

FAITHS AT WAR

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November 2013

DELIVERED TO CONFERENCE

CUSTODIRE L'UMANITÀ: VERSO LE PERIFERIE ESISTENZIALI, ASSISI, ITALY

A World of Conflict

I have been asked to speak on “Geopolitics in the Post-Secular Era,” a phrase I find interesting, and apposite. For many years, political leaders assumed that ideologies were wholly secular, and only in quite recent times – the present century – have they realized just how forcefully religion has struck back. September 11, 2001, marked the beginning of a new political epoch.

My main theme is Faiths at War, with an emphasis on the Middle East. But my scope is really larger than that. I'll look first at the major areas of conflict and violence in the contemporary world, both actual and potential. That means considering the Middle East and the Islamic world, certainly, but also at growing threats in Eastern Asia. Is there any hope that shifts in values will promote and preserve peace?

But here is my central point. I think that we can see trends in the world today that do promise a growth of peace, and the lessening of extremism. The other side of that story, though, is the growth of secularism and radical individualism, the decline of those spiritual values so necessary for the full realization of human potential. The beneficiary is, ultimately, an ever more powerful secular state, which makes more and more demands on its citizens, and at its worst becomes a monstrous burden.

As an American proverb warns, “Be careful what you wish for: it might come true.”

The New Wars of Religion

At first sight, that quest for peace seems hopeless, especially when framed in terms of religion. After generations of seeing world conflicts in terms of political ideology, we now see a world apparently dominated by the struggle of faiths and creeds. Ever since the mid-1970s, the failure of secular ideologies to deliver on their promise of limitless progress led millions around the world to seek solutions in different kinds of fundamentalist religion. Although this process is most commonly identified in the context of Islam, it has to different extents affected all the major religions.

Islam, of course, matters so much because of its numerical strength. Both religions have

acquired vastly more adherents in the past century, but in some ways, Muslims have significantly outpaced Christians. When considered as a share of global population, Christian numbers have proved strikingly stable over the past century. In the year 1900, about one-third of the world's people were Christians, and that proportion remains more or less unchanged today. Moreover, if we project our estimate forward to the year 2050, that proportion should still be about one-third. But if we look at Muslim numbers in the same terms, as a share of global the world's people, then that religion has enjoyed a far more impressive surge. In 1900, the 200-220 million Muslims then living comprised some 12 or 13 percent of humanity, compared to 22.5 percent of the world today, and a projected figure of 27 percent by 2050. Christians in 1900 outnumbered Muslims by 2.8 to 1. Today the figure is 1.5 to 1, and by 2050 it should be 1.3 to 1. Put another way, there are four times as many Christians alive today as there were in 1900; but over the same period, Muslims have grown at least seven-fold.

Despite this numerical growth, most Islamic societies have coped poorly with post-modernity. With a couple of significant exceptions, such as Indonesia and Turkey, most Islamic nations have resisted the general worldwide trend towards democratization, and recent crises in Egypt have raised serious questions about even that nation to sustain a non-authoritarian political regime. For many years, the self-described beacons of progressive secular nationalism were such Ba'athist nations as Iraq and Syria, both of which today lie in ruins. Algeria maintained its secular identity, but at the cost of a savage and massively destructive civil war.

Middle Eastern nations in particular have coped very badly with the challenges of modernity and globalization, and have fallen ever farther behind in terms of technological innovation and commercial development—behind the West, of course, but also behind Japan and the Pacific Rim nations, and now both China and India. (The economic contrast between neighboring India and Pakistan is vast and rapidly growing).

Although populous, Muslim nations supply only a minuscule fraction of the world's scientific research, as measured by patents and articles in major journals. Prominent atheist advocate Richard Dawkins recently created a fierce controversy when he pointed out that the entire Muslim world could claim only ten Nobel Laureates, while his own Trinity College, Cambridge, had 32. And Trinity is only one of dozens of individual colleges that comprise Cambridge University.

