

Increased social and political equality in Europe has led to a decline in the popularity of religion.

by Blog Admin

The number of Europeans identifying as part of an organised religion has fallen significantly since the beginning of the 20th century. [Mick Power](#) assesses the reasons behind the decline in religious practice and belief in Europe, arguing that a number of specific factors, such as greater social equality in comparison to countries like the United States, have played a role. The Catholic Church has also been particularly affected by the use of a patriarchal system of control and the recent sex abuse scandals which have damaged its reputation.



This month the 13th Synod of Bishops meets at the Vatican with its focus being on the decline in religious belief and practice in Europe, and the decline in support for Catholicism in North America. The Synod promises a “new evangelization” which will in part focus on those like me “who have been baptized but not sufficiently evangelized”. As American journalist H.L. Mencken once commented “for every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong”.

The problem facing religions is that in Europe in particular there has been a decline in religious belief since the early 20th century. One interpretation that has been made of the decline in Church attendance has been “believing without belonging”; namely, that although Europeans attend church less often, they nevertheless still retain their religious beliefs. However, [David Voas and Alasdair Crockett](#) have reported analyses of the British Household Panel Survey and the British Social Attitudes surveys to show that in the UK there has been a decline in both belief and attendance at about the same rates. Their further analyses show that these effects are not due to specific cohorts, nor due to specific experiences (e.g. the Second World War), but are generational; thus, their results show that the absence of religion in a family is almost always passed on to the children, but only about half of the children in religious families share their parents religiosity. In [further analyses](#) of the UK data, they found that although immigrant non-white ethnic minority groups are more religious than the indigenous population, the generational rate of decline in religiosity is nevertheless similar to the generational rate of decline in the indigenous population. Nor do people become more religious as they get older, contrary to some popular religious myths.

As Richard Dawkins comments in *The God Delusion*, the contrasting fortunes of religion in the UK and the USA is at first sight a paradox given that the USA was founded as a secular non-Christian nation, in contrast to the UK which has an established church headed by a constitutional monarch. Richard Dawkins was at a loss to explain the increase in religiosity in the USA, but Michael Shermer in *How We Believe* tackles the issue head-on. Shermer summarises data to show that in the past 150 years, the percentage of the US population that have church membership has increased from 25 per cent to 65 per cent, and that about 90-95 per cent of Americans believe in god in one form or another. The increase in religiosity seems particularly evident among American evangelical Protestant groups. Michael Lindsay suggests that the US-UK differences may in part be due to minority groups (e.g. African-Americans and Southerners) in the US feeling more marginalised and excluded in comparison to their UK and other European counterparts, so these marginalised groups in particular have turned to the Protestant evangelical movements that charismatic church leaders such as Martin

Luther King have provided in the recent past. The Catholic Church is right to be worried because it enshrines inequality in its own organisational structure, with “god’s representative on earth” at its head. The general increase in equality at political and social levels in Europe is likely to be one of the factors that have contributed to the decline in European religiosity.

Sociologists from Durkheim onwards have argued that the structure of the family influences the idealised structure of the relationship between supernatural beings, even in monotheistic religions. Equally, the family is a very significant source of influence for the transmission of religiosity from one generation to the next. However, the contrasting trends in the US and the UK illustrate that the family is only one component amongst the range of social factors that influence religiosity and that other factors such as the recent history of exclusion and marginalisation of African-Americans in the US are also powerful factors that influence changes in patterns of religiosity.

As part of the increasing equality, there have been significant changes in gender relations in Europe and elsewhere. For the sake of argument, let us assume that men are not inherently more spiritual than women, and that they are not closer to their gods. Let us assume instead that men and women are equal in spirituality, but that the factors that we have discussed in *Adieu to God* such as urbanisation in early civilizations, the development of patriarchal systems of control, and the move towards monotheistic religions have created the illusion that men are more spiritual and women are more sinful. If such supposed differences are illusions manufactured by patriarchy, then under certain conditions we would expect women rather than men to be the spiritual leaders, similar to the way in which female fertility goddesses seem to have been dominant in Neolithic communities because of the preoccupation with seasonal cycles and the fertility of the earth.



Pope Benedict XVI (Credit: Giuseppe Ruggirello CC BY-SA 3.0)

One example of a matrilineal religion of recent origin is *Macumba*, the African-Brazilian religion that has a number of sects throughout Brazil. The religion has its roots in the enslavement of African peoples who were shipped to South America to work on the plantations. Part of the interest for anthropologists and sociologists of Macumba is that through enslavement any patriarchal power of the enslaved men was undermined by enslavement, so that spiritual power within the slave communities became female. However, in order to survive within a dominant culture of European origin, Macumba is a highly syncretic religion that draws not only on African religions, but also on Catholicism and on Brazilian Spiritualism. The Macumba sect that has been studied most is that of Candomble, with much of the general attraction of the sect being in their appeal not only to marginalised minority groups such as those descended from former black African slaves, but to other minority groups such as homosexuals who also feel marginalized by the established churches. The significant role that women play within this matrilineal religion is clearly part of the growing appeal of Macumba throughout Brazil and in other areas of South and Central America.

Early Neolithic religious practices seem to have focused on the issue of fertility and the role of mother goddesses; the shift to urban settlements in the early civilizations and their domination by male leaders, was accompanied by the promotion of the male gods such that eventually the patriarchal monotheisms emerged in the Jewish, Christian, and then Islamic traditions. These patriarchal monotheistic religions have promoted a single male god and a male religious elite, while subordinating the role of women and other minority groups. However, there have been many backlashes from such oppression including religious movements that have emerged as the religions of the oppressed such as the Evangelical movement in the US, the conversion of low caste Hindus to Buddhism and Christianity (almost all Christian converts in India are from the low caste), and the development of New Religious Movements that can offer something other than traditional patriarchy.

We also noted that there are consequences of excessive and inappropriate religious control, with the example of the global sexual abuse scandals that have hit the Catholic Church in recent decades, which, it is argued, are a consequence of the imposed celibacy on a religious elite which is then in a position of power over women and children in their care. A celibate Catholic patriarchy will always be at increased risk of abusing those that it is meant to care for; the sooner that Catholicism learns from other monotheisms including Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam that celibacy is not the path to godhead but the path to abuse, and that sexuality is not inherently sinful and only for the purpose of procreation, then the sooner that millions of lives worldwide will be safer and healthier. Although many are now attributing the decline in European religious belief and practice to the Catholic Church sex abuse scandals, and there is no doubt that these are undoubtedly contributory factors to decline in traditionally Catholic European countries such as Ireland, the decline was well in place in many other European countries before such scandals came to light. However, the powerful mix of misogyny and child abuse that is institutionalised within Catholicism means that a few bishops preaching “evangelization” will be greeted with laughter and derision because of such misguided attempts to hide the real problems, along with the Pope’s masculinity, under the famous “holey” papal chair, the *sedes stercoraria*. There can’t be much room to hide anything else under there by now.

This article is based on material presented in Mick Power’s recent book [Adieu to God: Why Psychology Leads to Atheism](#) (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

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Mick Power is a Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Edinburgh. He has previously worked as a Medical Research Council researcher at the Institute of Psychiatry and with the World Health Organization to develop the WHOQOL measure of quality of life. His most recent book is [Adieu to God: Why Psychology Leads to Atheism](#) (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) which is an account of the psychological reasons why religion survives in the face of scientific evidence to the contrary.

