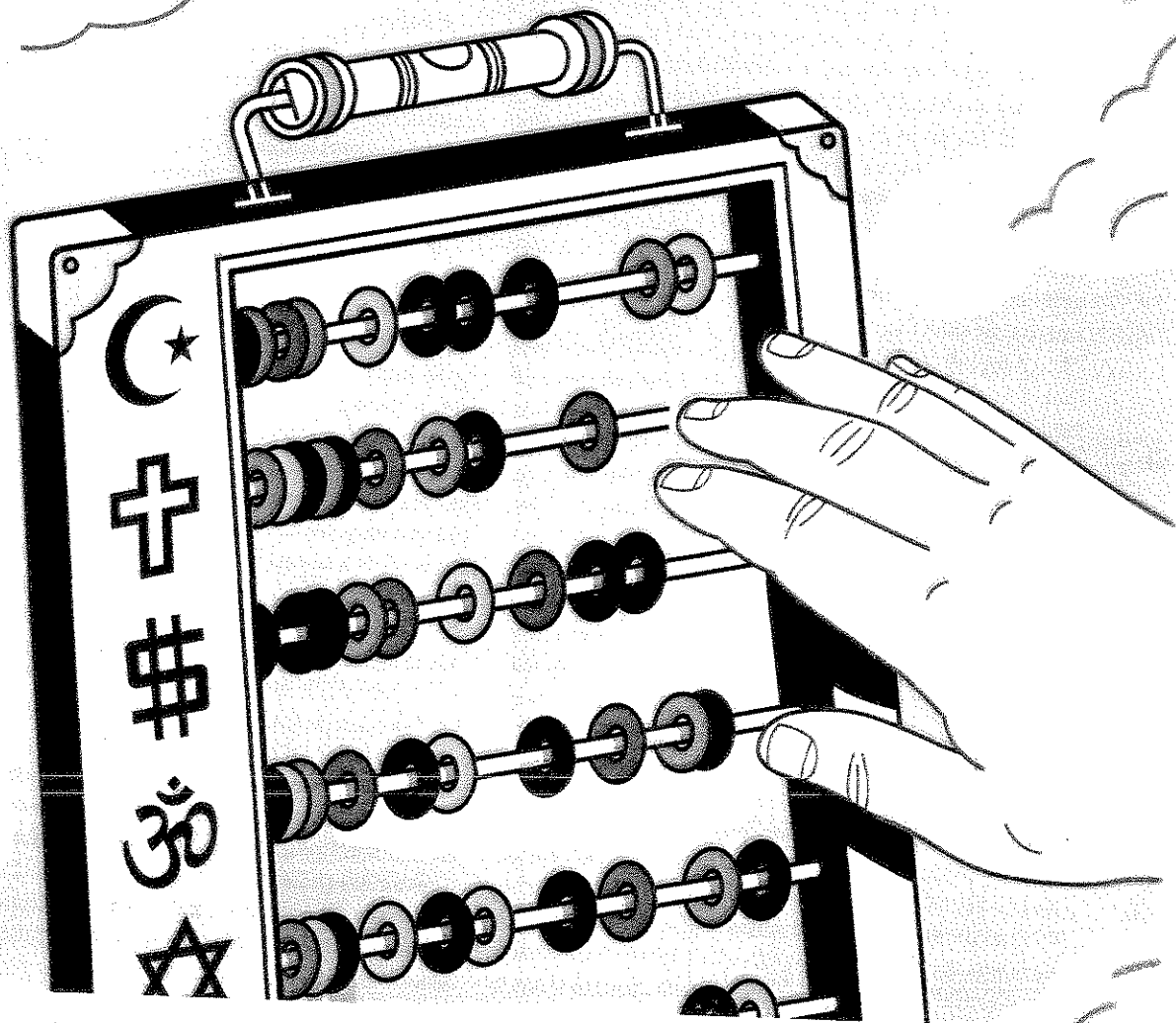
The coming religious peace

BY ALAN WOLFE

Illustration by Harry Campbell

And the Winner Is . . .

