

DECLINE IN RELIGION IS A GOOD THING

The recent survey indicating that Christians are **outnumbered by the non-religious** covers only England and Wales but, although Northern Ireland is still the most religious part of the UK, the trend here is in the same direction.

According to the 2011 census, 10.1% ticked 'no religion' and a further 6.8% were 'not stated'. In total this represents no fewer than **300,000 people**, though it underestimates the non-religious because many tick a particular denomination for cultural reasons. The decline is also seen in weekly church attendance, down from two-thirds of adults in the late 1960s to only one third today.

Most Christians will decry this growing secularisation, but arguably it will benefit the society in a number of crucial ways. Democratic states that are the most secular, such as in Scandinavia, Japan, Australia and the Netherlands, are faring much better on nearly **every single indicator of well-being** that the most religious states, such as Colombia, Malawi, Pakistan and the Philippines.

The Save the Children Foundation, for example, publishes an annual *Mother's Index* wherein it ranks the **best and worst places on earth in which to be a mother**. And the best are almost always the most secular states, while the worst are among the most devout.

The Institute for Economics and Peace publishes an annual *Global Peace Index* and, according to its 2014 rankings, **the most peaceful states on earth**, such as Iceland, Denmark, Austria and Finland are almost all among the most secular, while the least peaceful, such as Syria, Afghanistan and South Sudan are among the most religious. Largely secular Europe, with 14 of the top 20 most peaceful nations, is the world's most peaceful region.

Murder rates are also lower in more secular countries. Of the top 50 safest cities, nearly all are in relatively non-religious countries. Denmark and Sweden, probably the least religious countries on earth (less than a third of the population), enjoy among the lowest violent crime rates and the lowest levels of corruption.

According to research published by Dr Phil Zuckerman in *Psychology Today*, (13th October 2014), secular nations such as those in Scandinavia also display **greater altruism**, donating the highest percentage of income and supportive aid per capita to poorer nations.

Indeed, in terms of outlook and values generally, atheists and agnostics, when compared to religious people, are **less likely to be nationalistic, racist, anti-Semitic, dogmatic, ethnocentric, and authoritarian**. Secularism also correlates to higher education levels and to support for women's rights and gender equality, as well as gay

and lesbian rights. Religious people are more likely to support government use of torture.

In 2009 the *Evolutionary Psychology* Journal carried out a study of the correlation between religious belief and contentment and security. It found that **the less religious a society is, the happier and more secure it becomes**. Religion flourishes where a society is dysfunctional and poor. When affluence is present and people feel secure through the provision of health care and social services, religion quickly loses its hold.

Gregory Paul, the author of the study, writes: “Popular religion is a coping mechanism for the anxieties of a dysfunctional social and economic environment”. Various world happiness studies back up Paul’s findings, with Denmark, Norway, Netherlands and Sweden at or near the top of most lists.

Christians, Muslims and other faith groups should take note of these findings. Millions of people throughout the world are **good and thriving without God** and our numbers are growing every day. Imagine there’s no heaven. It *is* easy if you try.