

Niall Ferguson on Islam and demographics

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Islam and demographics with one of the world's most influential historians. Niall Ferguson is Lawrence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard University. He's also Senior Research Fellow at Jesus College, Oxford, and Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution at Stanford.



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Stephen Crittenden: Welcome everyone, to The Religion Report.

Today on the program, an interview with one of the world's most influential historians. Niall Ferguson is Lawrence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard University. He's also Senior Research Fellow at Jesus College, Oxford, and Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution at Stanford.

Niall Ferguson is an economic historian; he's the author of a two-volume history of the Rothschild banking family; 'The Cash Nexus - Money and power in the modern world 1700-2000'; 'Empire - The Rise and Fall of the British Empire and the lessons for global power'. He also has a very interesting regular column in the UK Telegraph. In January he wrote a piece called 'The origins of the Great War of 2007 and how it could have been prevented', in which he suggests that all the ingredients for a far bigger conflict than the two Gulf wars are now in place in the Middle East. He's also written about his concern at the decline of Christian belief and practice in Europe, saying he doesn't know what's causing it, but he knows it matters. And he's written about the crisis of Europe's collapsing birth rate, saying that a youthful Muslim society to the South and East of the Mediterranean is poised to colonise (the term is not too strong) a senescent Europe (that's 'senescent' as in 'senile').

Well although this kind of talk is now commonplace in Europe, right across the political spectrum, religious demography is still a taboo subject in Australia as Federal Liberal MP Dana Vale found out recently.

However, Cardinal George Pell is alert to the issue. He recently wrote a newspaper column in which he suggested that 'a society which does not have enough children to

reproduce itself will be replaced by another' and that 'even if the fertility rate of Yemen were to fall by 50%, by 2050 its population will be the same size as Russia's, 102-million and overwhelmingly young.

And so to Niall Ferguson, who joins us from his office at Harvard University.

Professor Niall Ferguson welcome to The Religion Report. You're an interesting historian to me because you're basically an economic historian, but increasingly it seems to me you're acknowledging the non-materialist forces at work in history.

Niall Ferguson: I think I've always tried to do that in my work, although I've been interested in economic and particularly financial history since I wrote my PhD on the German hyperinflation; I've never been blind to the autonomous power of religion and indeed of political religion, which is one way that you could describe Nazism, or for that matter, Communism. In my most recent work I've given a lot of thought to questions of religion. I wrote an entire book about the Rothchild family; it was impossible to write that without thinking about both Judaism and anti-Semitism. And now that I come to address questions of British and American Empire, I'm naturally confronted by questions of the role of religion, not only within these empires, but so to speak in the resistance to them on the imperial frontier. So this is a very important part of my work.

Stephen Crittenden: You also have a very big dash of what I'd call Spenglerian Decline and Fall, you've been writing recently about the [Huntington](#) Thesis, which we've dealt with a lot on The Religion Report in past years, and you make the argument that perhaps the faultlines, the real faultlines at the moment aren't so much between civilisations as within them, and that the civilisations of the modern world are more likely to collapse than to collide.

Niall Ferguson: Well I probably should distance myself from Oswald Spengler before going any further. Although I'm interested in the relative decline of the West, I don't approach the question in anything like the way he did after the First World War, and I certainly don't look forward as he did, to the advent of some messianic dictator to turn things around. It's clear that the West has been in a kind of steep relative economic decline, if you compare the present with say a century ago when the West really did rule the world, and entirely dominated Asia. We've come an awful long way since then, and the recent rapid growth of Asian economies can only imply the relative decline of the West. But it seems to me that Samuel Huntington was in a sense in Spenglerian mode when he wrote "The Clash of Civilisations" because he was conjuring up the existence of

monolithic civilisations that he foresaw as in a sense, taking the place of the ideological fissures of the Cold War and in this clash, it was likely to be what he called the Judeo-Christian Western civilisation that came off worst in the sense that demographically Islam was on the rise, and economically Confucian Chinese civilisation was on the rise. But I don't buy the subject, I didn't at the time and I buy it less now, in the sense that most of the conflict that has been going on since he published that seminal article, haven't been between the civilisations at all, they've actually been within them. So I did a little back-of-envelope calculation of all 30 major armed conflicts I guess since the article came out. Only ten or maybe eleven should be construed to be between civilisations in Huntington's sense, and it's a stretch actually, because that's by saying "Well in one war, one side was Islamic or Muslim and the other side wasn't". Most of the conflicts that have gone on in the past decade or so, have been internal ethnic conflicts within Huntington's civilisations. That's particularly true in Central Africa, and I think it's going to be true in the Middle East too. I mean what we're seeing in Iraq is already I think a civil war.

