

Why are secular populations shrinking?

New discoveries about belief and theory of evolution. Scientist Michael Blume interviewed by islam.de. (German Translation from www.islam.de, February 2007)



”Researchers of evolution are discovering: Why belief is of use”. The German scientific magazine “Bild der Wissenschaft” titled that topic in its February edition (02/2007) and thus illustrated a turning point in the debate about religions and evolution. Included are results of researches of Dr. Michael Blume (department of religious studies, Heidelberg University), who was founding president of the “Christlich-Islamische Gesellschaft” (Christian-Islamic Society) in the region of Stuttgart. Currently, Michael Blume is preparing himself for his habilitation in Heidelberg and is working in the policy department of the Ministry of State of Baden-Württemberg. Islam.de asked Blume about the new discoveries.

Q: What are the new discoveries of researchers of evolutionism?

Blume: In the beginning it may be important to mention what science cannot achieve: giving final answers on questions of religious truth or even about the existence of God. But it can observe live and check and construct theories on that basis. And recently, we are discovering some amazing things about the topic of religion...

Q: Like what?

Blume: When we talk about the evolution of life, we have to assume that attributes and abilities thrive if they successfully serve the transmission of genes. In contrast, attributes and abilities which are harming will finally disappear. And as some still think that the theory of evolution is serving as a proof against religion, we are now faced with hard facts that link religiosity with biological success. Religion is no accident, it is established as a necessity in the development of mankind.

Q: Are you able to prove that scientifically?

Blume: Yes, I am. My main focus is the cohesion between religion and demography. “Be fruitful and multiply” are God’s first words to mankind in the Bible and in the Koran, one can find similar examples, where creating partnerships is God’s recommended good deed. Demographers are observing for many years that everywhere in the world religious people give birth to more children than secular people. So I wanted to take a deeper look into this and I was more than surprised about the clarity of the results. Whether in the global perspective, in Germany, France or among the especially exact data of the swiss census, there is no doubt left: religious people are opting more often for more stable marriages and are giving birth to decidedly more children than secular contemporaries in time and social class.

Q: But couldn't that depend on factors like wealth and education?

Blume: That's what Carsten Ramsel, Sven Grauppner and I have thought in the beginning and tested at the University of Tübingen. It is known that more educated and wealthier people tend to have fewer children. But based on the German and Swiss facts we have found out: the difference in the number of children between religious and non-religious people is increasing with more education and income! All the more people enjoy wealth, education and freedom, the more it depends upon their religious practice how often they opt for strong relationships, for family and more children. Vice versa, secular societies are even shrinking when they are poor. Actually you can observe that in nearly all eastern-European states. A sound state support of the family like in Sweden or France can lift the overall birth rate, but is not correcting the relative difference between religious and secular people.

Q: What is the root of that phenomenon?

Blume: The human being is the only being which can actively decide on questions of relationship or children. In colloquial speech, one speaks of an "accident", when a child is sired unscheduled. The point is: the human being is able to estimate that founding a family is excluding other options of life, that children do create headaches and costs, too. Mainly mothers are depending on reliable partners and mutual support. Thus, in the decision for children, man has to overcome his or her own ego, to renounce voluntarily and to bend to the demands of community. These are the values, which successful religious communities justify by transcendence and teach on several ways, obviously even more successful than we have thought so far.

Q: Could religion also bring negative effects upon us?

Blume: Yes, when people are not free to decide about their lives, but are following religious commandments out of force, they will give birth to more children than is good for all of us. Then we have population explosion, poverty, missing perspectives and at the end internal and external violence. We have to research much more about this subject, but my cautious conclusion is that religiosity and a balanced development of population can only prosper when we have freedom of religion, including respect about the rights of women and the choice to abandon religion. In contrast, force is leading the people and religious communities into catastrophe.

Q: Sounds very familiar to Muslims due to the Koran!

Blume: Yes, Sura 2:256 ("There is no force in belief"). I think that science will discover fascinating propositions in the Holy Scriptures repeatedly when they deal with the basics of human life. These findings may please religious people more than surprise them. We still remain children who try to spoon out the ocean. But science can be interesting for people for a better understanding of their situation and to act with more knowledge. Let us take an example: For a serious explanation of the rise of Islam in Turkey we do not have to take some arcane, islamophobic theories. A very important factor is that the Turkish secular upper-class is shrinking because their lack of children and that they are desperately seeking to defend their benefices. At the same time, the religious people living in the suburbs are on the rise demographically, economically and politically. Thus, discrimination and force are only widening the political and demographical gap. More democracy, freedom of religion and respect to each other would be better for all sides!

Q: How will you continue your research?

Blume: With the support of the Swiss Federal Office for Statistics I am working at the moment with the data of the Swiss census from 1970 to 2000 to probe into trends. How did the family structures of Swiss Christians, Muslims and Undenominational change in the last decades? I am very interested in the opinion of Muslims in that field, too, so I would be glad to exchange about that with you.

Q: Dr. Blume, thank you for your time.

Homepage of Dr. Michael Blume: www.blume-religionswissenschaft.de