

Unmasking the myth of the impending death of religion

The Triumph of Faith: Why the World is More Religious Than Ever

Rodney Stark

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There has been a lot of ‘received wisdom’, in recent years, about religion in general and Christianity in particular. Much of this ‘wisdom’ is wrong, as shown by Stark throughout this book.

A few caveats

Some of the figures in this book must be interpreted with caution. For instance, Stark quotes percentages reflecting the low rates of atheism in most nations. However, self-declarations of atheism are usually lower than simply being in a state of absence of belief in God. (Some atheists take this to absurd extremes, asserting that every child is born an atheist—until inculcated with belief in God.)

In addition, and as noted by the author, ‘God’ is subject to various self-concepts. Someone can, in good conscience, say they believe in God, but their idea of ‘God’ may be very

much at variance with the biblical definition.

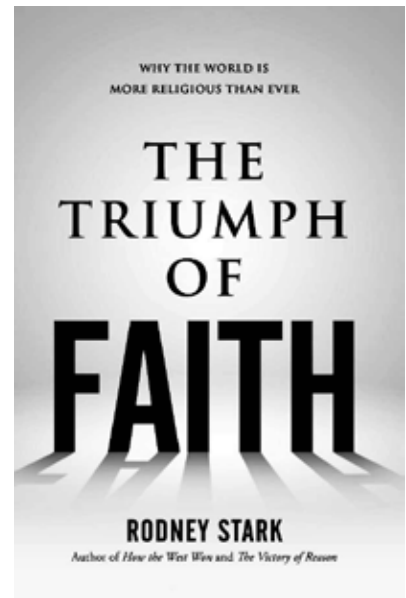
Stark cites rates of churchgoing that are much higher than those I have seen elsewhere. He tabulates data that indicates that, in the western European nations, at least 13% of the population went to church in the last week (p. 21). Other sources, however, indicate 2–5%.

The author seems not to consider the fact that self-reports of regular churchgoing sometimes tend to be higher than actual attendance rates. For instance, self-reports would imply that roughly 40% of the American population is in church on a given week, but actual counts of church attendance put the estimate closer to about 25% (which is still much higher than other industrialized nations).

Finally, the reader must remember that ‘secularization’ has multiple definitions, ones that are not brought out by Stark. For instance, a seminary professor from Great Britain once told me that he considered the USA more secular than England because, whereas individual religious observance is higher in the USA, there is more religion in public life in England than in the USA.

Religion and morality

Liberals and secularists commonly tell us that religion is related to the evolution of morality. Religion is nothing more than a vehicle for morality, and belief in supernatural beings was necessary to frighten people into obedience to moral codes. As humanity ‘grows up’, it will discard the outdated supernatural elements entirely and just have a morality by itself.



Stark shows that any link between morality and supernaturalism is tenuous at best. For instance, many of the pagan gods acted capriciously, or even malevolently, to other gods and to human beings. In addition, most native religions had essentially no concept of gods caring about what humans did or did not do.

Trumpeting the end of Christianity—a miserable failure

There is a long—and dismally failed—history of predicting the demise of Christianity. Thomas Woolson, about 1710, told us that religion was about to disappear. Frederick the Great thought that Woolson was correct, only a little too pessimistic, and Voltaire proclaimed that religion would be gone by 1810. Instead, all these men passed into history.

Many 19th- and 20th-century thinkers also assured us that religion was a passing phase of human thinking. These included the Communist Friedrich Engels, anthropologist A.E. Crawley, sociologist Max Weber, and Sigmund Freud—who assured us that religion was the

greatest of neurotic illusions. Other “The End is Near (for religion)” failed prophets included C. Wright Mills, Anthony F.C. Wallace, and Peter Berger.

Declining church attendance in perspective

Interestingly, Stark puts contemporary church attendance in temporal perspective. The notion—that today’s European churches are empty—is asserted under the tacit assumption that they once were full. For instance, the piety commonly associated with the Middle Ages, in Europe, makes one intuitively suppose that virtually everyone then was a churchgoer. Stark shows that this was hardly the case. Many villages were located too far from a church, and transportation was not good. Chroniclers at the time wrote of low levels of church attendance overall, and a lack of seriousness by many of those who did attend.

The same considerations hold for recent times. While the Catholic Church was an unchallenged monopoly in Latin America, church attendance was low. With the growth of Protestant Churches, and Catholic responses to this challenge, church attendance increased and is now higher than ever.

Alternatives to churchgoing

An unwillingness to attend church does not necessarily imply a rejection of Christianity. Still less does it necessarily imply a secular mindset. Rodney Stark notes that many non-churchgoers, in western Europe, profess to have a private Christian faith. He quotes British sociologist Grace Davie, who, faced with the fact that many more Europeans embrace Christian doctrines than attend church, refers to such people as “believing non-belongers”. (Of course, this is in

violation of God’s command to attend church (e.g. Hebrews 10:25), but this is another matter and is not considered by Stark.)