Stephen Crittenden: Shi'ites versus Sunnis.

Niall Ferguson: Absolutely. And that's a much more, it seems to me, dangerous division than the division between Christians and Muslims actually.

Stephen Crittenden: I wonder however, whether there hasn't been a great monolithic conflict between Islam and Christianity going on for 1300 years. You know, Pope Benedict is very interesting to watch on this issue. He's very uneasy about Turkey joining the EU. Last week he was talking about rehabilitating the reputation of the Crusades. I had suspected that you would be supportive of that idea. I recall a piece you wrote in The New York Times not long ago, where you began with a quote of Edward Gibbon, the great historian of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, speculating that if Charles Martell had lost the Battle of Poitiers, Oxford University would just be domes and minarets.

Niall Ferguson: Well I think it's important to distinguish these two issues, because I'm extremely cautious about any idealisation of Christendom, or indeed the West as something with homogeneity or natural unity. After all, the most bitter religious wars that raged in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries were within Christianity, and the most violent or at least one of the most violent acts of the 20th century was perpetrated by Christians against Jews. And that makes me really sceptical when people in the

United States talk about Judaeo-Christian civilisation because that seems to me a merger of very recent origin. So by comparison with those conflicts, I don't attach a special importance to the longstanding conflict that obviously has gone on between Islam and Christianity. I don't think that conflict should be given a sort of privileged status, historically. It hasn't produced more violence than the conflicts within Christianity, or between Christianity and Judaism. That's point 1.

There's a second point though which is really, really important, and that has to do with demographic change and migration, changing the character of Europe itself, because most of modern history going right back to before the 17th century and culminating in the mid-20th century, the story of world history was the expansion of Europe. The demographic expansion of enormous migrations from particularly Western Europe later, central and Eastern Europe, transformed the demographic complexion of the world and of course Australia is one of the products of this huge transformation.

That process ended almost in our lifetime actually, with the demographic transition that set in around the 1980s when Europeans not only had begun to limit family size, but actually allowed the reproduction rate to fall below the natural replacement rate. So European couples stopped having even two children. At the same time as this demographic shift happened in Europe, really large scale migration started to happen from North Africa, from the Middle East, from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and these transformations are really an extremely important phenomenon.

Stephen Crittenden: And you say in fact that there are colossal demographic forces at work in Europe now.

Niall Ferguson: Well there sure are. I mean you only need to look at the differential in the birth rates that exists between Europe and the Muslim countries to the south and east of Europe, the fertility rate in the '90s and early 2000s, was 2-1/2 times higher in Muslim countries, that border the European Union, than in the European Union itself.

Stephen Crittenden: Inside Europe itself, aren't those demographic forces just relative issues though? I mean if the existing population of Europe had exactly the same declining birthrate, but not imported so many guest workers from Muslim countries, would there be a problem?

Niall Ferguson: Well it's obviously an economic story that drives this migration, and it'll continue to drive it because it's very hard to stop these migratory movements when European societies are aging as rapidly as they are, and I don't think you can easily

separate these economic factors out from their cultural consequences. But the cultural consequences are very striking, because what's clearly the case is that Muslim communities in Western Europe have not been under great pressure to assimilate. There's been a remarkable resilience not only of religious belief, but with what might be called the wider ethnic culture that immigrants have brought with them, and I think this has very profound implications for the social stability of urban European.

Stephen Crittenden: Niall, this kind of talk I have to say in Australia, is completely unacceptable. Here in Australia a few weeks ago, a government backbencher named Dana Vale, who's electorate is very white, got herself into a lot of trouble when she raised the demographic question and whether Australia could one day be an Islamic society if the rest of us kept having small families or kept on having abortions. This kind of talk though is now completely commonplace, right across the political spectrum in Europe, isn't it?

