

# Atheism, Ideology and Belief: What Do We Believe in When We Don't Believe in God?

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# Who am I?



- Native Californian. Expat living in the United Kingdom for last 8 years.
- Theologian with broad interests in philosophy and the sciences.
- Grew up in a non-denominational Evangelical church came to Church of England when studying abroad in Oxford 2004
- Have an interest in the nature of belief, faith and atheism. Especially the future of faith and religion.

# Where we are going...



- What is Religion and Religious Belief? Theories of Religion
  - Functionalism
  - Phenomenology
  - Psychology & Evolution
  - Existentialism
- Snapshot of Traditional Religiosity Today
- Religion, Belief and Ideology
- Atheism and Ideologies: Past and Present
  - Marxism
  - Liberal Humanism
  - Scientism
- The Future of Atheism and Ideology

# What is Religion and Religious Belief?



- Theories of Religion and Religious Belief
  - Functionalism
  - Phenomenology
  - Psychology & Evolution
  - Existentialism

# Theories of Religion: Functionalism

- Emile Durkheim (1858–1917): “A religion is a unified system of beliefs...relative to sacred things...beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community, all those who adhere to them.”
- Functionalism explains the existence of social institutions such as religion in terms of the needs that the institutions would meet in society.
- Religion helps to protect social order and create social cohesion. God is just the society ‘writ large’.
- Religion serves 4 functions
  - Disciplinary: forcing or administering discipline
  - Cohesive: bringing people together, a strong bond
  - Vitalizing: to make more lively or vigorous, vitalize, boost spirit
  - Euphoric: a good feeling, happiness, confidence, well-being

# Theories of Religion: Phenomenology

- Rudolph Otto (1869–1937)
  - Religion focuses on the religious experience, the numinous. It can't be reduced to the social or functional.
  - Religion as the experience of the *mysterium tremendum* (terrifying mystery)
- Mircea Eliade (1907–1986)
  - Religion as the demarcation between the sacred and the profane

# Theories of Religion: Psychology and Evolution

- Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)
  - Religion or belief in God arises primarily from unresolved and repressed psychological neurosis and distress. God is a ‘Father-figure’ for adults.
  - Religion attempts to control the Oedipus complex, is a means of giving structure to social groups, wish fulfilment, an infantile delusion, and an attempt to control the outside world.
- William James (1842-1910)
  - “religion ... shall mean for us the feeling, acts and experience of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider to be divine.”
- Evolutionary Theories
  - Pascal Boyer and Scott Atran argue religious/magical thinking arises out of a byproduct of natural evolutionary forces on cognitive systems (HADD etc). Others (Richard Sosis) see it as evolutionary advantageous because it enhances group cohesion.

# Theories of Religion: Existentialism

- Paul Tillich (1886 – 1965)
  - “Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life.”
  - Ultimate concern is “total.” Its object is experienced as numinous or holy, distinct from all profane and ordinary realities. It is also experienced as overwhelmingly real and valuable—indeed, so real and so valuable that, in comparison, all other things appear empty and worthless. As such, it demands total surrender and promises total fulfilment.
  - These ultimate concerns manifest the unconditioned existential realities towards which our entire lives are orientated

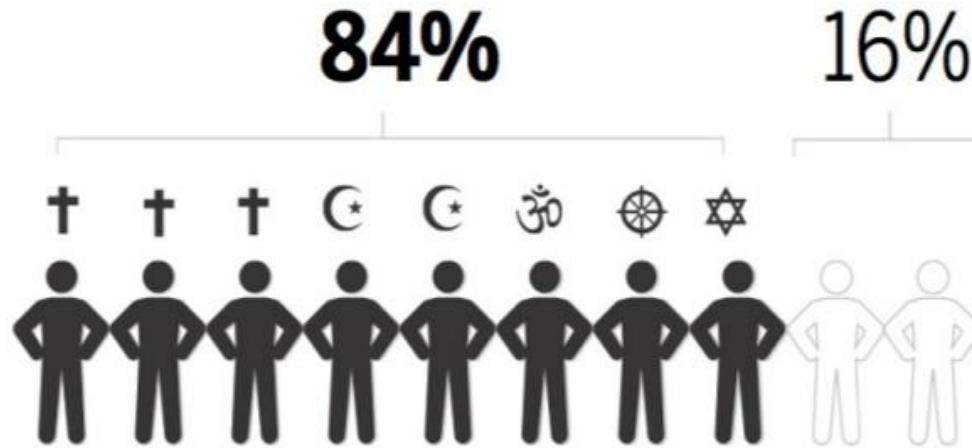


# Snapshot of Religion Today: Common Perception of Secularisation

- ***The secularization thesis*** is the belief that as societies progress, particularly through modernization and rationalization, religion loses its authority in all aspects of social life and governance.
- Common understanding of the future of all religious expression and belief is that it is in decline because of advancing societies
- ‘eschatology of decline’ and ‘ecclesiology of fatalism’



