

## Project:

Discuss whether your religious convictions and/or congregation provides anything(s) specific that atheism cannot replace (as suggested by Barber).

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# Why atheism will replace religion

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Atheists are heavily concentrated in economically developed countries, particularly the social democracies of Europe. In underdeveloped countries, there are virtually no atheists. Atheism is thus a peculiarly modern phenomenon. Why do modern conditions produce atheism?

First, as to the distribution of atheism in the world, a clear pattern can be discerned. In sub-Saharan Africa there is almost no atheism (Zuckerman, 2007). Belief in God declines in more developed countries and is concentrated in Europe in countries such as Sweden (64% nonbelievers), Denmark (48%), France (44%) and Germany (42%). In contrast, the incidence of atheism in most sub-Saharan countries is below 1%.

The question of why economically developed countries turn to atheism has been batted around by anthropologists for about eighty years. Anthropologist James Fraser proposed that scientific prediction and control of nature supplants religion as a means of controlling uncertainty in our lives. This hunch is supported by data showing that the more educated countries have higher levels of non belief and there are strong correlations between atheism and intelligence (see my [earlier post](#) <sup>[1]</sup> on this).

Atheists are more likely to be college-educated people who live in cities and they are highly concentrated in the social democracies of Europe. Atheism thus blossoms amid affluence where most people feel economically secure. But why?

It seems that people turn to religion as a salve for the difficulties and uncertainties of their lives. In social democracies, there is less fear and uncertainty about the future because social welfare programs provide a safety net and better health care means that fewer people can expect to die young. People who are less vulnerable to the hostile forces of nature feel more in control of their lives and less in need of religion.

In addition to being the opium of the people (as Karl Marx contemptuously phrased it), religion may also promote fertility, particularly by promoting marriage, according to copious data reviewed by Sanderson (2008). Large families are preferred in agricultural countries as a source of free labor. In developed "atheist" countries, women have exceptionally small families and do not need religion helping them to raise large families.

Even the psychological functions of religion face stiff competition today. In modern societies, when people experience psychological difficulties they turn to their doctor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. They want a scientific fix and prefer the real psychotropic medicines dished out by physicians to the metaphorical opiates offered by religion.

Moreover, sport psychologists find that sports spectatorship provides much the same kind of social, and spiritual, benefits as people obtain from church membership. In a previous post, I made the case that sports is replacing religion [2]. Precisely the same argument can be made for other forms of entertainment with which spectators become deeply involved. Indeed, religion is striking back by trying to compete in popular media, such as televangelism and Christian rock and by hosting live secular entertainment in church.

The reasons that churches lose ground in developed countries can be summarized in market terms. First, with better science, and with government safety nets, and smaller families, there is less fear and uncertainty in people's daily lives and hence less of a market for religion. At the same time many alternative products are being offered, such as psychotropic medicines and electronic entertainment that have fewer strings attached and that do not require slavish conformity to unscientific beliefs.

#### References

Sanderson, S. K. (2008). Adaptation, evolution, and religion. *Religion*, 38, 141-156.

Zuckerman, P. (2007). Atheism: Contemporary numbers and patterns. In M. Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to atheism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This book is not held by any U.S. Library.

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#### Links:

[1] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-human-beast/201005/the-real-reason-atheists-have-higher-iqs>

[2] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-human-beast/200911/is-sport-religion>

[3] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/files/teaser/2010/05/33722436150f7b65b276.jpg>

[4] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-human-beast>