Extremist Violence

Continuing political and economic crises provide a natural framework for the rise of Islamist extremism. Over the last twenty years, the Muslim world has been caught up in a massive religious revival, and this movement has expressed itself in calls for pure religious states upheld by the full apparatus of Islamic law. Perhaps this idea appeals to people afraid of losing their cultural identity in the face of globalization, or else it might seem to offer a solution for the desperately poor in a world dominated by the wealthy and callous West. Such movements gain enormously from the support of wealthy oil nations, anxious to divert violent radicalism away from their own soil. In turn, extremism seeks scapegoats, obviously enough given the region's cumulative setbacks. Overwhelmingly, those targets have been Christians.

The most notorious consequence of all this has of course been global terrorism, but also ethnic/religious cleansing, as in Syria and Iraq, and in the creation of highly repressive regimes. For many in the West, the rise of a nuclear-armed Iran is an ultimate nightmare (the fact that Pakistan already has such weapons is conveniently forgotten). The prospects for religious violence and confrontation in Egypt are uniquely perilous, threatening the killing or expulsion of millions, and a refugee situation in the Mediterranean world not seen since the Second World War. We should be painfully conscious of the approaching centennial of the Armenian massacres of 1915, lest that very year, 2015, witnesses a repetition of anti-Christian slaughter on a terrifying scale.

However we understand the prospects for the long term, the immediate dangers are alarming, and demand responses by all major powers. It is particularly vital that policy makers at all levels become thoroughly familiar with the history of religions in those cultures, and the rhetoric underlying these current struggles.

It is not hard to see why people are tempted by the language of a clash of civilizations. Nor why so many Europeans in particular see that clash reflected on their own soil, as the continent's Islamic population grows.

Myths of Terrorism

Now, that clash of civilizations idea always had its problems.

If we look at the history of terrorism, it is striking how late Islamists came on the scene as major players. From the late 1960s through the late 1980s, the world suffered repeated waves of outrageous terrorism associated with the Middle East, but the groups involved were militantly non-Muslim and indeed comprehensively anti-religious.

Just in the case of Italy, two of the worst incidents international terrorism both involved appalling terror attacks at Rome's Fiumicino airport, respectively in 1973 and 1985. One was connected to the Palestine Liberation Organization, one to the Abu Nidal group, then in the employ of Saddam's Iraq. Neither the P.L.O. nor Ba'athist Iraq had any sympathy for Islam as a faith, and both movements were at daggers drawn with Islamists. In the radical Palestinian movements of these years, in fact, the most radical leaders usually stemmed from Christian backgrounds. Nor, of course, does that take account of domestic terror attacks associated with the Far Right and Far Left, neither of which claimed any religious motivation.

"Islamic terrorism" was a newish creation in the 1980s, which is odd if terrorism is somehow in the religion's DNA. Suicide attacks and suicide bombing, for instance, were a new development of the 1980s. They emerged in what we have already termed a post-secular world.

Growing Divisions

In practice, both Christians and Muslims have often enjoyed good relations. For most of the Middle Ages, Jews and Christians survived in Muslim states, at a time when Muslims or Jews were massacred or expelled by their Christian neighbors. Even today, with all the well-

publicized horrors of interreligious violence in the Middle East, there are powerful demonstrations of harmony. Most Muslim states tolerate Christian worship, even Gulf nations such as Oman and the United Arab Emirates, provided there are no attempts to convert Muslims. In most of Africa, too, Muslim–Christian relations at local level have often (at least until recently) been characterized by a live-and-let-live attitude. Partly, this reflects the strong affinity between the daily practice of the two great African religions, both of which have drawn on older animist traditions. Across East and Southeast Asia, Western-style Christmas has become a widespread secular holiday, marked enthusiastically even by many Indonesian Muslims.

Having said all this, the long-term prognosis for interfaith relations is not good. This does not mean that either religion is of itself violent or intolerant, but both have potent traditions of seeking to implement their views through political action: the two sisters are simply too much alike to live side by side. Both Christian and Muslim states can exist for decades or centuries without seeking to persecute minorities. All too often, though, persecution erupts, perhaps in response to some natural cataclysm, or to the rise of a particularly zealous regime. The minority community is reduced or scattered, and even after the hard times end, matters can never be quite the same again. Peace then resumes until the next cycle of intolerance begins, but the ratchet turns yet another notch, and life becomes correspondingly more difficult for the survivors of the shrinking minority. It is much the same story as that of the Jews in medieval or early modern Europe.

