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Culture and religion

Things that may interest you

- In 2015 31% of the world was Christian, 24% Muslim, 16% unaffiliated and secular, 15% Hindu, 7% Buddhist, 5.7% folk faiths, 0.8% minority faiths and 0.2% Jews.
- In north and central Europe, amongst 16-30 year olds, 80-90% profess no religion. In USA, 41% of the same age-group believe in a biblical God while 39% believe in another higher power.
- China has surpassed USA as the biggest exporter of cultural goods and services - heritage items, performance arts, arts & crafts, books and press, audiovisual and interactive media, design and creative services. Then come India, Turkey, Malaysia and Britain. Measured as a percentage of GDP, the world's biggest cultural producer is Britain.
- In 2014, countries where people reported the most trust in other people were the Nordics, China, New Zealand, Netherlands, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Indonesia and Kazakhstan. Least were Colombia, Brazil, Zimbabwe, Romania, Ghana, Philippines, Tanzania and Malaysia.

As Western cultural hegemony began ebbing around the Millennium, other perspectives started filling the vacuum. This showed itself with the rise of indigenous and minority movements in Latin America, Central Asia, or amongst the Kurdish, Tamil or Hausa peoples, or with countries such as Malaysia, Venezuela, Kenya or Armenia. But the main impact came from cultures hefty

enough to act as viable ethical and ideological counterweights to the West.

The two main contenders were the Confucian sphere (with an enormous population and rising economic and cultural momentum) and the geopolitically sensitive Islamic sphere (with its strong ethical, political and community values). A social-political reform movement erupted in the 2010-11 Arab revolutions and, while it largely failed, it flagged up a longterm trend that is yet to flower as the Arab world shifts from the rule of oil monarchies and dictatorships toward greater social justice, social consensus and intercommunal coexistence. Which it will, sooner or later.

The American Samuel Huntington saw this rise of the Confucian and Islamic spheres as a clash of civilisations, and he was right and wrong. Indeed there has been a rebalancing, but his was the perception of an American who saw the world as a threat to American interests. The Confucian and Islamic spheres seek mainly to weaken Western influence in their patch, not to dominate the West as the West has dominated them. They seek to filter the best of the West from its more insidious and controlling aspects. A tipping point occurred with the banking crisis of 2007-8, reducing the West's cultural gravitas. Since then, the Confucian and Islamic worlds have enjoyed increasing parity in a dialogue of ideas and principles with the West.

China will be a cultural dynamo in coming decades but its dominance won't be quite the same as America's has been. Subsurface stresses between China and the Muslim world, Africa and Latin America will constrain its influence since these spheres are gaining cultural momentum in their own right, and India also competes as a major cultural exporter. We are heading toward a global cultural patchwork. But will such a patchwork have a deglobalising, insulating influence? It's possible, but unlikely. Politics and competitiveness can delay and complicate things but, as in UNESCO's observation, cultural globalisation is now

multidirectional and *multidimensional*. That is, even when foreign cultural influences are adopted, they also change, and this increases variation.

English-speaking countries such as USA and Britain, accustomed to cultural dominance, abreact somewhat to this multidirectionality. They are less happy being at the receiving end of the world's cultural influences and they don't understand others' languages. Cultural source-points are more genuinely global than before, especially with social networking and online streaming – hiphop comes in 200 languages and Bollywood and Nollywood have enormous audiences.

World society seems to favour cultural diversity and localism – though the balance varies from country to country. A UNESCO survey reports that, culturally, people in most countries favour locality over nationality, and nationality over globalism. In its survey of attitudes, only Jordanians report greater allegiance to the world than to their nation. High-rating pro-global countries include Australia, Canada, France, Greece, Switzerland, Mexico, USA, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Brazil and Venezuela. This said, many societies are internally divided, cleaving between younger internationalists and older traditionalists, who can be more nativist.

Another survey, the World Values Survey, has found that, though globalisation would be expected to produce a convergence of world values, this is not actually so. Richer societies have in the last 30 years been changing toward greater tolerance, acceptance of foreigners, progressive and democratic values, while poorer societies' values have changed little, even becoming marginally more traditional or conservative. There is a correlation between economic security and liberalised values, and growing global economic inequality has therefore led to diverging values, globally.