Human beings have never lacked for things to fight over, but for the last two millennia, they have fought the most over ideas involving the divine. Politics, technology, military capacity, and diseases have all played decisive roles in shaping history, yet it is impossible to understand the rise and fall of empires, the clash of civilizations and the evolving balance of power without appreciating the unique fervor that religion inspires, and the speed with which new religions can spread. ¶ Christianity, a minority sect during much of the Roman Empire, became a world religion with a vast following after the Emperor Constantine converted to it, in the fourth century A.D. Then came Islam, in the seventh century: just a hundred years after Muhammad's death, in 632, the religion he founded reached beyond the Middle East to Africa, India, and significant parts of Spain and France. The Protestant Reformation of 1517 quickly engulfed »



half of Europe, migrated to the New World, and fueled the Counter-Reformation in the remaining Catholic states on the Continent—by 1618, the Thirty Years' War had begun, resulting in the devastation of large swaths of western Europe and the death of some 30 percent of Germany's population. Every new outburst of religious passion, while producing ecstasy and revelation for some, has disrupted established loyalties, fueled intolerance, and led to violence between the chosen and the damned.

It may seem, at first glance, that little has changed. A recent cover story in *The Economist*, titled "The New Wars of Religion," proclaimed, "Faith will unsettle politics everywhere this century." Some scholars of religion have found new sport in predicting which religions will gain the most adherents (and upset the most applegarts) during the coming decades. Pentecostalism is one favorite candidate; it is sweeping through Latin America and Africa, already claiming some half-billion followers around the world. Catholicism is vying for the same conservative turf; Pope Benedict XVI's insistence on stricter religious teachings, though not likely to grow the Church in Boston,

appears intended to win more souls in Bogotá and Brazzaville. Islam claims a fifth of the world's population, and its share is climbing quickly; it is only a matter of time, many believe, before it surpasses Christianity, which is embraced by a third of the world's population, to become the predominant faith. Hindus and Buddhists together make up 20 percent of the world's people, and high birthrates in the countries in which they are dominant suggest that this proportion will grow. Some think that other religions will have to make room for Mormonism, an infant compared with many other faiths. (Those others will have ample time to do so—although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is growing quickly, it has just 12 million members, half in the United States.) All in all, *The Economist* forecasts, by mid-century, 80 percent of the world's people will adhere to one of the major faiths.

A lot rides on which of these predictions turn out to be true, and on how and where different religions bump up against one another. A common worry is that intense competition for souls could produce another era in which religious conflict leads to religious war—only this time

with nuclear weapons. If we are really in for anything like the kind of zeal that accompanied earlier periods of religious expansion, we might as well say goodbye to the Enlightenment and its principles of tolerance.

Yet breathless warnings about rising religious fervor and conflicts to come ignore two basic facts. First, many areas of the world are experiencing a *decline* in religious belief and practice. Second, where religions are flourishing, they are also generally evolving—very often in ways that allow them to fit more easily into secular societies, and that weaken them as politically disruptive forces. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal once famously showed that it would be irrational to bet against the existence of God. It would be equally foolish, in the long run, to bet against the power of the Enlightenment. The answer to the question of which religion will dominate the future, at least politically, may well be: None of the above.

Until relatively recently, most social theorists, from Marx to Freud to Weber, believed that as societies became more modern, religion would lose its capacity to inspire. Industrialization would substitute the rational pursuit of self-interest for blind submission to authority. Science would undermine belief in miracles. Democracy would encourage the separation of church and state. Gender equality would undermine patriarchy, and with it, clerical authority. However one defined *modernity*, it always seemed likely to involve societies focused on this world rather than on some other.

But intellectual fashions are fickle, and the idea of inevitable secularization has fallen out of favor with many scholars and journalists. Still, its most basic tenet—that material progress will slowly erode religious fervor—appears unassailable. Last October, the Pew Global Attitudes Project plotted 44 countries according to per capita gross domestic product and intensity of religious belief, gauged by the responses to several questions about faith (a rendition of the Pew data appears on the opposite page). The pattern, as seen in the Pew study and a number of other sources, is hard to miss: when God and Mammon collide, Mammon usually wins.