Even if the dominant religion is generally tolerant, it only takes an outbreak of fanaticism every half-century or so to devastate or uproot a minority, and that has been the fate of religious minorities across the Middle East in recent years. Although Christian communities survive across the region, their numbers are a pathetic shadow of what they were even in 1850, and whole peoples have been obliterated since that time.

These experiences remind us of the sad historical lesson that persecution can indeed be very effective, if carried out with enough ruthlessness. Perhaps one cannot kill an idea, but it is not too hard to massacre or convert everyone who holds or expresses it. We ignore this unpalatable fact because so few scholars ever write about the end of a church or religious movement, preferring to tell stories of ascent and growth. Once, the Nestorian church was one of the largest and most widespread institutions in the world: by 1500 it had almost ceased to exist. Once, Turkey had large Christian minorities, but these were squeezed out of existence in a decade or two. These events provide a bleak precedent for modern minority populations. Conceivably, the religious violence in Iraq over the past decade might succeed in eliminating that nation's ancient Christian minority just as thoroughly as occurred in Turkey. In a nightmare scenario, Syria, and even Egypt, might be next in line.

Undeniably, modern Christians have committed their share of atrocities. The Serbian massacre of 8,000 Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica in 1995 remains the largest single crime of its kind in post-1945 Europe. In recent years, though, the pattern of religious conflict has shifted decisively. In the world as a whole, there is no question that the threat of intolerance and persecution chiefly comes from the Islamic side of the equation. Around the world, Muslim states are passing through one of these historic phases of zeal and persecution of the sort just mentioned.

Islamism Retreats

Let us assume, then, that radical Islamist movements continue to pose a major global threat. Can that challenge of religious violence be removed or reduced?

It is utterly wrong to conflate all Islamic societies and nations as one common phenomenon. Far from being homogeneous, they are about as vastly distinct as are notionally Christian societies. And already, many Islamic countries are experiencing profound changes that portend greater stability and peace. As I have said, I am gravely concerned about the short-term prospects for peace, but matters look much more encouraging in the longer term.

Now, for our present purposes, the social changes in question are rather mixed in nature. As I have [written before](#), many societies are [changing fast](#), giving women a much greater role in employment and public life, and higher status in marriage and the family. The consequence is that women enjoy more autonomy, which is reflected in a fairly sudden and radical move away from high fertility and large families, and the breakdown of older family structures.

Some nations of the Middle East and North Africa have experienced a precipitous plunge in fertility rates since the late 1980s, and that trend shows no sign of slowing. Iran offers a startling example. From the 1970s, many Iranians came to believe that women should be educated and allowed to enter the workforce, and this idea persisted even after the 1979 Islamic revolution. With growing numbers of women working (and, therefore, less available to parent a huge family), and with more financial options available to women outside of marriage, fertility rates inevitably dropped. From 1950 through 1980, Iran had extraordinarily high fertility rates, between 6.5 and 7 children per woman. During the 1990s, however, the rate tumbled from 5.6 to 2.5, and today, the rate is just 1.7. Iran's demographic profile has moved from the paradigmatic Third World model (high fertility rates, high growth) to the First World pattern: Europeanization.

Nor is Iran unusual. European scholars observe, sardonically, that the closer a woman lives to Rome, the fewer children she has. Now, surprisingly, the same is true on the Muslim side of the Mediterranean. Just in the last twenty-five years, Algeria's fertility rate has plunged from 6.7 to 1.76, Tunisia's from 4.8 to 1.71. All these countries are now well below replacement level, and fertility continues to decline year by year. Soon, all should have profiles comparable to Germany or even Italy. And although other neighboring countries like Morocco and Turkey are still above replacement, their fertility rates have halved since the 1980s.

Almost certainly, this demographic change will have religious consequences. In the short term, religious fundamentalists might benefit from popular unease over the changing role of women, and the emergence of alternative family models. Over time, however, lower fertility promotes religious and political stability. At a minimum, a society in which women hold higher status has to change its religious practice to include and accommodate them, as we see, for instance, in the enhanced role of women within Moroccan Islam in recent years.