Even so, there is still a problem with cultural globalisation. It permits Chinese to excel in Western classical music, Westerners to

dance to African rhythms and everyone to eat everyone else's foods, but it steamrollers over smaller local cultures, languages and life-ways that are relevant to the future. Whether they die out or modernise, smaller cultures are changing and their indigenous context, relevance and significance is weakening. This is detrimental longterm, eroding global sociodiversity and bringing a loss of homegrown knowledge and variety. Once gone, a culture is irretrievable, even if it has been recorded, preserved, commoditised or anthropologised.

UNESCO lists the heritage intangibles that it seeks to preserve. These include Georgian polyphonic singing, Kyrgyz epic-telling, Indian Vedic chanting, Cambodian ballet, Sicilian puppet theatre, Belizian Garifuna, Lakalaka from Tonga, Mandinga rites from Senegal and the Gelede oral heritage of Benin. All of these are fascinating to tourists and anthropologists, but they are likely either to die, lose their reason for being, or live on only in YouTube videos and cultural festivals. Ethnodiversity, languages, histories and cultural uniquenesses are falling into history's compost pile.

A countervailing tendency enhances sociodiversity though. New cultural formats are taking shape amongst mixed-race social groups, business and academic caucuses, in cross-cultural music, amongst geeks, hippies, dissenters, activists, extremists, travellers, 67m autistics, 23m refugees, 10m stateless people and 200m migrants – some of whom preserve their traditions more avidly than people in their countries of origin. Cross-fertilisation and migration have broadened the cultural spectrum in every country. Perhaps there is a creative or diversifying tendency in humanity seeking to create variegation anew, irrespective of globalisation's standardising tendencies.

Culture is made up of a body of ideas, customs, creativity and social behaviours – it's the human software of nations and cultural worlds. Our planet is made up of a variety of such worlds, each with unique reality-structures formed over millennia. This variety is

changing: following a few centuries of Euro-American influence, around 1990 we crossed a critical threshold, stimulated by travel, computerisation, financial deregulation and the end of the Cold War. The American thinker Francis Fukuyama called this ‘the end of history’ but really another story was starting. The world’s social-cultural blocs are rearranging themselves.

Since 1990 the world has become materially more uniform – we all drive roughly the same cars, use the same phones and our homes are stacked with items made in China. Yet cultural contrasts are growing more emphatic since all cultures are obliged to square with each other anew in the expanded ethno-cultural ecosystem of modern times. They see a new perspective of themselves, and deep creative dynamics are afoot. Multiple outcomes are bubbling up, previously unforeseen.

Taking gender politics as an example, while this historic shift started in the 20th Century West, it arises independently through the perceptions and choices of women within their own cultures, for their own reasons and in their own ways. It’s an idea whose time has come. In the West, Muslim headscarves are seen as a symptom of a male dominance, yet to many young Muslim women headscarves are a feminist statement. Western women’s preferences are not universally applicable.

These deep creative dynamics are also generational: the Millennials are history’s first truly global generation – though their foreparents laid the ground. Millennials’ worldviews are closer to those of fellow Millennials worldwide than to those of earlier generations in their own nations.

So we are now in a period of cultural fermentation, leading toward a time and an outcome we do not yet see. We have stumbled into a social-cultural *mêlée*, an encounter of multiple, shifting identities and expressions. We are faced with a challenge to work out our distinctions at a time when global cohesion has never been more

necessary. To achieve such cohesion, we must sort out our differences. Diversity and cohesion are both important, and the world will oscillate between them over time. While they are globally very interdependent, nations, ethnicities and groups are finding a new sense of identity, creativity and viewpoint unique to themselves.

Identity is also framed in relation to specific contexts – people respond differently to ‘immigrants’ than they do to foreign doctors or performers. All societies are internally divided, maintaining a collective equilibrium that survives as long as potent issues stay below the surface. But erupting frictions are necessary because each culture has historic ghosts and ghouls to exorcise. Success in dealing with frictions depends greatly on public maturity and helpful social leadership. This will be a crucial and sometimes painful truth-and-reconciliation process on a global scale.