Toward the right edge of the graph—in the realm of the most-prosperous countries—and at the very bottom lies western Europe, where God, if not dead, has only a faint pulse. Islam, to be sure, is increasingly prevalent in countries such as France and Great Britain, and one can also detect a slight uptick in Christian religiosity across much of the Continent in the past decade or so. But at the same time, the region's last significant pockets of concentrated religiosity are collapsing. Fifty years ago, Spain and Ireland were two of the most religious countries in Europe; now they are among the least. Not long ago, Spain was governed by a fascist dictator in close collaboration with the Catholic Church; now it allows both gay

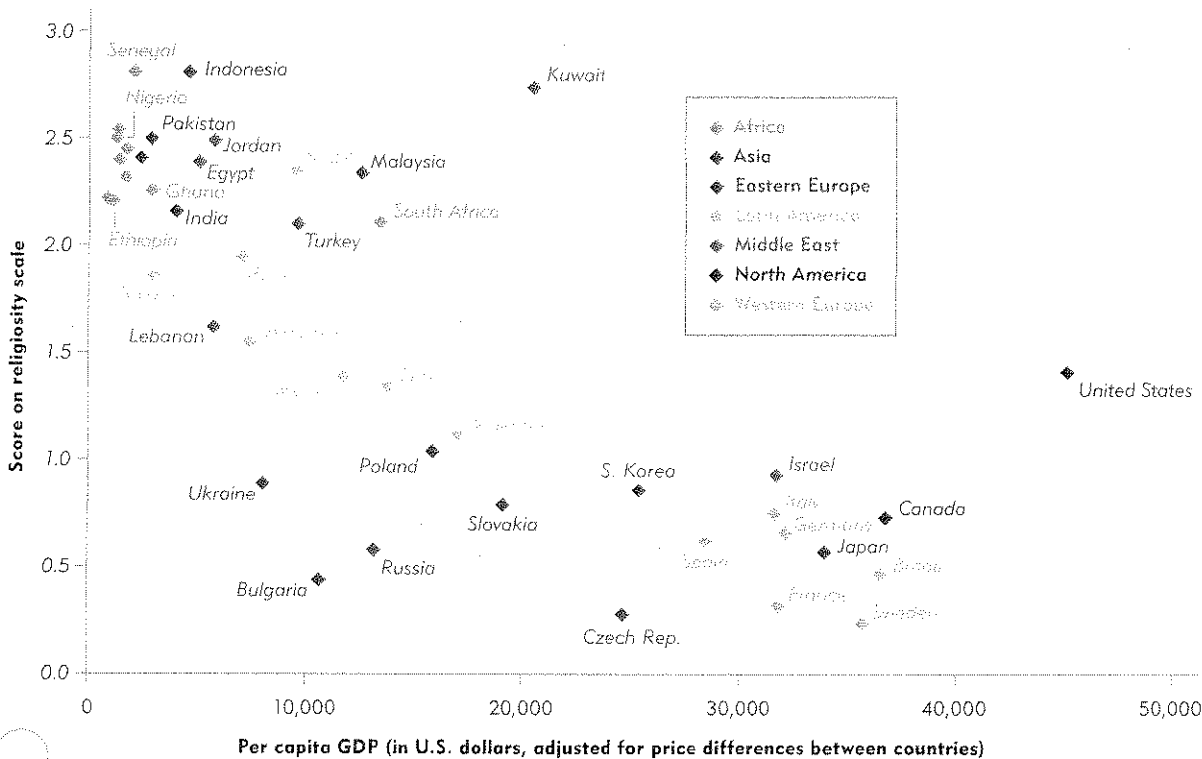
marriage and adoption by gay couples, making it as liberal as Massachusetts. Ireland once gave us, in the form of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, one of the most chilling depictions of damnation in world literature; these days, Dublin's churches are emptying out, and the few parishioners are apt to be Polish immigrants, most of whom presumably came to Ireland to nourish their bank accounts, not their souls.