Niall Ferguson: Well I think it's become more respectable to discuss demographic change and cultural difference, not least because of events like the storm over the cartoons in Denmark, or the murder of [Theo van Gogh](#) in Holland. There's a sense that you just can't pretend any longer that there's been a successful integration and assimilation of immigrant communities. And I didn't even mention the bombings in the London Underground, did I? So ultimately any sensible liberal society removes the bans on topics of discussion when those topics of discussion are so obviously important. We have to be able to talk about processes of social integration and assimilation, we have to be able to talk about shifts in demographic balances openly, because if those things are made taboo, then the only people who are able to talk about them, end up being people on the political right. Now I don't regard this as something which is the exclusive monopoly of people on the right.

Stephen Crittenden: But it's true, isn't it, that people on the left of the spectrum have been very reluctant to think in these terms, let alone speak in these terms.

Niall Ferguson: Well I think this has marginally been out of cowardice really, or wishful thinking. There's been a wishful thought in Western society for some time, and that thought was that multiculturalism would be a stable entity, that if one allowed multiple religions and ethnicities to coexist, everything would be fine in a liberal society because free speech would be respected by all concerned. But unfortunately an intolerant minority, and I stress that it is a minority within Muslim communities, is determined

not to respect the free speech and other liberal values that people in the West take for granted, and that's the big problem, that liberals have to grapple with as much as conservatives, and I really feel quite strongly.

Stephen Crittenden: In fact do liberals, who are in favour of the continuation of pluralistic societies, have to come to terms at some point with the idea that in order to preserve that plurality, multiculturalism itself as a policy, has to go?

Niall Ferguson: Well it depends of course what you mean by multiculturalism. One of the things that's very striking to me since I moved from Europe to the United States, is how much more assertively Americans expect immigrants to accept American values. The test you have to pass to get US citizenship is really quite a marvellous thing in terms of its confident assertion of the importance of American values, political values and American history; these are things you need to know about. In that sense it seems to me, Europeans have underestimated how much you need to do to integrate immigrants.

Stephen Crittenden: Have they also exaggerated the extent of the Muslim populations and the problems of integration that they bring. When you think that less than 10% of the population of France is Muslim, 3% of the population of Britain, a couple of hundred thousand people in this country?

Niall Ferguson: I think one has to be very careful here about conjuring up imagers of demographic floods, that was an image often used in debates on immigration in the late 1960s and 1970s. Of course the valeu of Paris, in those eastern suburbs of Paris, it can often seem really quite a rising tide, because immigrant communities are very concentrated in particular cities and in particular parts of those cities, and those relatively unskilled, lower middle class and working class white families that end up in those, as it were, left behind in those areas of dense immigrant settlement, not surprisingly do feel that they are socially and indeed politically threatened, and they're precisely the people who turn to the National Front in France.

Stephen Crittenden: Isn't it also important perhaps to point out that the majority of Muslims who come to live in Western Europe or in Australia, presumably don't see Western civilisation as failing, or they'd have migrated to Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, that we have this sense of imminent decline of our own culture, but in fact people have come from other places to live in Europe, in Germany, in France, in Britain, in Australia precisely because they're not in decline?

Niall Ferguson: Well I think we have to recognise the two very different strains of

thought at work here. On the one hand, it's clear that economic migrants and their children from the Muslim world to Western societies have been motivated by a desire to get on materially more than they've been concerned necessarily to preserve their traditional religious beliefs, and I think one only needs to spend time as I have with, say the Turkish communities in big German cities like Hamburg and Berlin, to realise just how far these people have been secularised and have in fact embraced a great deal of what we regard as being integral to Western society. But let's not forget that in the same period that this was happening, Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes were systematically kicking out Islamist radical clerics, and of course these people found it much easier to get on with the business of proselytizing and radicalising in West European capitals. So we have the sort of paradox of relatively secularised Muslim communities suddenly becoming home to some of the most radical of Islamist zealots, and so it doesn't really take an awful lot of people to be converted let's say, rather disillusioned, unemployed, third generation or second generation French or British Muslims to be converted by these radicals for you to have a problem. It's not as if you need an overwhelming majority of people to be committed to radical terrorist organisations for them to do damage.

Stephen Crittenden: This of course is the idea of Bolshevism, when you think that the Bolsheviks sort of seized power with what - a couple of thousand people?

