

The Way We Will Be in 2057

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The future we get is the future we choose. This piece is about choosing, not predicting. Every age makes its own choices, but the menu of choices is an extrusion of history. What will be our choice menu for the next 50 years?

I see two big choices: What will we do about global warming and what will we do about religion? As there is space for only one problem, I pick the most recalcitrant.

Fetching a wide compass, 'modern' religions were all formed in late Bronze / early Iron Age societies, when mankind thirsted for an identity transcending the tribal or clan-based social units consecrated by pagan gods. Noble spirits imagined a godhead who recognized man as man, not as Greek or Persian, black, or white. The unity of man posits a unity of god without naturalistic determinacy. The Human Chorus, however, requires a god with a name, a gender, a language, proclivities and preferences. It requires angels, jinn, buraq, heaven, hell and miracles, especially miracles. Religion without the supernatural is just bad philosophy. Monotheism balances on a contradiction: god needs properties, but properties particularize and pluralize. If there's one god, and it's ours, then the other putative gods are false. Rational debate will not resolve issue; there remains war. Our god is the true god because he gives us victory on the battlefield. Intolerance, thy name is monotheism.

God of course knows this bloody well, but the Chorus doesn't, and doesn't yet WANT to know. Instead of passing laws restricting the teaching of evolution, we could better require close reading our own religious texts. How many Christians and Jews know that the father of Jesus repeatedly issued instructions like: "Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known a man by lying with him. But all the women children that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves" (Moses, **Numbers, 31.17/18**). "thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth" (Moses, **Deuteronomy 20.16**). "And thou shalt do to Ai and her king as thou didst unto Jericho and her King" (God to Joshua **Joshua. 8 :2**). A commander issuing such orders would have been hanged at Nuremburg. Most do not know that Jesus said things like "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch...men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (Jesus, **John 15;6**). The Koran is much worse, "We renounce you: enmity and hate shall reign between us until you believe in Allah only" (**Koran 60:2**) "when the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them" (**Koran 9:5**) ... "make war upon them until idolatry shall cease and God's religion shall reign supreme." (**Koran 8:40**)..."Kill them wherever you find them" (**Koran 2 :193**)... "Prophet, make war on the unbelievers" (**Koran 9:73**). "The only true faith in God's sight is Islam." (**Koran 3:19**). Myriad such passages in the Koran explicitly abrogate the older more peaceful texts from the Mecca period; they sanction slavery, domestic violence, religious war and persecution. We will criticize each other's theories, we will debate each others social-political ideas, but there is a strong taboo against criticizing the content of religion. Why? What ARE we afraid of? In the next 50 years, I believe these contradictions must fester to the surface. Shunning discussion of the content of religious beliefs must eventually be seen as DISrespect for the believers' humanity.

Religion served civilization well in the 19th and 20th century, combating the evils of slavery, communism, racism and dictatorship, but it is well to remember that modern civil society is not the child of religion. The foundational idea is that legitimate authority arises from below, from the consent of the governed, and not from above. Freedom of thought, speech, assembly, and belief, the separation of church and state, the right to due process and democratic governance are not found in the Bible or in any religious text. They emerged from the European enlightenment. The founding fathers of the United States were NOT Christians, they were Deists, without Bronze Age baggage. George Washington always stood up and left church before taking communion, to demonstrate that he was not a Christian.

Modern technology places weapons of mass destruction in ever smaller and less responsible hands. Anyone who reflects on the events of 9-11 must also contemplate a nuclear device detonated in New York or Washington. No one will take responsibility, but everyone will know why it happened. The problem of religious fundamentalists, as any other violent minority, is The Moderates. It is the people, the great Human Chorus, who don't really believe, but don't disbelieve, who don't think much at all, but allow themselves to be leveraged by those claiming to embody their identity. Our fear of confronting religious texts overtly hostile to modern civil society marks the Human Chorus as the prize to be leveraged by extremists with these Bronze Age texts.

The problem of religion is not a question of laws, policy, treaties and the like. It is a problem of the Chorus itself, on the widest cultural level. How will it go? I sketch three scenarios:

Scenario 1: Islamic terrorists are able to split communities by inducing fear, suspicion and hatred. Muslims in the west are subjected to increasing discrimination and alienation, driving them further into the arms of the Jihadis, who in turn grow fruitful and multiply. Terrorist cells in the west grow and provide the logistics for more attacks. Eventually a very large terrorist event occurs, perhaps a nuclear detonation in Washington or New York with casualties in the tens, maybe hundreds of thousands. The reaction of the US is characteristically maladroit. A major attack on a suspected culprit causes a comparable level of suffering, finally galvanizing the 'Arab street'. The regime in Saudi Arabia falls, and other others quickly follow. Islamic movements scramble for power and oil production is halved, causing major economic disruption, especially in the developed west. Europe with its large Muslim minority is skewered and helpless. The US spends its soul in a globalized Arab-Israeli conflict, while the torch of civilization passes to the Far East, where dogmatic religion never took hold.

Scenario 2: Benign neglect remains the dominant public posture toward god's most grievous crimes. Leaders and public figures in 2057 are still afraid to admit they don't believe in god. The Arab-Israeli conflict continues undiminished. Democracy never takes root in Islamic countries. Autocratic regimes sustain themselves with petrodollars, while illiteracy hovers at 40%. Funding for terrorists slowly declines, but their numbers grow; their activities expand in the region, but not beyond. The US becomes more embroiled in the Middle East, with garrisons propping up client states. Military spending never returns to pre-Iraq war levels, and US funding for science and

research never regains the levels enjoyed before 2000. The flow of ideas shifts, tracking the flow of new products and new technologies. The dollar is valued at 40 euro cents, salaries in Europe and Asia for high tech jobs dwarf those in the US, which is no longer the destination of choice for talented students in Asia, Latin and South America. Income disparities in the US grow to a point where the bottom half is disenfranchised and lacks upward mobility. Capital markets in Europe seize the technological initiative and surpass those in the US. South America orients more to Europe and Asia. The US 's decline in prominence is slow enough to remain deniable in 2057, and the need for denial fuels the lurch backward.

Scenario 3: The fundamental values of the French, English Enlightenment, and the French and American revolutions resurge. A vigorous interest in causes of religious divisiveness allows public figures, politicians and role models to publicly reject institutional religion and embrace reason and science over faith and dogma. It is no longer political suicide for a politician to say that he does not believe in god or go to church. It is no longer respectable to pander to religious backwardness. Israel's blank check on the US treasury is rescinded. Courageous Muslims reject the Koran's authority and join in this movement (ironically, spearheaded by Jews). Their courage is heralded in the west where they define new role models for large numbers of second and third generation Muslim immigrants in the US and Europe. Middle Eastern immigrants gain new access to opportunities in the West and at the same time press for modernization and reform in their countries of origin. Democracies emerge, first in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Lebanon then others. Muslim extremism is out of fashion and loses its global reach. Iran remains a pariah state, and Saudi Arabia remains an anachronism, but the economies along the Mediterranean begin to flower, and the march of reason is unstoppable. Enriched by the cultural heritage from the Middle East, Europe and the US experience a cultural and commercial bloom comparable to the Renaissance.

Recognition of the universal humanity of man based on nothing more than being human lies in the future. Backwardness inhabits the past.