Eastern Europe lies to the left of western Europe on the graph. Poland is of course well known for its religiosity; the Communists who governed the country for nearly half a century tried to suppress the Church but were ousted by Solidarity, in large part a faith-based movement, with the encouragement of a native-son pope. But most of the countries of eastern Europe, though poorer than their counterparts in the West, are not very different from them in religious terms. And increasing prosperity in eastern Europe may lower religiosity even more. Poland shows signs of this already. The country's outspokenly Catholic prime minister, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who governed in collaboration with his equally devout twin brother, was defeated late last year by Donald Tusk. Tusk is far less religious in his personal life than the Kaczynskis—he was married in a civil ceremony, and held a church wedding later only to further his political career. During the election campaign, he attacked Kaczynski's ties to a right-wing, ultra-Catholic broadcasting station, and took more-liberal positions on in vitro fertilization and abortion (although he does not support legalized abortion, he opposed a Church-sponsored constitutional amendment to ban it). The first European states to fully embrace secularism did so over hundreds of years. The last holdouts appear to be making the shift in a generation.

Heading up the graph from eastern Europe in comparative religiosity, we arrive at Latin America, a region famous for its piety. Yet secular values are transforming this part of the world, too, and as they do, religiosity is declining. In 2006, Chile—one of Latin America's wealthiest nations—elected Michelle Bachelet, an openly agnostic single mother, as president. Last spring, Mexico City, the capital of the world's second-largest Catholic country, legalized early-term abortions; the law passed in the city's legislative assembly by a vote of 46-19. One cannot ignore the rising cultural and political importance of Pentecostalism in countries ranging from Brazil to Guatemala. But neither can one ignore the growth of an increasingly secular middle class in countries such as Argentina, Colombia, and Peru.

The Asian countries surveyed are scattered around the graph, but they follow the graph's basic pattern (as do Asian countries not included in the graph). Indonesia, one of the poorest countries in the region, is up among the world's most religious ones, and has been the scene of considerable, and considerably gruesome, religious violence. China, a bit

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richer, is less religious (though even in poorer times, China was not generally given to religious fervor, at least not in the way that Westerners understand the term). India, China's main rival for future domination of the world economy, is also less religious than the continent's poorer countries. It does have a popular political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, that advocates a militant and politicized form of Hinduism. But the BJP, which was part of a coalition that led the government for several years beginning in 1998, lost power in 2004 and has not recovered. Pakistan, India's poorer neighbor, shelters Osama bin Laden and turns out jihadists in droves. But its population is more moderate than many Westerners suppose: its leader, Pervez Musharraf, gets his main support from the military, not the mullahs; and the chief opposition figure, until her assassination in December, was an Oxford- and Harvard-educated woman backed by legions of well-dressed lawyers.

Among the so-called Asian Tigers—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—only South Korea, where Christian fundamentalism is thriving, is known for religiosity. And even there, it has been leveling off in recent years. Japan, the richest nation in Asia, is right where one would expect it to be on the religiosity scale—alongside godless countries of western Europe.

The Middle East, of course, is the region of greatest concern to many Americans when it comes to religious fervor, for the religion in question is Islam, and Islam, we are told by conservatives of both the neo- and religious

varieties, is an enemy of our way of life. Despite its oil, the Middle East is still relatively poor and only recently urbanized. No one doubts that to arrive there is to pass through the doors of devotion. When Pew asked people whether one must believe in God in order to be moral, the answers in Islamic countries were off the charts: 99 percent of Egyptians and 97 percent of Jordanians, for instance, said yes. Mathematically speaking, it is hard for societies to be more religious than that.

Much has been written about the nourishment that autocracy, on the one hand, and foreign meddling, on the other, have provided to reactionary Islamist movements in the Middle East. Worries about militant Islam often focus on Saudi Arabia, where Islamic fundamentalism really is powerful. The Saudis, moreover, use the considerable cash at their disposal to spread their version of the faith around the world. Given that 15 of the 19 September 11 hijackers were citizens of Saudi Arabia, no one should dismiss the dangers of religious fanaticism originating there.

