

more slowly than Europe). And yet, as Norris and Inglehart also say quite clearly, if we take a more global look at the contemporary world as a whole, we can make just the opposite argument—the world seems to be getting more, not less, religious. A higher percentage of people are probably more religious now than they were two or three decades ago, and in many countries, like Russia, Iran, and elsewhere in the Middle East, religious authority seems to have increased rather than withered.

However, on the assumption that Norris and Inglehart are right, what is the major reason for the increase in religious persons around the world? Although the causes might be complex, surely one of the most important is simple demography. Everywhere in the world, as in the United States, religious people have more children than irreligious people. The difference is even greater between societies. Religious societies have much higher birth rates than irreligious ones. In part, this simply reflects the levels of development of those societies. Before modernization all societies were mostly religious, and all societies had high birth rates and high death rates. People simply did not know how to stop having babies or how to stop death. Eventually, sanitation, medicine, and other factors brought the death rate down in industrializing and modernizing societies, leading those societies to have high birth rates but low(er) death rates, so that their populations “exploded.” In the contemporary world a less-developed society does not have to invent sanitation or medicine. These ideas and materials can be brought in from outside, so the drop in death rates can happen quickly.

As the more developed countries learned how to control deaths, their birth rates also came down. People found that children could be expensive and confining in an industrial and urban world. Some of these societies (e.g., Japan, Russia, Spain) now actually have declining populations. Meanwhile, less developed countries today may have reduced death rates, but they still have high birth rates (although they are coming down) and are still religious. Thus, the number of religious persons in the world increases with these exploding populations.

Even if we return to the idea of secularization as authority, the world has seen surging religious militancy in much of the Muslim world, with relevant consequences for politics in those countries. Women are either deciding to wear veils or being forced to wear veils. Iran, once run by a secular shah and a socialist prime minister, is now controlled by its religious establishment. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood won the 2011 elections in that country (only to be thrown out of office by a military coup). Other examples around the world can be found.

Reasons for this reemergence of religious political authority have complex roots but are partly a matter of the reassertion of cultural pride in a segment of the world that had been colonized and dominated by Western political, economic, and, most importantly for religion, cultural imperialism. Under these circumstances, many people found that only religion provided an alternative symbol of difference and nationalism and a legitimate basis for organization, so that it could serve as a rallying mechanism for the assertion of independence and power.

Conclusion

An old and revered saying in science is that “the more you learn the more questions you have.” And true to the saying, even after years of research and analysis, I am left with a lot of questions and ideas about the nature of religious involvements around the world. I hope you are as well. That is, after all, the hallmark of developing a sociological imagination.

I therefore want to end this chapter with a question, something to look into in the future. I will phrase the question as a proposition. It may be true, or sort of true, or not true at all. I have seen no research on the point that might provide an answer. I suspect that one of the reasons highly developed countries experience declines in religiosity is that over the long term those countries have experienced soaring life expectancies.

At the time of Christ, average life expectancy in the Roman Empire was less than 30 years. By 1870 life expectancy in England, the richest country in the world, was still only 40 years. Three of ten babies born died by the age of one. Death was everywhere. Everyone had seen many

people die. A 30-year-old had seen her mother and one or more children die, a 10-year-old her grandmother and a brother, and maybe her father. Death was even more present everywhere else in the world. No wonder people were preoccupied with death and the afterlife.

Today, life expectancy in England is about 80, in the United States 78, in Japan 82. Most young people have known no one who has died, or perhaps their aged grandparents, or a soldier in some war. But death is not an everyday event (unless one lives in a retirement community). Young people don’t live there. Furthermore, I suspect that many old people are not as repulsed by death as their ancestors. With long lives behind them, their peers dying, and illnesses sapping their activity, death does not seem so cruel and forbidding. People over 70 have America’s highest suicide rate. Death has come gradually, in little steps. As the current cliché has it, death is a natural part of life—especially when one reaches his or her 80s.

So perhaps the focus of religion on the afterlife, or next life, or on helping people to deal with death, is not