Secularism in 2050: huge changes in population make a secular UK even more urgent

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As huge demographic changes and the rapid increase in the Muslim population reshape religion in the UK, Benjamin Jones makes the case that secularism is the best guarantee of future freedoms for believers and atheists alike.

By 2050, 1-in-9 Britons will be Muslim, and if it isn't already, as much research and polling suggests , Christianity will be a minority religion.

Pew's recently published and extensive research on population projections found that eight countries including Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand and the Netherlands will no longer have a majority of Christians by 2050. In the Europe of 2050, over 1-in-10 citizens will be Muslim, in a European Union with free movement of people.

While "unaffiliated" will be the single largest group in several western countries, low birth rates globally mean that the non-religious will decline as a share of world population. Muslims have the highest birth rate of 3.1 children per woman, followed by Christians at 2.7 children.

Worldwide demographic change is afoot, and the UK is deeply affected by these drastic population trends. This has significant implications for secularism in the UK, as the balance of religion changes, and also for those who have been historically antagonistic to the secular cause.

We cannot pretend that all religions are equally capable of secularisation or existing in a free and secular state. Islam presents challenges to secularism that are not present from other faiths in the modern world, regardless of their historic hostility.

An irrefutably large majority of British voters believe Islam is incompatible with British values: 55% think "there is a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society." This "fundamental clash" is extremely concerning.

Our long-term hopes essentially rest on the shoulders of those within Islam who are trying to reform it, and working to defuse this clash of values. If they are unsuccessful, the UK will become embroiled in an internal clash of civilizations.

David Robertson, an ardent anti-secularist and soon to be moderator of the Free Church of Scotland, wrote about the unfolding transformation of the UK's religious makeup recently and warned that Islam is the "elephant in the room." I found myself, unsettlingly, agreeing with much of his premise – and was somewhat relieved when he came to some completely wrong conclusions.

Robertson said: "Christianity is the bedrock and foundation of our secular society. Islam is different. Islam has no doctrine of separation of the spiritual from the political. Islam is, and has always been, a political movement." This from the next head of a church which called for Biblical principles in the Scottish government. Nonetheless, on the issue of Islam, Robertson seems to find secularism a

very attractive system. I agree with him that Islam is different, as he puts it, but am fascinated to see him praising "our secular society" when he also advocates for Christian privileges.

In a future British state where they are in a dwindling minority, secularism will become essential for Christians; particularly when the growing, perhaps ascendant religion is one with such a worrying doctrine and history on the rights of non-believers.

Robertson was correct about the central question: we should be talking about the challenges presented by a rapidly growing Muslim population. We only need to look at France to see the problems being faced. This concern is not 'racist' – Pew makes quite clear that "modest net gains" from people converting into Islam are to be expected in the next three decades. The rise is not just about birth rates, but conversion too.

Listen to the spokesmen for 'moderate' Islam who deny the applicability of sharia law to the UK, because it is not an Islamic country. It seems inevitable that one day in decades to come, if trends continue, that this qualification will no longer apply. A demonstrative example is the overwrought figure of Mo Ansar, who was left unable to denounce a hypothetical Islamic state stoning someone to death. If Britain, with 83% not planning to attend church at Easter, counts as Christian, what Muslim plurality is needed before the UK of the future is deemed Islamic?

The epochal changes on the horizon make the case for traditional secular issues more urgent; the abolition of the antiquated 'right' of bishops to a seat in the Upper House is a good example. If these Anglican privileges are not removed in favour of a level playing field, a powerful argument is available to Muslim advocates, as 'representatives' of the fastest growing faith, that appointing their clerics to the Lords is a simple matter of equality. In 2050, how could a Christian argue that a minute, minority religion (as the Church of England will be in the mid-21st century) should have votes and influence in the legislature, which other faiths do not enjoy?

This is exactly what happened with faith schools. Once Christians and Jews had them, it became indefensible not to allow other religions to teach children in their faith traditions with taxpayer funding.

I can easily imagine Anglican leaders of the future embracing parity in religious representation in the Lords, in the interest of maintaining their own privileged position – though doubtless they would publicly say it was for purposes of 'equality.'

The great danger at this point would be to respond with a 'multi-faith' approach, preserving special treatment for Christians (in education, in the House of Lords) but ameliorating other religions by giving them equivalent 'rights'. This is what happened with faith schools. We do not want a situation where twenty six bishops are joined by a proportionate number of imams or rabbis appointed to the legislature simply for holding a religious position. Such a policy is obviously anti-secular and would leave out the future single largest block of Britons: the non-religious.

The old, improvised accommodations — on faith schools, on clerics in the House of Lords — simply won't hold-up in 2050. These quirks of the post-Christian United Kingdom must be resolved, because they set a dangerous precedent. It is injurious enough when these privileges are wielded by a relatively benign faith; they will be far less tolerable if handed out to other, less benevolent religious groups as well.

Secularism for 2050 isn't ephemeral or optional, it is essential for the future. We must set these principles in stone now.

Secularists must grapple with the implications of these population changes, but so too must our traditional critics.

There are some reasons for secularists to be optimistic. Two-thirds of Muslim parents don't want their children to attend state-funded faith schools, and there is no guarantee that the children of practising Muslims will themselves be Muslim. In principle it is wrong to even refer to 'Muslim' or 'Christian' children. That said, there is convincing evidence that Muslims are more successful in perpetuating religion across generations than other faiths.

Our only long-term hope is for the successful formation of a reformed Islam, at ease in a secular UK. If this project fails, then the population projections are a legitimate, real concern.

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Benjamin Jones was the communications officer of the National Secular Society (2014-2017). Follow him on Twitter @BenJones1707. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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