But the Middle East is a huge area, with many forms of religious expression: the notion that Islamic fundamentalism will sweep the entire region is simply not realistic. Consider another set of data collected by Pew: among Lebanese, Turks, Kuwaitis, and Egyptians who see a struggle in their countries between modernizers and fundamentalists, a majority (or, in the case of the Egyptians, a near-majority) say that they identify with the former. It is true that Turkey, one of the world's largest Muslim countries, is

governed by an Islamist party—but that party is both politically and religiously moderate (for example, it favors membership in the European Union). Dubai, one of the richest Muslim countries, is less interested in propagating radical Islam than in attracting gamblers to Las Vegas's MGM Mirage, in which it is a significant shareholder. And even in Saudi Arabia, according to a recent poll by the research organization Terror Free Tomorrow, only 15 percent of the population have a favorable view of Osama bin Laden, and 69 percent support stronger ties with the U.S.

We are left, finally, with Africa. Religiosity there is widely regarded as high, perhaps higher than in the Middle East, but it differs in character. It is in Africa where the predictions of an old-fashioned, broad-based religious revival, with all its attendant conflicts, may come closest to the mark. Much of the commentary on religion's muscle in Africa, and the consequent potential for clashing civilizations, centers on Nigeria, the continent's most populous country and one in which, Pew found, most of those who perceive a struggle between modernizers and fundamentalists put themselves in the latter camp. In recent years, 12 states in northern Nigeria have adopted sharia, or Islamic law, and created special morality police to enforce its tenets. Eliza Griswold explores Africa's religious revival, and in particular the subtleties of the contest between Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, elsewhere in this issue. Here, suffice it to say that Africa is indeed in the throes of a great awakening.

Will it endure? A hundred years ago, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber quoted the great evangelical John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church:

I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches.

In 19th-century Europe, as Weber's reference suggests, religious devotion did make people better off materially, and thereby moderated godly fervor. Just because it may have happened that way then does not mean that religion will have the same effect in the developing world now. Yet whether it is faith or some other force that stimulates economic growth in Africa (or Asia or the Middle East), growth is bound to occur, and to continue to moderate religious fervor.

You'll have noticed that I've said nothing yet about the United States. Talk about an outlier—there on the Pew chart it stands, nearly alone, as the only country in the world, apart from Kuwait, that is both wealthy

and religious. Americans are not only more religious than Europeans; they are more religious than the citizens of some Latin American countries. If proof is needed that religion will remain a dominant force in history for a long time to come, the fact that the world's most affluent society is also well up among the faithful would seem to provide it. When the president says that his decision to invade another country was influenced by a call from God, or when school boards decide to include creationism in their curriculum, it appears safe to conclude that Americans are not living in the world envisioned by Marx or Freud.

But one shouldn't go overboard in describing American religiosity. For one thing, it is as shallow as it is broad: Americans know relatively little about the histories, the theological controversies, or even the sacred texts of their chosen faiths. Recent decades have seen the rise of the Christian right in the United States, but they have also witnessed the seemingly inexorable advance of secular ideals, such as personal choice and pluralism, that blossomed in the 1960s. Some signs indicate that the Christian right may be losing steam, or at least moderating, as a political force. Nonbelief, meanwhile, is increasing: not only are atheist manifestos selling in large numbers, but the percentage of those who express no religious preference to pollsters doubled between 1990 and 2001, to 15 percent.

The most important religious phenomenon in the United States, however, has nothing to do with the number of atheists. It concerns another trend that, like modernization, is changing the trajectories of religion worldwide: the creation and spread of a free religious marketplace, which partly (though by no means completely) revives religious devotion wherever it reaches, but also tends to moderate the religions offered within it.

Religious monopolies or near-monopolies, such as state-sponsored churches, generally throttle religious practice over time, especially as a country becomes wealthier; the European experience amply demonstrates this. Lacking any incentive to innovate, churches atrophy, and their congregations dwindle. But places with a free religious marketplace witness something very different: entrepreneurs of the spirit compete to save souls, honing their messages and modulating many of their beliefs so as to appeal to the consumer. With more options to choose from, more consumers find something they like, and the ranks of the religious grow.

