

## THE FUTURE OF ISLAM

PETER RIDDELL

**I**n the wake of World War II, as the world emerged from devastating conflict and entered the post-colonial era, some commentators predicted that rising prosperity would herald a new, post-religion age. The secularizing tendencies that were carving huge slices off religious allegiance in the West would be replicated across the world, according to this view. Such commentators also anticipated that religion, in its surviving form, would be rationalist, liberal and concerned with the here-and-now rather than the Hereafter.

Instead, the world of Islam has experienced massive resurgence across the globe since the 1970s. Calls for the implementation of Sharia Law in its diverse forms have multiplied. Much of this Islamic resurgence has had clear apocalyptic overtones, suggesting that existence in the Hereafter can be helped by greater piety in this world.

The movement of Muslims into hitherto non-Muslim countries has contributed to changing the demographic face of the West over the last 50 years. Public discourse has become preoccupied with Islam and issues surrounding it: Islamophobia, terrorism, Islam as a religion of peace, oppression of women and religious minorities, and so forth.

The resurgence of Islam across the world has been fueled and sustained by vast funding from Arab oil-producing nations. This

is seen in the rapid growth in non-Muslim countries of mosques, Islamic centers, university departments of Islamic studies, Islamic banks, and the like.

So where to from here? Given the dynamic and unpredictable nature of Islamic resurgence in the recent past, are we able to predict the future of Islam over coming decades? It would be useful to approach this task by outlining those developments which are either certain or highly probable.

In terms of demographics, Muslims as a proportion of the world's population will increase from the present figure of around 20 percent to 25 percent by the year 2050. This increase will not be due in any significant measure to conversions to Islam. Rather, large Muslim family sizes in Muslim-majority communities - Bangladesh, Pakistan, India's Muslim community, Indonesia - will result in a steady increase of Muslims as a proportion of humanity.

Muslim minorities in Western post-Christian countries will continue to grow as a proportion of Western populations, through immigration, refugee arrivals and natural growth because of larger family sizes, as well as some conversion. Conservative political and social groups in the West will attempt to slow down this rate of growth, but the singular dominance of official multicultural policies that refuse to discern among the various immigrant groups according to ability and willingness to integrate will facilitate continuing large-scale Muslim immigration to Western nations.

Sharia finance, or Islamic banking, will continue to expand in both Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries, due to active promotion of this form of financing by Middle Eastern nations. Furthermore, with money comes influence. The lure of Sharia-linked funds will serve as a catalyst for increasingly Islam-friendly policies by Western governments struggling to balance their budgets in stringent economic times.

A further certain trend relates to Islamic identity. Struggles to define this identity in recent decades between radicals and liberals, Sunnis and Shi'a, literalists and rationalists and other competing groups will continue and increase in intensity for two reasons. First, such struggles have existed since the very beginning of Islamic

history, because the prophetic example of Muhammad and the texts of Islam lend themselves to diverse interpretations. Second, the nature of Islam as a blueprint for life covering diverse sectors – faith, law, politics, economics, social structure etc. – means that Muslims always have and always will debate the relative weightings of these different sectors in defining the shape of Islam in different contexts.

Over the last 20 years, the world has witnessed an ever-increasing push for anti-religious vilification legislation by Muslim activist groups and individuals. The hallowed chambers of the United Nations have provided a battleground for Muslims lobbying on this point, vigorously resisted by Western and non-Western human rights and advocacy groups. While the text of the campaign by Muslim activists has been expressed in terms of preventing vilification of all religions, the sub-text has been motivated by a concern to prevent criticism of Islam. There is no doubt that in the years to come, Islamic lobby groups will push with increasing success for such legislation in Western countries and in turn, this legislation will be used more and more to curb criticism by non-Muslims of aspects of the faith, doctrine and practice of Islam.

Also to be anticipated are ad hoc terrorist strikes by radical Islamist groups against Western and non-Western (including Muslim) targets. Western security forces will succeed in foiling most attacks in the West, though Muslim targets will not fare so well. Liberal Islamic spokespeople will continue to argue that such terrorist groups are not true Muslims, thereby absolving Muslim authorities, and Islam per se, of responsibility for such actions.

News bulletins over the last two years have been preoccupied by the ever-changing “Arab Spring”, more appropriately termed the Arab Awakening. Many commentators in both East and West have predicted an almost utopian age of democratic reform throughout the Arab world, with long suppressed populations at last finding their voice. More cautious commentators have noted with alarm the emerging tendency for Arab totalitarian dictators to be replaced by Islamist forces that are potentially at least as totalitarian, with the added dimension of being supremacist in the domain of religion.

We are indeed witnessing a new era in the Middle East but it will be one that contains more self-consciously Islamic states (though some Arab states will move in the opposite direction). This will bring with it renewed and increased conflict between the Arab world and the state of Israel.

With regard to the future of religious minorities in the world of Islam, lessons can be drawn from the past to predict the future. Religious minorities have fared better in the past when Muslim communities have been less self-consciously Islamic than more self-consciously revivalist. Given the present context of rising Islamism, we can predict with confidence that there will be increasing discrimination against and, in some cases, active persecution of religious minorities in Muslim-majority locations.

The relationship between the increasing numbers of Islamist states and Western nations will be a rollercoaster ride. At times, there will be great tension between the two in coming decades. In response, some Western governments will adopt increasingly Islam-friendly postures, especially those with large Muslim minorities and in receipt of significant funding from Arab oil-producing states.

The world has witnessed vast movements of population over the last 50 years. As population pressures increase in Muslim-majority communities, and as internal struggles for identity take hold, refugee numbers from Muslim majority states, already very significant, will increase exponentially. The beacon attracting these refugee groups will continue to be liberal Western democracies where growing Muslim minorities will facilitate their acceptance.

The emergence of increasing numbers of Islamic states in the Muslim world will trigger a growing exodus of the liberal Muslim intelligentsia, seeking a haven for the free expression of their ideas, which will often be highly critical of the states that they have left behind.

Also certain is that the major Islamic oil producing nations will continue to use part of their vast incomes to promote Islam in non-Islamic majority countries across the globe. The only possible

factor derailing this trend would be the development of alternative energy sources that significantly erode the central role of fossil fuels in today's world, though this seems unlikely for the foreseeable future, given that powerful Muslims and non-Muslim groups have vested interests in preserving the status quo.

If the tone of the predictions outlined above seems more gloomy than hopeful, we should remind ourselves that the above predictions relate primarily to the next 50 years. Making a call on the longer-term future is too difficult a task to undertake, given the volatility of the world of Islam in the early 21st century. There will of course be some bright moments and encouraging trends. Some liberally-minded Muslims and non-Muslim exponents of democratic freedoms will engage constructively both on the secular stage and within the religious arena. However, at this stage the momentum in the world of Islam lies not with democratic forces but rather with Islamic revivalists. The Islamic resurgence still has a considerable course to run – the counter trend seen in today's Iran is the exception rather than the rule – and effects will be more and more felt in Western countries through the growing presence of Muslim minorities. In such a context, it is ironic that Western democratic traditions will work to the disadvantage of the West. Brief electoral cycles mean that successive governments across the West will fail to come to grips with what is arguably the West's greatest ever challenge: the resurgence of Islamic religious, social and political consciousness.

*Peter Riddell, Ph.D., is Director of the Center for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths at the Melbourne School of Theology, and is a Senior Fellow of Kairos Journal.*