Niall Ferguson: Well I've actually argued for some time that we shouldn't think of radical Islamism (here I want to make a distinction very clearly between the political Islamist movement and the Islamic religion) we shouldn't think of Islamism as somehow a fascistic movement, that's a very fashionable thing to say here, 'Islamofascism' because it sounds dreadful. But in fact these things don't have much in common with fascism. Fascism was about the nation-state and nationalism, it was not really a universalist ideology. Communism has a lot more in common with, say, the ideology of al-Qa'eda. Read Osama bin Laden's statements, his various proclamations, and you hear a sort of Islamic version of Lenin in action, because what he anticipates is an Islamist world revolution overthrowing American capitalism. It's straight out of 1917, and those movements don't need to attract huge numbers of supporters to win power. They just need to stage successful coups d'etat.

Stephen Crittenden: A small, highly organised elite.

Niall Ferguson: That is what al-Qa'eda is. It attracts of course a loose and diffuse

following, but it doesn't necessarily need to transform or convert all Muslims in Western societies to its ideology. Nothing like that is necessary, it only needs to take a relatively small number of radical, disaffected youths and send them into revolutionary situations, and that's exactly what's going on at the moment.

Stephen Crittenden: Niall, I want to get back to demographics. Is demographic decline necessarily a sign of decadence and collapse?

Niall Ferguson: Well not necessarily, and I think one shouldn't equate these things, but it is of course pretty hard to separate out from - let's call it the balance of power. I mean shifts in global population have big implications. In 1950, there were three times as many people in Britain as in Iran. Well, by 1995 the population of Iran was bigger than that of Britain; by 2050 it will be 50% larger than Britain. It would be a fantasy to pretend that this didn't matter. Extraordinarily high birthrates of societies like Iran are going to have profound geopolitical consequences. We really shouldn't delude ourselves about that. It's funny how some people recognise very clearly the importance of demographics because they're facing it, so to speak, day to day, eyeball to eyeball. Israelis understand this because as Ariel Sharon realised in the final part of his career, demographics made it absolutely impossible for Israel to sustain its position in the occupied territories. Indeed it's going to be hard for Israel to sustain its position per se as the number of Palestinians or the number of Arabs, non-Jews inside Israel itself, begins gradually to rise to be equal to the number of Jews. So when you're confronted with these demographic shifts so to speak, in your own street, you very quickly realise how much they matter. It's easy for people on enclaves of relative prosperity, I can't resist mentioning Cambridge, Massachusetts as one of these - to pretend that this isn't going on, because we're not living it.

Stephen Crittenden: Right. You make a very interesting point in relation to Iran in this respect. Military historians sometimes make the argument that when a leader like say Napoleon has a big enough cohort of soldiers, he has to go to war to give them something to do. And you make a similar point about Iran. You talk about the extraordinary surplus of young men and you say that they represent a generation which is ready to fight.

Niall Ferguson: Well Iran had an amazing population boom in the wake of its revolution, and the war it waged with Iraq only fuelled that boom. I mean if you go back just ten years, something like 40% of the population of Iran was aged 14 or younger.

This was really quite an extraordinarily youthful society, the very antithesis of West European societies where the younger are a tiny minority increasingly. So this matters, but of course I would be very wary of any deterministic theory that said young societies always go to war. It's true that in the French Revolution military expansion was a kind of a solution to the problem of unemployed and politically unruly young men, but it's not an absolutely necessary consequence of society.

Stephen Crittenden: You also make the point of course that Islamic societies like Iran are full of youthful energy, because of this young population. I want to put it to you actually that when you go to places like Libya or Iran or Syria, the people may be young, but that isn't the image overall. You still have the image of a stagnant backwater where nothing happens because the religion has decreed that nothing can happen.

Niall Ferguson: Well there's a real tension in Iran between a youthful population and the dead hand of the theocratic state, and that tension manifests itself in sometimes contradictory ways. One of the more puzzling things that emerges when you survey opinion in Islamic countries, is that while they say they hate the United States, they like a lot of things that we tend to associate with American popular culture. And so you have the paradox really of the quasi-Americanised young, say, Palestinian, who might listen to Eminem but then becomes a suicide bomber. And I think this is something that's really hard to grasp about what's going on in these societies. If you're a teenager in the Islamic world, you have a very, almost schizophrenic attitude towards the West. You may be attracted by its pop culture because so many aspects of it are irresistibly cool, but you have a tremendous sense of inferiority and under-achievement in terms of your national culture. And of course economically you're doing pretty miserably. You may well be unemployed or in a lousy job, and you may think economically, 'Gosh wouldn't it be great to go to the United States and become part of the most dynamic and wealth-creating society on earth. And at the same time you feel God, how arrogant these Americans are, how I'd like to give them a bloody nose. I think perhaps the inherent tension which is at work here, and it could of course flip either way, I mean in a really happy ending type scenario, ultimately the attraction of the West is just more powerful than the sense of frustration and inferiority that pushes in the other direction. But right now, I don't feel optimistic, it seems to me that the other tendency is gradually prevailing in conditions of relative economic instability.