Part of Russian society is European and part Asiatic in orientation; part of British society is insular and part internationalist; part of Indian society is urban-cosmopolitan while part is rural and poor. These contradictions mooch along well enough until something triggers a heated reaction. News coverage and online social networking make these reactions snowball or spread globally, and damage can be done very quickly. Such eruptions can also be helpful: an online campaign to support the rights of an ethnic group or a cause, or railing against corporate interests, unconceals malignant local or national issues. So global influences can support localism in some contexts.

Globalisation has charged a price in terms of languages, knowhow and traditions lost, suffocating customs and sociodiversity. The world will regret this. Tradition is easily eroded by education, emigration, intolerance, violation of traditional rights, insensitivity, bad policy, museification, ever-extending roads, phone networks, tourist and media penetration, replacement of hand-crafted items with manufactures, and infiltration by the money economy. But

cultures are not static and, if they become so, they dwindle and lose relevance – even indigenous people leave them behind.

Religion

Until the 1990s the expectation amongst seculars was that economic growth and modernity would reduce religious affiliation, belief and ‘superstitions’, but this has proven untrue. Religion has grown as a medium of faith and cultural identity. Partly this has been a reaction against modern secular materialism, amorality and double standards. Of the main cultural contenders, the Islamic and Confucian spheres, the first is religiously based while the other hosts far more religiously unaffiliated people than Europe, the historic source of modern secularism.

Statistics can be compiled of the numbers of people affiliated with traditional faiths, but three key factors are often missed. First is the genuine depth of people’s faith and the extent to which it is heartfelt and truly *lived*. The second is ‘default believers’, who state an affiliation while not really practising it – they might be disaffected, lapsed or uninterested. Nonetheless they swell adherents’ official numbers. The number of default believers is probably high and rising but counting them is difficult. The third factor is unaffiliated people, some being secular and some with an independent spiritual orientation – perhaps yoga, meditation, or spiritualist, folk, pagan, new age or personal beliefs – but researchers tend not to distinguish these two groupings. People on an independent path represent an unmentioned elephant in the room both for seculars and religionists. These three factors make figures unreliable and solely indicative.

Many people affiliate with the religion of their birth to avoid stepping out of line. In the Middle East, secular Arab socialism was strong in the 1950s-70s but, as Islamic fundamentalism gained ground in the 1980s-90s, many people re-affiliated with Islam for identity reasons, or due to community pressures, obligation or

safety fears. Today, 20-30% of Arabs and Iranians are secular or spiritually independent but they keep quiet. Similarly, many Europeans say they're Christian, remembering their faith only at Christmas, Easter and funerals.

Unaffiliated people have not significantly increased in number except in Europe and amongst younger generations in North America. They represent 16% of the world population, or 1.2bn people, chiefly in the Asia-Pacific region and Europe, and they are expected to grow by only 3% by 2050, compared with 70% growth for Muslims and 34% for Christians. As a share of the world's population, unaffiliated people will decline mainly because they are older, with lower birth rates than Muslims or African Christians. In Europe, Muslims are predicted make up 10% of the population in 2050. The largest Muslim country in the world will be India, though it will still be mainly Hindu. In USA, Christians are expected to decline from 75% to 65%, mainly by switching or lapsing, and there will be more Muslims than Jews. 40% of all Christians will live in Africa, and Rome and Canterbury will be far from Christians' centre of gravity by then.

Religious switching is not widespread, with movement mainly toward Islam or non-affiliation, away from Christianity, while other faiths hold steady. Globally, by 2050 40m will adopt Christianity but 106m will leave it. There has been significant religious adoption in Russia (Orthodox Christian), China (Buddhist and Evangelical) and across Africa (Christian and Muslim).

The main future trends arise from birth and death rates: Muslims are on average younger, with higher birth rates, while Christians (except in Africa), Buddhists, Jews, other faiths and the unaffiliated are older, with lower birth rates. Christianity is the largest faith by population but, by 2060, Islam is expected to equal it, at around 3bn each. Islam, currently with around 1.6bn adherents, is growing rapidly due to higher birth rates, more new adopters and lower rejection rates amongst Muslim young people.

