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## KICKING THE SECULARIST HABIT

  
*A six-step program*

BY DAVID BROOKS

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Like a lot of people these days, I'm a recovering secularist. Until September 11 I accepted the notion that as the world becomes richer and better educated, it becomes less religious. Extrapolating from a tiny and unrepresentative sample of humanity (in Western Europe and parts of North America), this theory holds that as history moves forward, science displaces dogma and reason replaces unthinking obedience. A region that has not yet had a reformation and an enlightenment, such as the Arab world, sooner or later will.

It's now clear that the secularization theory is untrue. The human race does not necessarily get less religious as it grows richer and better educated. We are living through one of the great periods of scientific progress and the creation of wealth. At the same time, we are in the midst of a religious boom.

Islam is surging. Orthodox Judaism is growing among young people, and Israel has gotten more religious as it has become more affluent. The growth of Christianity surpasses that of all other faiths. In 1942 this magazine published an essay called "Will the Christian Church Survive?" Sixty years later there are two billion Christians in the world; by 2050, according to some estimates, there will be three billion. As Philip Jenkins, a Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University, has observed, perhaps the most successful social movement of our age is Pentecostalism (see "[The Next Christianity](#)," October *Atlantic*). Having gotten its start in Los Angeles about a century ago, it now embraces 400 million people—a number that, according to Jenkins, could reach a billion or more by the half-century mark.

Moreover, it is the denominations that refuse to adapt to secularism that are growing the fastest, while those that try to be "modern" and "relevant" are withering. Ecstatic forms of Christianity and "anti-modern" Islam are thriving. The Christian population in Africa, which was about 10 million in 1900 and is currently about 360 million, is expected to grow to 633 million by 2025, with conservative, evangelical, and syncretistic groups dominating. In Africa churches are becoming more influential than many nations, with both good and bad effects.

Secularism is not the future; it is yesterday's incorrect vision of the future. This realization sends us recovering secularists to the bookstore or the library in a desperate attempt to figure out what is going on in the world. I suspect I am not the only one who since September 11 has found himself reading a paperback edition of the Koran that was bought a few years ago in a fit of high-mindedness but was never actually opened. I'm

probably not the only one boning up on the teachings of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb, and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

There are six steps in the recovery process. First you have to accept the fact that you are not the norm. Western foundations and universities send out squads of researchers to study and explain religious movements. But as the sociologist Peter Berger has pointed out, the phenomenon that really needs explaining is the habits of the American professoriate: religious groups should be sending out researchers to try to understand why there are pockets of people in the world who do not feel the constant presence of God in their lives, who do not fill their days with rituals and prayers and garments that bring them into contact with the divine, and who do not believe that God's will should shape their public lives.

Once you accept this—which is like understanding that the earth revolves around the sun, not vice-versa—you can begin to see things in a new way.

The second step toward recovery involves confronting fear. For a few years it seemed that we were all heading toward a benign end of history, one in which our biggest worry would be boredom. Liberal democracy had won the day. Yes, we had to contend with globalization and inequality, but these were material and measurable concepts. Now we are looking at fundamental clashes of belief and a truly scary situation—at least in the Southern Hemisphere—that brings to mind the Middle Ages, with weak governments, missionary armies, and rampant religious conflict.

The third step is getting angry. I now get extremely annoyed by the secular fundamentalists who are content to remain smugly ignorant of enormous shifts occurring all around them. They haven't learned anything about religion, at home or abroad. They don't know who Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins are, even though those co-authors have sold 42 million copies of their books. They still don't know what makes a Pentecostal a Pentecostal (you could walk through an American newsroom and ask that question, and the only people who might be able to answer would be the secretaries and the janitorial staff). They still don't know about Michel Aflaq, the mystical Arab nationalist who served as a guru to Saddam Hussein. A great Niagara of religious fervor is cascading down around them while they stand obtuse and dry in the little cave of their own parochialism—and many of them are journalists and policy analysts, who are paid to keep up with these things.