The key precondition for this sort of marketplace is the presence of rudimentary secular values. This may sound odd, since the secular has long been thought the opposite of the religious; the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the 1905 French law establishing *laïcité*, or the removal of religion from public affairs, and the creation of modern Turkey were once seen as the replacement of religious orthodoxy by Enlightenment principles. Secularism is still commonly understood in this way:

a secular society is viewed as one with large numbers of freethinkers choosing science over superstition and reason over revelation.

But secularism is not the opposite of belief; nonbelief is. Indeed, secularism has religious, specifically Christian, roots; it renders unto Caesar what is Caesar's, while leaving to God what properly belongs in his realm. John Locke argued as much in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, first published in 1689: genuine salvation, he wrote, can never be achieved through governmental coercion. In contemporary societies influenced by Lockean ideals, then, religion's priority of belief and secularism's commitment to individual rights are not in opposition; rather, they complement each other. It was once thought that the First Amendment was written to protect public life from the depredations of religious orthodoxy. It is now commonly accepted that the Founders also separated church and state in order to protect religion from government.

So what happens to religions that find themselves with many competitors? Consider what is occurring within the growing American evangelical movement. It has built megachurches that meet the needs of time-pressed professionals by offering such things as day-care centers, self-help groups, and networking opportunities. Its music owes more to Janis Joplin than to Johann Sebastian Bach. Its church officials learn more from business-school case studies than from theological texts. And its young people—well, as the children of parents who have gone through a born-again experience, they are not likely to be as obedient as the evangelical leader James Dobson wants them to be. Having opted to grow on secular terms, American evangelicalism is becoming less hostile to liberal ideas such as tolerance and pluralism. New efforts to take it in directions sympathetic to environmentalism and social justice are a direct result of the maturing of the faith, which followed from earlier decisions to make the movement more appealing to large numbers of Americans, especially the young.

Does the pattern hold outside America? After all, it is often said that the promulgation of secular values and lifestyles, one result of globalization, is prompting a reactionary religious backlash. There is some truth to this argument, but it misses the bigger picture. Most of the religious revivals we are seeing throughout the world today complement, and ultimately reinforce, secular developments; they are more likely to encourage moderation than fanaticism.

Let's look at how global commerce is affecting religion in the developing world. Religious leaders are using advanced media technologies to propagate their message, bringing new religious options and interpretations even to many remote areas. At the same time, globalization is drawing people into the cities, where they must fend for themselves in an unfamiliar environment; in these circumstances, people begin to look to religion not for

instruction in traditional ways of life, but as a means of coming to terms with new experiences. Both developments weaken the hold that local, insular religions have on their adherents, and also make it harder for governmental or clerical authorities to restrict religious choice.

How does this lead to moderation? It doesn't always—rejectionist religious strains can certainly prosper, at least for a time, during periods of intense dislocation. Still, although Jihad may be at war with McWorld, most other forms of religious enthusiasm, including most forms of Islam, are not. Various versions of the prosperity movement are attracting followers in developing countries, as well as in poorer areas of the United States, precisely because they value success in this world as much as holiness in another. These movements can be rightly accused of theological thinness, but not of adherence to old-fashioned doctrine. Their goal is not to question the modern world's riches but to bring them within the reach of more people. And once this dynamic is set in motion, it tends to gather momentum. As Eliza Griswold points out, the success of the Pentecostal Gospel of Prosperity in Nigeria has prompted the creation of a new Islamic organization focused on economic empowerment, which already has 1.2 million members in Nigeria alone.

In our time, as in Locke's, forcible conversion does not work very well, if at all. One does not spread the good news of the Lord through the bad news of war. As religious leaders recognize that they are more likely to swell their ranks through persuasion than through coercion, they find themselves accepting such secular ideas as free will and individual autonomy. And even religions that are culturally dominant and closely linked with the state must worry about holding on to the allegiance of the young, as well as retaining the loyalties—and the money—of those who have moved abroad and been exposed to religious pluralism and tolerance. As one part of the world becomes modern, those parts it touches also gain exposure to modern ideas. Few places remain where old-fashioned, rigidly dogmatic forms of religion are isolated.