The Islamic world thus seems to be dividing into a two-tier model, a demographic schism between countries with low fertility rates, and those with rates at 5 or 6—countries such as Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. The highest birthrates of all are in such nightmare lands

and failed or failing states as Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Palestine/Gaza. Quite possibly, low-fertility countries will become more secular, more European in fact, while large-family nations remain religious. Algeria might have far more in common culturally and socially with France than with Egypt. In that case, concepts of Muslim identity would become ever more tenuous, and so would any prospects for a future clash of civilizations. Anything we say about the prospects for Muslim-Christian conflict must be taken in the context of this rapidly spreading demographic transition.

These trends have vast political consequences. As society becomes increasingly older, with a higher median age, it has fewer of the young adults who so often fall prey to the attractions of extremism. The country in which this transformation has happened most rapidly is Tunisia, which was the birthplace of the Arab Spring movement two years ago. In Iran especially, these social trends point to a sharp decline in ultra-religious fervor and extremism in coming years.

It is the countries that have not yet experienced these social revolutions – in Egypt and Syria, Somalia and Pakistan – where religious-based violence continues to thrive. Not only do I think that the kind of Islamist violence we see today *might* fade in the near future, but we already see the portents.

Significantly, in light of the themes of the present conference, these changes arise from attitudes to the individual and the person, to acknowledging the full humanity of all. In particular, they reflect radical new attitudes to women. As I will discuss later though, the kind of secularity that these changes imply has its own dangers, to which I shall return.

The Decline of Violence

When we look at the horrors of contemporary struggles, and the ideologies that drive them, it seems impossible to imagine that they might ever change, and yet of course they do.

A historical perspective is essential here. The Europe of a century ago, with all its explosive nationalism and militarism, its rival imperialisms, its societies founded upon values of aristocracy and social exclusion, is today inconceivable. So has the Europe of the 1930s, with its multiple forms of totalitarian hatred confronting each other. So also has the Europe of, say, 1963 or even 1983, constantly staggering on the brink of war between nuclear armed rivals. To look wider afield, all knowledgeable observers in the 1960s and early 1970s despaired of any prospect of peace with the Chinese, who seemed to be creating a society founded on the implacable revolutionary hatred of all outsiders. Then as now, no obvious road led out of fanaticism.

These bygone worlds are now the stuff of bad dreams. Might we hope that in two decades, say, religious-based terrorism will be in the same category?

Our Better Angels

Although the work is controversial, we can also look at Steven Pinker's book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011), which argues that mass violence and killing have steadily declined through the centuries, and that even the appalling wars of the

twentieth century were far less destructive – in relation to global population – than were conflicts of ancient and medieval times. Interpersonal violence has also declined astonishingly, as measured for instance by homicide rates through the centuries.

The world can become less bloodthirsty and, says Pinker, it has. Strikingly, in trying to describe these changes, Pinker stresses values, and places in the foreground concepts of human worth and dignity. Among the factors that he cites for this great global transformation, he notes changes that have promoted the dignity of the individual, the sense of the worth of the person, as promoted through literacy, mobility, democracy and cosmopolitanism. Pinker also cites the growing role of women, of “feminization.” A far-reaching “rights revolution” has promoted an expansive sense of universal human rights, demanding concerted action against violators.

He also describes “the escalator of reason,” the growing application of rational judgment to the prospect of conflict. In the words of the British humanitarian Norman Angell, many people came to realize that:

The fight for ideals can no longer take the form of fight between nations, because the lines of division on moral questions are within the nations themselves and intersect the political frontiers. There is no modern State which is completely Catholic or Protestant, or liberal or autocratic, or aristocratic or democratic, or socialist or individualist; the moral and spiritual struggles of the modern world go on between citizens of the same State in unconscious intellectual cooperation with corresponding groups in other states, not between the public powers of rival States. War has no longer the justification that it makes for the survival of the fittest; it involves the survival of the less fit. ... The warlike nations do not inherit the earth; they represent the decaying human element.

Now, I quote Angell with some embarrassment as his famous book, *The Great Illusion*, appeared in 1910, and was widely quoted as showing that war in the modern world would be impossible. Events of 1914 proved him badly wrong. But as he responded to criticisms, he had not prophesied an era of eternal peace, rather that war would be wholly unprofitable and counter-productive for all participants, an interpretation that is difficult to counter.

