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The Decline of Secularism

By Mohammad Alami Musa

SYNOPSIS

For many years, it was thought that religion would decline as countries modernised. This line of thinking is being challenged, not only by the experience of countries like the United States and Singapore, but also by demographic shifts occurring in many parts of the world. By the end of the 21st century, these demographic shifts may result in religion's displacement of secularism as a dominant ideology in the world.

COMMENTARY

Canadian professor of politics and specialist in political as well as religious demography, Eric Kaufmann, has projected that the rate of population growth of religious communities (people with religion) would be higher than the rate of population growth of secular people. He concluded that by 2050, there would be more people in the world with religion than without religion.

Kaufmann's conclusion is affirmed by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre, which projected that the number of people in the world with religion will increase from 84 per cent in 2015 to 87 per cent in 2050, with China accounting for most of the new converts. Pew further projected that Christians would remain the largest religious group in the world until the number of Muslims catches up by 2060. With both communities comprising about 62 per cent of the global population by then, secular individuals will be outnumbered by people who practice religion.

The Rise of the Religious Population

Empirically, religious people, especially the conservatives, fundamentalists, orthodox and evangelicals, are inclined to marry earlier, have children sooner, and to beget more children, than their secular counterparts. They also tend to marry within their community and are better at retaining religious memberships.

Kaufmann also predicted that the pro-natality growth of religious communities will continue as their members, driven by a divine mission to spread the faith and to pursue their strategy of dominion, tend to believe in enlarging their flocks. In the United States, for example, White evangelicals who form 25 per cent of the population, are very active in proselytising and converting others to their faith. Furthermore, by 2050, the US population will increase by about 100 million, mostly amongst the conservative communities in Republican states.

Based on these observations, Kaufmann concluded that religious people would remain a major component of the world's population, especially amidst an increasing global population.

In Western Europe, demographic trends will reverse aggregate religious decline as there is a Christian revival and an increase in Islamic demography. For the Christians, evidence of this trend can be seen, for example, in the increasing number of Lutherans in Finland and Orthodox Calvinists in Holland. Furthermore, religious immigrants – Christians from Eastern Europe and Muslims from developing countries – who typically have big families are contributing to the rise of religion in Western Europe. This increase in religious demography and the strong waves of immigration are expected to boost the growth of religion in Europe.

World-wide, the religious population will also grow as the result of population increases in the developing countries of the Global South and the former Soviet bloc countries. Furthermore, proselytising, and evangelising missions, which tend to be more successful in developing countries, will contribute to the increase.

The Failure of the Secularisation Theory

There is, however, an argument against the rise of religion in the world despite the demographic shifts mentioned above. This argument is based on the secularisation theory which states that religion will lose its significance and that religious populations will decline as countries urbanise and modernise, i.e., as they raise educational levels, harness science and technology, and develop economically.

This secularisation theory was popular in the 1960s. However, soon after, scholars began to question its validity, with some acknowledging that they had been too hasty in accepting the theory. The renowned American-Austrian sociologist and theologian, Peter Berger, was one such scholar. Although a champion of the secularisation theory in the 1960s, he declared in the 1980s that religion had made a huge comeback in the world. No force, not even the strong wave of secularisation, can cause religion to wane, what more to make it disappear from human lives.

Many more scholars followed suit, maintaining that religion is here to stay and will remain significant despite the intensive modernisation that the world had experienced. They cited the US as an example of how religion did not diminish there even though it had modernised and developed into a global economic powerhouse. Until today, the fact that the US is still a religious country is not in doubt.

The Case of Singapore

Singapore is another example. Religion here is stable and has not shown any significant decline despite rapid modernisation and phenomenal economic development. From results of the World Values Survey conducted in 108 countries, Singapore scored 6.98 for “Importance of God in one’s life” (“1” indicating “least important” and “10” indicating “very important”). For the question of how important religion is in one’s life, Singapore scored 1.98 (“1” indicating “very important” and “2” indicating “rather important”).

These scores suggest that even though Singapore is a modern and highly advanced country, most of its people have not rejected religion. Singapore’s experience is not unique. There are other countries where rapid and intensive modernisation did not result in the decline or disappearance of religion, showing that the modern world is not on an irreversible path of secularisation.

Conclusion

Eric Kaufmann’s demographic study and population projections affirm that the world will see the rise of religion. He predicted that the future would see a global demographic shift, which would transform the US, Europe, Israel, and the Muslim world as their religious populations become bigger than their secular populations. Secular countries in the world will also contribute less to global population than religious ones. Kaufmann quipped that by the close of the 21st century, religion will trump secularism and that the religious shall inherit the earth!

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