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### June 24, 2013: So, Is Religion Disappearing or Getting Stronger?

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Title: So, Is Religion Disappearing or Getting Stronger?

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6/24/2013—A book entitled *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century*, written by Christian Caryl, was reviewed by Ferdinand Mount in the June 20, 2013 issue of the New York Review of Books. The review was entitled When Our World Turned Upside Down. In the review, Mount quotes a comment by Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi dissident concerning the 1979 revolution in Iran that brought down the Shah and brought the Islamic Republic to power.

“Here we had these forces that we thought we had consigned to the dustbins of history that reappeared and turned out to have nothing to do with what we had always expected. The working classes were nowhere to be seen. All the categories through which we had viewed the world had fallen apart.”

Religious people in America, especially in universities, like to point to quotations like that in order to show that, as they put it, “religion is back.” They say this sort of thing to criticize the secularization thesis that in the 19th century predicted the demise of religion. This kind of thinking has also led to the literary industry of “post-secularity.”

It is certainly true that in the late 20th century there was an upsurge of religious commitment, or maybe it was just an increased political involvement by religion, in the world. And it is also true that it was experienced by secularists at the time as quite unexpected because they had assumed that religion was dead, especially as a moving force in history.

But I believe this upsurge was a kind of illusion, a temporary condition. Yesterday, there was a story in the New York Times about Sunni recruits from Egypt to help the Syrian rebels against a coalition led by the Syrian government that is increasingly dominated by Shiite forces and resources from Hezbollah and Iran. In other words, the Syrian Civil War is now becoming a full scale sectarian War of Religion.

I think we are seeing a replay of the period of the wars of religion in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries that began shortly after the onset of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 and is said to have lasted until 1648. The vast secularization of European culture began when these wars ended. During these religious wars, it would’ve been hard to see them as presaging secularization. Yet, because of the exhaustion that these wars produced, that is precisely what happened.

Fifty years from now, in 2163, it will be possible to look back at the current period as inducing the same kind of exhaustion. War and terror are associated with Islam, fairly or not—and, as I have said, I think not. Soon, though I do not know when, the Muslim world will collectively decide, as the Christian world in Europe did, over 300 years ago, that religion is too divisive and dangerous to be taken so seriously. And they will tame it. And then the other religious traditions, which are today reacting to research and Islam, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, will also settle down. And secularization will really take off in the world.