

Rescuing secular democracy

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A stunning phenomenon has dramatically changed the way in which we in the West regard the public sphere in particular, and democracy in general in the twenty-first century: [the re-emergence of religion](#).

Since the nineteenth century sociologists had forecast the [decline of religion](#), whose function in society was to be gradually overtaken by scientific reason. This prediction was based on a powerful intuition which seemed to be validated by well-established developments in society. The number of church affiliations in Western Europe showed a [downward trend](#). The weight of opinions from religious officials on public affairs appeared to be diminishing. The manifestly unstoppable progress of the natural and human sciences since the seventeenth century enlightened more and more areas of citizens' everyday lives pushing faith towards redundancy.

At the turn of the twentieth century the 9/11 attacks in the United States awakened the West to the awkward realisation that all those predictions about religion had been, [at best, inaccurate](#). There was a decline in affiliations to Christian churches in Western Europe, but that did not neatly represent the reality of the United States—or even that of the rest of Europe for that matter. And as the analysis included [more regions of the world](#) the original picture became less and less clear.

For anyone who considers religion a backward vestige of the past, the twenty-first century is becoming a nightmare. Thanks to the "culture wars" in the United States and elsewhere, massive emigration from North African and Middle Eastern countries towards Europe, and the advent of terrorist attacks that can occur at any place and at any time, not only has religion refused to disappear, but it is [back on stage](#) in the public sphere, and in a prominent place. And so, highly secularised societies find themselves having to devote attention during government deliberations, in the media or in conversations on the street to matters surrounding religious buildings, religious law or religious clothing.

To be precise, in good part the cause of this resurgence of religious matters in public discussion in the West is often related to a particular religion: Islam. Western societies are struggling to accommodate the worldview and lifestyle of millions of new citizens who having immigrated, refuse to give up their culture and become secular. The demise-of-religion sociological theories find in this fact a stumbling block. The “return of the gods” is not happening in faraway, underdeveloped countries, but in the heart of highly developed, liberal societies such as the U.S., Germany or Australia.

The new religious citizens are difficult to classify within the traditional categories of left and right, or even within the new ones of pro- and anti-globalists. They are under attack from right- and left-wing nationalists on account of their foreign culture and lifestyle. Liberals and social democrats welcome them in principle, based on a multicultural conviction, yet they are uncomfortable with some of the new citizens’ views on moral and social issues because [they often coincide with conservative positions](#). But more importantly, the big difference is that these new religious citizens base their actions and their whole lives on supernatural beliefs. Charles Taylor describes our secular societies as [living within an “immanent frame”](#) where reality is considered as not transcending our material boundaries and where the possibility of an immaterial or supernatural realm is discarded without discussion.

What to do about this new presence (or comeback) of religion in Western secular public spheres is a question with no easy answer. In a way, it actually presents one of the worst existential threats liberal democracy has ever faced, since the liberal openness to diversity as prescribed by multiculturalism faces the prospect of society becoming more diverse but less liberal. However, there is an obvious first step within the reach of Western societies today: acknowledging that for an important part of their population certain metaphysical tenets beyond the immanent frame are essential and cannot simply be wished away.

Indeed, [a detailed look at history](#) shows that contemporary liberal democracies—and even the phenomenon of secularism itself—arose under very specific circumstances that included a non-secular, religious milieu: that of Christianity. This milieu is still present in Western societies, be it as a vestige of the past as in some [Nordic countries](#), or in renewed forms such as with the [charismatic movements](#). Even if Western societies are much less Christian at present than they were 500 years ago, perceiving, analysing and exploring Christianity’s influence in the configurations of our democracies might provide useful hints on how to deal with the challenges that new religious minorities pose.

The rescue of secular democracy passes not only through the acknowledgement of a religious dimension present in the new migrants that are coming to its shores now, but also through recognition of the religious elements that historically made democracies what they are today. Such realisation can bring fresh oxygen and light to the discussion about the

“new” phenomenon of religion—and what to do about it—based on what both traditional and newly arrived citizens have in common, regardless of their obvious differences.

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