In addition to all this, there are various forms of public religious devotion in existence other than the attendance of church. For instance, Stark points out that there are 6,130 active shrines in western Europe, and these draw over 66 million visitors a year, most of whom are religiously motivated and are not tourists.

Secularism and human progress

Atheists like to tell us that, as humanity progresses, religion becomes less and less relevant, and that secularism is the sure result. The actual course of events does not support this contention. The decline in practised Christianity in western Europe started, to a serious extent, in the 1960s. Obviously, this was long, long after western Europe had attained a high standard of living.

Atheists also would have us believe that, with increasing knowledge, humans realize that the supernatural is an obsolescent concept. Again, this

is not borne out by the facts, even if we accept the atheist’s premise. The decline in religious observance, among western Europeans, does not mean that they have discarded the supernatural. To the contrary: Surveys show that a significant fraction of western Europeans believe in such supernatural things as fortune tellers, astrology (figure 1), and lucky charms. Obviously, these are as anathema to the ‘scientific’ rationalist as is belief in God.

Secularism in the USA

Claims of a secularized USA must, first of all, be kept in perspective. The demise of American Christianity had been predicted before, and in vain. Decades ago, the mainline denominations reigned supreme and they preached modernism. The World Council of Churches, especially, promoted theological liberalism. American Christianity, especially its supernaturalism, was thought to be in inevitable decline. Instead, precisely the opposite happened. The mainline denominations shrunk, and evangelical and fundamentalist



Figure 1. Far from rejecting supernaturalism, the unchurched in many nations are more likely to believe in astrology than the churched.

churches thrived. In Roman Catholicism, overall practice has declined, but conservative Catholic movements have flourished.

The reasons are not hard to discern. If the church is an echo of humanism, why bother with the church? If the church teaches wishy-washy platitudes, or pop psychology, who is going to be inspired by *that*?

In recent years, there have been gloating statements, in the media, that the United States is following western Europe into secularism. Stark examines, and refutes, these claims.

The author challenges the validity of statistics that purportedly show a decline in churchgoing in the USA. A many-decades analysis shows no change. In addition, it is not correct to say that churchgoing is declining among young adults, because this age group has always tended to have relatively low churchgoing rates. He also disputes claims that evangelicals are more liberal, on social issues, than their elders.

Stark clarifies the figures that show that more Americans consider themselves “Nones” than ever before. Why? It turns out that the religiously unaffiliated Americans used to claim affiliation with some religion, but now the religiously unaffiliated more commonly declare themselves “Nones”. Thus, what we are seeing is not an increase in secularism, but a decrease in the power and prestige of denominational labels.

Why secularism in Western Europe

In common with many commentators, Stark considers the state-church system as one that is a detriment to Christianity. The western European state church is effectively lazy, moribund, modernistic, and steeped in dead formalism, because it gets state funding, and has no incentive to deliver a good product

and to engage its attendees. There is also no competition. In contrast, the church in the USA is relatively vibrant because of the religious pluralism and competition.

The situation in western Europe, with its state-church system and its modernism, can even get more egregious. In 1963, the English Anglican bishop John A.T. Robinson published his *Honest to God*, in which he essentially rejected the existence of God. More recently, Danish priest Thorkild Grosboll was even more open in his disbelief in God. Obviously, if even openly atheistic clergymen can retain their positions in a church, and feel no need to even hide their atheism, something is very wrong!

Over a century ago, the church in Sweden had begun to be afflicted with atheism. Local elected boards largely controlled the church, and the choosing for these positions was driven by politics, not religious conviction. Worse yet, for several generations, the favoured candidates for these church boards were socialists, and this put avowed atheists in charge of the church in Sweden. The fox was allowed to govern the chicken coop!

The ‘non-religious’ Japanese and Chinese

The vast majority of the people of Japan and China say they have no religion. This has been cited as a fact demonstrating that a large fraction of modern humanity can do perfectly well without religion in general and supernaturalism in particular.

To begin with, the ‘no religion’ notion presupposes that any form of religion must necessarily be synonymous with ‘organized religion’ in the Christian sense. It is not. The ‘no supernaturalism’ notion presupposes that eastern religions are necessarily non-supernaturalist. Again, the truth is otherwise.

Stark points out that Shinto is not something that Japanese belong to. They *use* it. Some 90% of Japanese visit Shinto shrines and a comparable fraction have a Buddhist altar in their home, wherein the spirits of their deceased ancestors are believed to reside. Shinto teaches that there are spirits resident in rocks, trees, animals, and places. The Japanese version of Buddhism is not indifferent to supernaturalism. Buddha himself is worshipped in many temples. The Japanese version of Buddhism teaches of Nirvana not as a state of non-existence, as in classical Buddhism, but as a form of afterlife bliss that is somewhat comparable to the Christian teaching of heaven.

