

secularist government or the scandalously persecuted Christians? For better or worse, the older dream of a fully privatized religious faith and a fully secularized public realm seems to be losing its hold.

Some will find this development refreshing, some frightening. Most will see a very mixed bag. But one should not underestimate its complexity. The fact that a strongly religious American president has committed the United States to the building of a largely secular state in the Middle East as a bulwark against religious terrorism, and is doing so over the objections of largely secular elites in Europe and America, only begins to hint at the intricacy of the matter. Like it or not, religion will remain a major player in shaping world events, and those who want to will it away are indulging in illusions of their own. John Lennon's song "Imagine" will not be a reliable guide to the 21st century. That illusion has no future. The sooner we realize it, the better.

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## *Will English Become the Universal Language?*

By BARBARA WALLRAFF

SOME AMERICANS HOPE THAT 30 YEARS FROM NOW English will be the universal language. It won't. True, the United States is today a net exporter of English, and nearly all countries whose most common first language is something else are net importers. People in those countries value English because it is the language of innovation and prosperity and globalism and pop culture.

If we first-language English speakers lose our reputation for being forward-looking, obviously that will be bad news in its own right. But a corollary is that English will lose its competitive edge. Look what's happened to Russian. Now that schoolchildren in the former Soviet republics are no longer required to learn it, they don't bother. They're learning English instead. Why? Because English is the language of innovation, etc.

True, too, even if people don't admire us, they might value English if it were a global lingua franca. But the

varieties of English in use are diverging. After the United States and the United Kingdom, the country with the third-largest number of English speakers is Nigeria—assuming you count Nigerian pidgin as English, as most but not all linguists do. (Sorry, Canada and Australia—your populations just aren't large enough to put you ahead.) The country with the fourth-largest number of English speakers is thought to be India. Hardly anyone in either Nigeria or India, however, speaks English as a first language. In those countries, English is typically shot through with words and sentence patterns imported from local languages.

Not only that, but the world may soon have little use for a lingua franca. Software developers and linguists are inventing gizmos that will let people who lack a full command of English write it fluently. Others are at work on technologies that will turn writing into speech, and vice versa. Once solutions to those problems are found, we'll be within easy reach of getting instantaneous translations out of machines. At that point, who will need to learn English—or any second language?

Note that there's no hope whatsoever that English will become a universal first language. About three times as many people are native Chinese speakers as are native English speakers. The number of people who speak Hindi-Urdu, Spanish, or Arabic at home is in the same ballpark as the number of native English speakers. Those populations of native speakers of other languages are all growing faster than the population of native English speakers. Much the same is true within the United States. According to the 2000 census, about 18 percent of Americans speak languages other than English at home, and 4,361,638 households contain no one over the age of 14 who speaks only English or speaks it "very well."

The diversity of languages that immigrants bring us would be good news if the immigrants and their children would not only learn English (as nearly all of them do within a generation or two) but also retain their first languages. Among people involved in the world beyond their own communities, what's really on its way to being universal is the ability to speak more than one language. Of course, we should resist any erosion of the cultural factors that help keep English strong. But instead of hoping that English will remain in demand no matter what, we'd do better to welcome the

inevitable diversification of our nation's, and the world's, language portfolio.

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## *What Is the Most Pressing Environmental Question?*

By BJØRN LOMBORG

MOST PEOPLE SEEM TO BELIEVE THAT THE STATE OF the world is getting worse—that poverty, malnutrition, and inequality are increasing, while the air and water become more polluted, forests continue to shrink, and global warming threatens humankind.

Yet the data tell a very different story. Humanity's lot has improved dramatically—not just in the developed world but in the developing world, where the poverty and malnutrition rates, both 50 percent in 1950, have dropped to 25 percent and 17 percent, respectively, and the illiteracy rate has dropped since 1970 from 80 percent of the population to 20 percent.

In the rich world, the environmental situation has improved. In the United States, the most important environmental indicator, particulate air pollution, has been cut by more than half since 1955, rivers and coastal waters have dramatically improved, and forest acreage is increasing. And these trends are generally shared by all developed countries. Why? Because we are now rich enough to care for the environment.

In much of the developing world, environmental indicators are getting worse. But these countries are only acting as we once did. They care first about feeding their kids before cleaning up the air. Affluence will make the environment a higher priority. In some of today's richer developing countries, such as Mexico and Chile, air pollution is already beginning to decrease. In the rich world, most people probably expect global warming to become the most important environmental challenge over the next 30 years. They're wrong.

Global warming is real. The trouble is that even large

amounts of money will buy very little improvement. The Kyoto Protocol, even with U.S. participation, would only postpone by six years the warming expected in 2100 if we do nothing, and would cost \$150 billion annually. For half that amount, the United Nations estimates, we could provide clean drinking water, sanitation, and basic health care and education for every single person in the world, now.

The main environmental challenge of the 21st century is poverty. When you don't know where your next meal is coming from, it's hard to care about the environment a hundred years down the line. When your kids are starving, you will slash and burn the rainforest; when you're rich, you'll be a Web designer in Rio and vote green.

The single most important environmental problem in the world today is indoor air pollution, caused by poor people cooking and heating their homes with dung and cardboard. The UN estimates that such pollution causes 2.8 million deaths annually—about the same as HIV/AIDS. The solution, however, is not environmental measures but economic changes that let these people get rich enough to afford kerosene.

How do we make a better world? This question was answered by the Copenhagen Consensus project. Here, eight of the world's top economists (including four Nobel laureates) established a global priority list based on elaborate assessments by 30 economics experts.

At the top of the list they put preventing HIV/AIDS, malnutrition, and malaria, and abolishing agricultural subsidies. These are the areas in which we can do the most good per dollar for the world. Kyoto ended up at the bottom of the economists' list because it would cost a great deal and do little good.

By investing in research and development that will make renewable energy cheaper, we can make sure that our grandchildren will be able to cut the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that cause global warming. But if we are smart, our main contribution to the global environment 30 years from now will be to have helped lift hundreds of millions out of poverty, sickness, and malnutrition while giving them a chance to compete in our markets. This will make a richer developing world, whose people will clean up their air and water, replant their forests, and go green.

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