One can see intimations of a pluralistic, American-style religious revival around the world. In Europe, a moderating of fundamentalist extremism, in the name of religious revivalism, may well be under way. Americans worried about the clash of civilizations tend to focus on those forms of Islam called *salafist*, a generic term meant to include those who wish to restore the Muslim faith to the purity it presumably possessed during the era of the Prophet Muhammad. Perhaps they should focus more attention on Muslim religious leaders like Amr Khaled, an Egyptian televangelist now living much of the year in England. Combining idealistic themes of self-empowerment with prosperity movement themes of self-improvement, Khaled appeals to young people in ways that are neither strictly modern nor strictly fundamentalist. So

does Mustafa Hosni, a young Egyptian whose YouTube videos bring messages of self-fulfillment and spiritual renewal to jeans-clad Muslims in both Europe and the Middle East. These secularly influenced forms of Islamic revivalism may not draw huge masses into the streets, but they are exceptionally influential among the well-off, ambitious, and upwardly mobile Muslims who will be leading their countries in the future.

The pattern is similar virtually everywhere we look. Latin Americans are leaving Catholicism because they want the sense of personal empowerment that Pentecostal forms of worship can provide. The preacher and best-selling author Rick Warren is invited to Africa because his ideas about the purpose-driven life, read in the United States as a guide to getting one's personal act together, can be read in that part of the world as encouraging widely bourgeois virtues of thrift and responsibility. In this light, Pope Benedict's decision to steer Catholicism in a more conservative, traditional direction—a move that effectively forfeits the Church's future in the developed world

willing to adopt Protestant notions about how faith should be practiced in order to gain or retain adherents. During the Second Vatican Council, in the early 1960s, the Catholic Church accepted the idea of religious liberty. Jews in the United States find themselves organized into denominations—Reform, Conservative, Orthodox—in ways that borrow from Protestant traditions. Despite the attention paid to what once were hotbeds of extremism like the North London Central Mosque in Finsbury Park, significant numbers of Muslims in both North America and western Europe are turning their mosques into all-purpose religious institutions and accepting innovations in gender equality foreign to the practice of Islam in the non-secular past.

What about religions in non-secular environments—can they find ways to live in peace with one another? If not, we have a pretty good idea of what will happen: the Sunni-Shia wars in Iraq, and everyday life in the occupied territories, provide examples enough. Yet because so much of the world is now, if not secular, then moving toward

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in order to expand its appeal in developing regions—seems like a winner only in the short run.

Even in Nigeria, there are signs of accommodation, as Lydia Polgreen of *The New York Times* wrote in a recent report from Kano, one of the states that adopted sharia. The harsher aspects of Islamic law have not been implemented there, and Christians, many of whom had fled the region, are beginning to return. "Shariah needs to be practical," a civil servant in Kano told Polgreen. "We are a developing country, so there is a kind of moderation between the ideas of the West and traditional Islamic values. We try to weigh it so that there is no contradiction." Those who worry about religious revivals in the world today usually pose an either/or choice between religion and secularism. In reality, the two can work together.

Religious peace will be the single most important consequence of the secular underpinning of today's religious growth. All religions tend to be protective of their traditions and rituals, but all religions also change depending upon the cultural practices of the societies in which they are based. Protestantism and secularism have always had close ties: as noted, Locke was drawing on a specifically Protestant sensibility when he wrote in defense of secular ideals. Other religions in secular environments have shown themselves quite

secularization, the sort of accommodation recently seen in Kano may ultimately take hold in other developing areas as well.

The world will never be rid of fanaticism; globalization is just as capable of disseminating extreme ideas as it is of advancing moderation. But fanaticism should not be confused with religious intensity. One can pray passionately to God and lead an otherwise balanced life, just as one can be monomaniacal about things having nothing to do with the divine.

And religious leaders prone to fanaticism are likely to find that the price of using force to spread God's word, or to try to monopolize it, will be a greatly diminished hold on the future. Moreover, the future may come sooner than we think. We have seen how rapidly religion has spread in the past, claiming adherents from competing faiths before the competition knew what hit them. Both secularism and secularly inspired ways of being religious are spreading just as rapidly—maybe even more so. Historians may one day look back on the next few decades, not as yet another era when religious conflicts enveloped countries and blew apart established societies, but as the era when secularization took over the world. 

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