Are Chinese generally non-supernaturalists? Hardly. Stark points out that, just in the past year, 72% of Chinese had indicated that they had venerated ancestral spirits by their graves. Not a few Chinese informally practise folk religions. Finally, even though Confucianism is supposed to be a philosophy and not a religion, many Chinese pray to statues of Confucius for blessings and benefits.

Islam

According to conventional wisdom, Islam is the fastest-growing major religion on Earth, and Islam is destined to soon overtake Christianity as the world’s largest religion. However, Stark cites recently available figures that indicate that the much-touted fertility of Muslims is now in decline, and so Islam will not overtake Christianity. In addition, Islam has proven to be less capable of attracting new converts than Christianity.

Even more has been said about the low fertility of native Europeans. On this basis alone, it has been argued that, within a few decades, Europe will be predominantly Islamic. However, the actual decline of Islamic fertility means that this will

not happen—unless, of course, there is massive immigration of Muslims to Europe. This has lately been in the news, with increasing number of Europeans opposed to such immigration.

It has long been known that Orthodox Jews have many more children than secular Jews. However, Stark shows that this is also, to an extent, true of religious Europeans in comparison with secular Europeans. For this reason alone, it is doubtful if either Orthodox Jews or devoutly Christian western Europeans will die out in the foreseeable future.

Attempts to discount third-world Christianity

Liberals and secularists have various stock explanations for the turning to Christianity of peoples among whom Christianity had never previously been common. For instance, there is the notion that some locals had effectively been ‘bought’. They had allegedly professed Christianity in order to obtain material rewards from missionaries or from the colonial powers with whom missionaries were (correctly or incorrectly) associated. This included the so-called ‘rice Christians’ of China. The facts are otherwise. There have not been Christian missionaries in China for many decades, yet Christianity has not only persisted in the absence of tangible rewards, moreover under severe Communist persecution, but has actually grown to levels not even imagined several decades ago.

Now consider sub-Saharan Africa. The European mainline denominations, such as the Anglican Church, had stopped sending missionaries by the 1930s, based on the notion that the supernaturalism in Christianity is invalid, that it is chauvinistic to think that one religion can be more true than another religion, and that the presumed superstition in

the Christian religion is essentially no different from the superstition of native religions.

In spite of all this, Christianity has grown to a spectacular extent in sub-Saharan Africa in recent decades. It is a home-grown faith, in no sense dependent upon European or American influences.

Religion: a crutch for the weak? Hardly

Liberals and secularists tacitly adhere to the ideas of Karl Marx, who proclaimed that religion was the opium of the people. Belief in an afterlife (“pie in the sky”) was a palliative for the poor and their wretched condition. In addition, religion was something for the uneducated and unenlightened, who did not know any better.

Stark soundly demolishes these arguments. He shows that, in many Third-World nations, those who practise religion are, if anything, more likely to be fairly well off and educated than to be poor and uneducated. Chinese who convert to Christianity are likely to be college educated. Christians in India are more likely to have entered college than Hindus, Buddhists, or Muslims.

Religion as unthinking habit? No!

Failing all else, secularists would have us believe that people are essentially secular—in that they mechanically perform their religions, but do not really think in religious terms. For instance, it has been argued that American religiousness is only apparent and outward, because Americans do not experience the world as enchanted—as a place filled with spirits, demons, and moral forces.

The facts are otherwise. For instance, more than half of Americans believe that they had been protected by a guardian angel, that it is possible to be possessed by demons, and that

dreams can sometimes foretell the future.

The very fact that people decide to be observant, or non-observant, of their religion, itself implies a choice. In addition, in the USA, nearly half of the religious are practising a religion other than that of their parents.

Finally, surveys of the world’s population refute the contention that people are merely engaging in rote religious behaviour. For instance, most people in just about every place on Earth indicate that they often or sometimes think about such things as the purpose and meaning of life. With few exceptions, only single-digit percentages of people, the world over, agree with arch-atheist Richard Dawkins that life has no ultimate purpose.

Conclusions

The end of Christianity is greatly exaggerated. Not only so, but, in some parts of the world, precisely the opposite is the case. In recent decades, there has been a revival not only in Christianity, but also Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and other religions.

The problems with the state churches of western Europe inform us that western Europeans are not rejecting Christianity, much less becoming atheists. They are rejecting a poor caricature of Christianity. In addition, the tendency of many of the unchurched to have a ‘private Christianity’, and to explore alternative spiritualities, tells us, at minimum, that they have not rejected supernaturalism, nor embraced ‘scientific’ rationalism.

The call to renewed evangelization is clear. Many of the western European unchurched people would respond to the Gospel, were it presented in an accurate and lucid manner, and would join vibrant, Bible-believing churches, if these were available.