The fourth step toward recovery is to resist the impulse to find a materialistic explanation for everything. During the centuries when secularism seemed the wave of the future, Western intellectuals developed social-science models of extraordinary persuasiveness. Marx explained history through class struggle, other economists explained it through profit maximization. Professors of international affairs used conflict-of-interest doctrines and game theory to predict the dynamics between nation-states.

All these models are seductive and partly true. This country has built powerful institutions, such as the State Department and the CIA, that use them to try to develop

sound policies. But none of the models can adequately account for religious ideas, impulses, and actions, because religious fervor can't be quantified and standardized. Religious motivations can't be explained by cost-benefit analysis.

Over the past twenty years domestic-policy analysts have thought hard about the roles that religion and character play in public life. Our foreign-policy elites are at least two decades behind. They go for months ignoring the force of religion; then, when confronted with something inescapably religious, such as the Iranian revolution or the Taliban, they begin talking of religious zealotry and fanaticism, which suddenly explains everything. After a few days of shaking their heads over the fanatics, they revert to their usual secular analyses. We do not yet have, and sorely need, a mode of analysis that attempts to merge the spiritual and the material.

The recovering secularist has to resist the temptation to treat religion as a mere conduit for thwarted economic impulses. For example, we often say that young Arab men who have no decent prospects turn to radical Islam. There's obviously some truth to this observation. But it's not the whole story: neither Mohammed Atta nor Osama bin Laden, for example, was poor or oppressed. And although it's possible to construct theories that explain their radicalism as the result of alienation or some other secular factor, it makes more sense to acknowledge that faith is its own force, independent of and perhaps greater than economic resentment.

Human beings yearn for righteous rule, for a just world or a world that reflects God's will—in many cases at least as strongly as they yearn for money or success. Thinking about that yearning means moving away from scientific analysis and into the realm of moral judgment. The crucial question is not What incentives does this yearning respond to? but Do individuals pursue a moral vision of righteous rule? And do they do so in virtuous ways, or are they, like Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, evil in their vision and methods?

Fifth, the recovering secularist must acknowledge that he has been too easy on religion. Because he assumed that it was playing a diminishing role in public affairs, he patronized it. He condescendingly decided not to judge other creeds. They are all valid ways of approaching God, he told himself, and ultimately they fuse into one. After all, why stir up trouble by judging another's beliefs? It's not polite. The better option, when confronted by some nasty practice performed in the name of religion, is simply to avert one's eyes. Is Wahhabism a vicious sect that perverts Islam? Don't talk about it.

But in a world in which religion plays an ever larger role, this approach is no longer acceptable. One has to try to separate right from wrong. The problem is that once we start doing that, it's hard to say where we will end up. Consider Pim Fortuyn, a left-leaning Dutch politician and gay-rights advocate who criticized Muslim immigrants for their attitudes toward women and gays. When he was assassinated, last year, the press described him, on the basis of those criticisms, as a rightist in the manner of Jean-Marie Le Pen, which was far from the truth. In the post-secular world today's categories of left and right will become inapt and obsolete.

The sixth and final step for recovering secularists is to understand that this country was never very secular anyway. We Americans long for righteous rule as fervently as anybody else. We are inculcated with the notion that, in Abraham Lincoln's words, we represent the "last, best hope of earth." Many Americans have always sensed that we have a transcendent mission, although, fortunately, it is not a theological one. We instinctively feel, in ways that people from other places do not, that history is unfulfilled as long as there are nations in which people are not free. It is this instinctive belief that has led George W. Bush to respond so ambitiously to the events of September 11, and that has led most Americans to support him.

Americans are as active as anyone else in the clash of eschatologies. Saddam Hussein sees history as ending with a united Arab nation globally dominant and with himself revered as the creator of a just world order. Osama bin Laden sees history as ending with the global imposition of sharia. Many Europeans see history as ending with the establishment of secular global institutions under which nationalism and religious passions will be quieted and nation-states will give way to international law and multilateral cooperation. Many Americans see history as ending in the triumph of freedom and constitutionalism, with religion not abandoned or suppressed but enriching democratic life.

We are inescapably caught in a world of conflicting visions of historical destiny. This is not the same as saying that we are caught in a world of conflicting religions. But understanding this world means beating the secularist prejudices out of our minds every day.