# Snapshot of Religion Today: The Big Picture



- 8/10 People practice religion in some form another in the world today
- The 16% of people who don't, engage in some kind of religious practices or have some form of religious beliefs
- The world we live in is much more religious than public perception often allows

# Snapshot of Religion Today: Trends Across the World Religions

Major world religions, 1970–2020

Religion	1970		2010		2020		Rate* 1970–2020	Rate* 2010–20
	Adherents	%	Adherents	%	Adherents	%		
Christians	1,228,609,000	33.2	2,262,586,000	32.8	2,550,714,000	33.3	1.47	1.21
Muslims	577,228,000	15.6	1,552,330,000	22.5	1,827,063,000	23.9	2.33	1.64
Hindus	463,216,000	12.5	948,950,000	13.8	1,069,971,000	14.0	1.69	1.21
Agnostics	542,632,000	14.7	676,535,000	9.8	677,676,000	8.9	0.45	0.02
Buddhists	235,094,000	6.4	494,894,000	7.2	540,204,000	7.1	1.68	0.88
Chinese folk-religionists	227,822,000	6.2	434,576,000	6.3	435,458,000	5.7	1.30	0.02
Ethnoreligionists	169,276,000	4.6	242,516,000	3.5	262,010,000	3.4	0.88	0.78
Atheists	165,506,000	4.5	136,582,000	2.0	136,685,000	1.8	-0.38	0.01
New religionists	39,382,000	1.1	63,005,000	0.9	64,463,000	0.8	0.99	0.23
Sikhs	10,678,000	0.3	24,056,000	0.4	27,508,000	0.4	1.91	1.35
Spiritists	4,658,000	0.1	13,703,000	0.2	14,845,000	0.2	2.35	0.80
Jews	15,009,000	0.4	13,954,000	0.2	14,763,000	0.2	-0.03	0.56
Daoists	1,734,000	0.1	8,429,000	0.1	9,068,000	0.1	3.36	0.73
Baha'is	2,657,000	0.1	7,305,000	0.1	8,610,000	0.1	2.38	1.66
Confucianists	5,759,000	0.2	8,131,000	0.1	8,382,000	0.1	0.75	0.30
Jains	2,629,000	0.1	5,378,000	0.1	6,131,000	0.1	1.71	1.32
Shintoists	4,175,000	0.1	2,761,000	0.0	2,787,000	0.0	-0.81	0.09
Zoroastrians	125,000	0.0	197,000	0.0	192,000	0.0	0.87	-0.09
<b>Total population</b>	<b>3,696,189,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>6,895,889,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>7,656,531,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1.47</b>	<b>1.05</b>

\*Rate = average annual growth rate, percent per year indicated

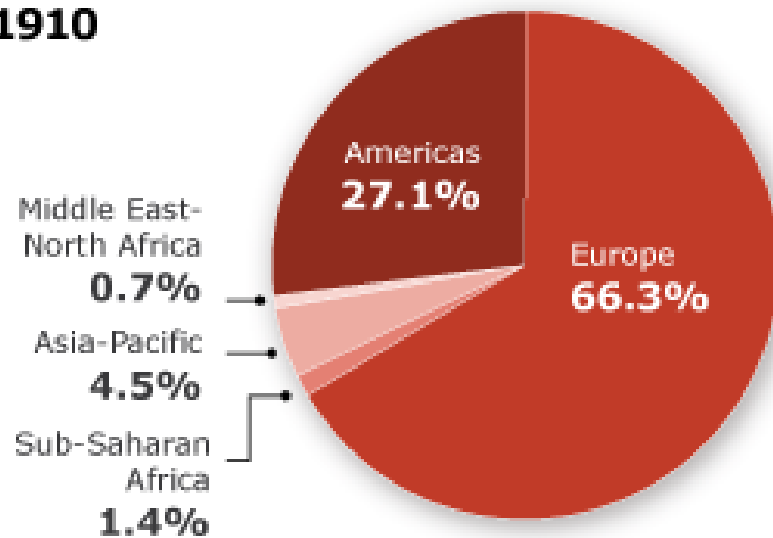
Center for the Study of Global Christianity, *Christianity in its Global Context*, June 2013