All the trends that Pinker describes are encouraging, indeed world-changing. Conceivably, their impact and their global span is vastly accelerated by new technologies, above all by social media.

A Triumph of Faith?

But I introduce a caveat. Singer explains those developments in terms that are not just secular, but rigidly anti-religious, and in ways that deny history. In the trends that he cites, religious leaders and their ideas are in fact critically important, though he rarely acknowledges this. This extends from the Jewish-rooted humanitarianism of Raphael Lemkin, one of the founding fathers of modern concepts of human rights – among other things, he coined the word “genocide” - to the extolling of human worth by Popes like John Paul II in the struggle against Communism.

Both these examples are familiar enough. Less so is the prophetic work of Pope Benedict XV in the First World War, a story little known even to many Catholics. At a time when Christian leaders throughout the West were presenting that struggle in terms of holy war and apocalyptic struggle, Benedict preached peace. In 1916, he lamented “the suicide of civilized Europe.” He also set out clear agendas how this peace could be achieved and preserved, advocating what at the time seemed like an unthinkable social revolution. He called for a peace without victors or losers. Rival states would cease fighting and restore all the territories they had conquered, leaving disputed claims to arbitration. European nations would disarm, using the money saved for social reconstruction. Benedict even favored ending military conscription, which in the European context of the time would have constituted a social revolution. In the long term, he wanted national loyalties to fade before the coming of a European union, a concept developed by successor Popes in the 1920s and beyond.

Where Pinker goes most astray is that, in listing those values of humanitarianism, cosmopolitanism, and civilization, he fails to realize that they are highly religious in their origins, and in their historical development. They represent the working out of Judaeo-Christian ideals in politics and society. If we are to look at the world’s conflicts and see the solution in terms of pure secularization, of “growing out” of older religious concepts and loyalties, we will be brutally disappointed.

Worse, ignoring these religious underpinnings prevents us seeing the authentic dangers in some of these global trends. That threat is especially acute when one of Pinker’s global megatrends is the rise of the Leviathan state. He views this as a positive current, in the sense that the state insists on a monopoly of violence, and suppresses disorder. That is all true. But as we must realize, that Leviathan state is itself lethally dangerous, and a massive potential source of violence and repression, unless it is restrained and constrained by a sense of the human worth of the people it rules. And that, again, is where religious values can and must come into play.

A Nightmare

This takes us back to the issue of Islam and the Middle East.

My concern is not so much *whether* Islamist ideologies will fade, but what will replace them. If my projections are right, then the critical changes weakening extremism will also promote secularization, a kind of Europeanization of Islam. That analogy is all the more accurate because of the role of Muslim populations in Europe in transmitting European values and ways back to their countries of origin.

In the short run, that trend seems highly desirable, in potentially reducing violence and conflict. Having said that, Europeans more than anyone know the dangers that follow from a collapse of faith, and a rise of secularism. A very rapid decline of family and tradition creates a profoundly atomized society founded on extreme notions of hedonistic individualism. Concepts of community, and even society itself, all but vanish. Also, as we know well, the secularism that presents itself in terms of universal tolerance can become a strict and unbending ideology in its own right, with no room for religious values, or those who uphold them.

Do we wish to see the Islamic world experience the same trends that Europe has witnessed since the 1970s? The prosperity, yes, and the emancipation: but the secularization?

A Dream

We have no conceivable way of predicting the global conflicts that will arise within a decade or two. Yes, we can identify particular tensions, and list strategic stress points around the world, although none need necessarily lead to violent outcomes.

Culturally, though, we can predict very likely conflicts within nations. Above all, these will arise from the ambitions of states on the one side, and on the other the attempts to defend the rights of individuals and communities. In those conflicts, religious groups and institutions would play a critical role, facing an urgent need to define and defend human values, with the kind of humanism I described earlier as a valuable model. And on the religious side of that balance, Christians would readily find common cause with other faiths, including Islam.

Perhaps instead of a confrontation between faiths, we would look instead to a non-violent conflict between religious and secular values, a cultural and intellectual struggle.

And that would, indeed, be a clash of civilizations.