Stephen Crittenden: Finally Niall, I want to turn to the issue of the decline of Christian

religious faith in the West. You make the point that it's not just a question of the decline of population, there's also this decline of religious faith. And at one point you write, 'Why have Britons lost their historic faith? To be frank, I have no idea, but I do know it matters'.

Niall Ferguson: Yes, it's one of the least studied and most important questions for modern historians, why organised Christianity, both in terms of observance and in terms of faith, sail off a cliff in Europe sometime in the 1970s, 1980s. And the explanations that have been offered for this phenomenon so far are relatively weak and unconvincing. What's clear is it's got nothing to do with economic development because it hasn't happened in the United States, where Christianity is alive and well in what is a modern, secular society in so many ways. So we have a real puzzle here: why is Christianity dying out in its traditional core heartland, what used to be called Christendom, why are Europeans becoming godless? And it's such an important question because it makes Europe quite vulnerable (I hesitate to use your term 'decadent') but it makes it vulnerable to penetration by -

Stephen Crittenden: I thought it was your term?

Niall Ferguson: I mean to me this is one of the reasons why it's quite easy for radical Islamists to make inroads in Western Europe because there isn't in a sense, any religious resistance there. In a secular society where nobody believes in anything terribly much except the next shopping spree, it's really quite easy to recruit people to radical, monotheistic positions. It's just that the monotheism that's making the running at the moment is Islam, rather than Christianity.

Stephen Crittenden: Some people would argue that all of this de-Christianisation in Europe has created a moral vacuum. I wonder however, whether the majority of people in the population aren't basically pretty conservative, and whether those Christian values have seeped into the DNA of the culture and that on the whole those values have - we hear lots of alarm bells and alarmist talk - but basically those values are still reasonably intact.

Niall Ferguson: Well of course it's hard to measure that kind of thing. Clearly religious values cannot become part of the human DNA, that is a metaphor but it doesn't have any biological reality. What one does see in urban Europe, and it's really quite striking, is a level of low intensity criminality that wasn't there before. Social order is not in great shape in the typical West European city, and it's really quite a striking contrast, when

you go to oh, I don't know, San Antonio, Texas.

Stephen Crittenden: And as an economic historian, is your sense that the reasons for that are not economic? That they really are, if you like, civilisational?

Niall Ferguson: I think there's no question there's a connection between religion and economic and social behaviour. Max Weber was not the first person to make an argument about the relationship between Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. I think more recent work, for example Robert Barrow, my colleague here at Harvard, has done some very interesting work on the relationship between religious belief, religious observance and social order and economic behaviour, and it's actually quite striking, there do seem to be some important correlations here. I myself, although I was not brought up in a religious household, and I suppose if I were pressed, would have to admit to being a kind of incurable atheist, I'm nevertheless strongly convinced that religion performs important social functions in the transmission say, of ethical values between generations, and that a society that does away with it, that ceases to engage in any kind of formal religious instruction, is a society that's likely to be less good at maintaining social order than one which maintains a measure of religious faith and observance. And that is based purely on historical observation. The experiments with atheism as the basis for political order, say in the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution, did not produce happy results. So I think one really does away with Christianity, or indeed one does away with God at one's peril. Human beings do seem to behave better when they have some sense of moral authority in the world, and indeed some kind of formal system for inculcating good ethical behaviour.

Stephen Crittenden: Niall Ferguson, I've enjoyed it immensely. Thank you very much for being on the program.

Niall Ferguson: It's been a pleasure, Stephen.

Stephen Crittenden: Harvard University Professor, Niall Ferguson
Well that's all this week, goodbye from Stephen Crittenden.

Guests

Niall Ferguson

Lawrence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard University

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