Hindus will increase from 1bn to 1.4bn. Buddhists, numbering 488m, will decrease slightly by 1.5m – living in low-birthrate countries such as China, Japan, Korea and Thailand. People observing folk faiths will grow by 11% to 450m. Other faiths – Sikhs, Baha'is, Jains, Taoists and others – will rise 6% to around 61m. Jews will grow slightly from 14m to 16m.

Interfaith conflict is less common than conflict *within* faiths. Muslim terrorism has killed more Muslims than Christians or seculars. Friction between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims is greater than it has been for centuries, much because it is politically exploited. Christian monks and priests fight each other in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. There has however been a surprising rise of frictions by Buddhists against Muslims in Sri Lanka and Myanmar and against Christians in Bhutan. Western military interventions in Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan have been seen by many Muslims as a new Crusade – with some justification because the West's chief sabre-rattlers have been right-wing American Christians.

Islamic fundamentalism is slowly subsiding. However, influenced by Muslims in the West, a new real-life Islamic consciousness is developing, especially amongst the young. This will continue thanks to generational change and a likely incremental decoupling of religion from politics in the Muslim world. Fundamentalism was a reactive response to Westernism but, as Western influences deflate, fundamentalism too is likely to lose traction. Islam is generally more stretchy, consensual and multicultural, with less emphasis on institutions and priesthoods than Christianity and with a greater emphasis on the individual's personal relationship with Allah. It is also a behavioural, legal and social system, a complete package, and its numerical gains, especially amongst the young, suggest that they see it to be relevant to their experience of modern times.

The Confucian world has its philosophical and behavioural norms but, just as Hindu culture is best defined as ‘what Hindus do’, Confucian culture is ‘what East Asians do’. China and East Asia, with their ancient roots, went through a painful 20th Century, rebirthing since the 1980s and thus quite well adapted to meeting the 21st Century. Such a cultural regeneration is starting in the Muslim world, while the West, its spiritual regeneration window having been in the 1960s-70s, has to some extent missed its chance, except in the case of independent spiritual people with limited impact on prevailing Western culture. Africa’s cultural regeneration is germinating, with Christianity vibrant and folk faiths thriving too. Latin America, promising in the late 20th Century with its liberation theology, has reached a deadlock between its radical and conservative elements.

Religion is here to stay and is finding new life in the modern context. As cultural reactivity to Western dominance subsides, with the world morphing into more of a cultural patchwork, the big question is how much religion and culture will be sources of either friction or reconciliation. This question orbits around internal rumblings between progressives and conservatives within all religions and cultures. Progressive elements tend toward interfaith and cross-cultural reconciliation, while conservative elements tend toward greater cultural anxiety and defensiveness.

Quietly in the background, independent spiritual beliefs wax ever stronger, partially because of education and travel, partially because of an increasing women’s autonomy of viewpoint, and partially because many modern, thoughtful people are forming their own conclusions on spiritual matters. Even secular rationalists, those self-appointed guardians of empirical, untainted objectivity, have their high priests, doctrines, saints, articles of faith and hypocrisies.

The core of the shift the world needs to go through in coming times is *spiritual*. Traditional faiths play a role inasmuch as they encourage spiritual experience, and a sense of the greatness of the

grand scheme of things in which we are but small particles. Yet their traditional trappings can also obstruct such an opening to deeper understanding. The late Sheikh Bukhari of Jerusalem once said, “*God is too great to fit inside one religion*”.

The key lies neither in specific beliefs nor in scriptural adherence but in our actions toward each other. ‘*By their works shall ye know them*’, said Jesus – and each faith has an equivalent gem of such wisdom. One does not need to be religious to recognise the spirit in every human and the essential kindness, respect, equality and justice that derive naturally therefrom. Spiritual experience has a clarifying, simplifying effect, helping us put things into proportion, seeing beyond the situational details of our lives to perceive our deeper priorities. We are one humanity living in one world. We need to act on that basis. A PhD is not required to perceive this essential truth.

Interesting links

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