- Christians makeup roughly a third of the overall religious population worldwide and Islam close behind at ~23%
- Islam fastest growing in the past 30 years and is expected to continue being the fastest in the next decade but its growth rate is anticipated to decline

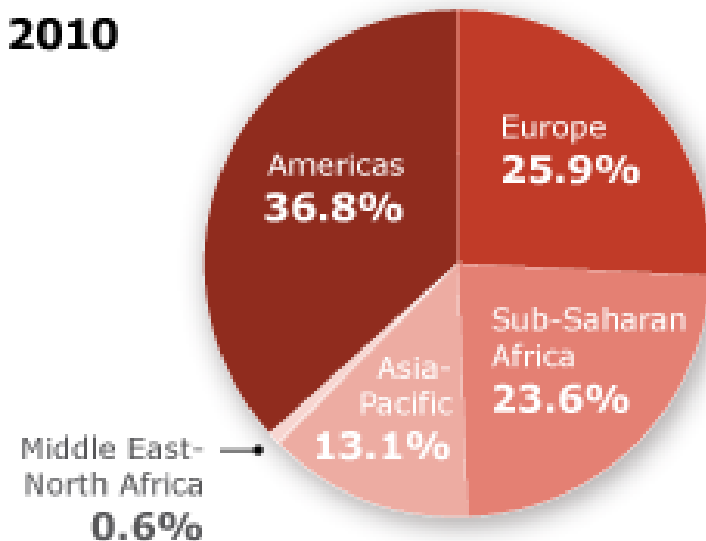
# Snapshot of Religion Today: Trends in Christianity

## Regional Distribution of Christians

**1910**



**2010**



Figures for 1910 are from a Pew Forum analysis of data from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • *Global Christianity*, December 2011

- Overall decline of European Christianity in the last century movement towards Africa, America and Asia-Pacific

# Snapshot of Religion: Today and the Future

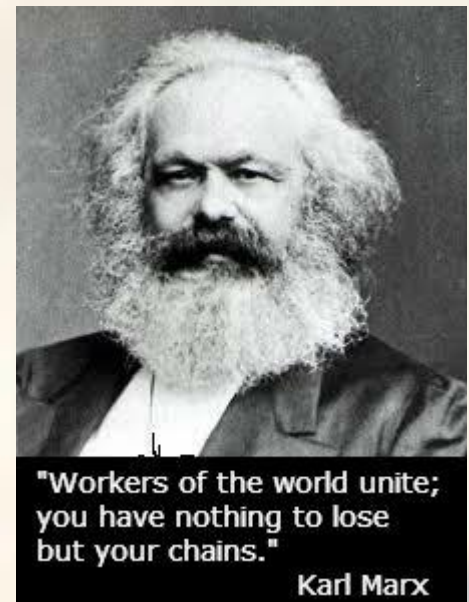
- The centre of gravity of the Christian faith has moved from Europe to the Global South
- Rise of Islam
- Secularisation not as bad as public says
  - Predominantly a European phenomenon rather than a global one
- Rise of the 'Nones', ie growth of the unaffiliated in Global North (Pew Research 2010, 16% of world population is currently unaffiliated)
- Greater religious diversity in the future including those with no traditional faith

# Religion, Belief and Ideology

- Religion as 'Ultimate Concern'
  - Belief as trust, Belief as world-view, Belief as existential orientation
- Belief in this sense goes beyond traditional religions as a universal feature of humanity.
- Opens the possibility of 'quasi-religions' or 'ideologies'. These 'quasi-religions' are "directed towards objects like nation, science... society, or a highest ideal of humanity, which are then considered divine" –Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*, 5.
- Even if someone professes atheism, they often adhere to a particular 'quasi-religion' or 'ideology'.
- Ideology: is a set of conscious and/or unconscious ideas which constitute one's goals, expectations, and actions.
- People draw ultimate meaning from these ideologies and beliefs. They ascribe ultimate value to them in the same way others do of traditional religions.

# Atheism and Ideologies: Marxism

- Marxism is an ideology and method of social analysis. It concentrates on social inequality between classes, uses a materialist understanding of history, and proposes a transformation of society.
- Vision of history and anthropology based upon economics
- Famous proponents: Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Leon Trotsky
- Very influential in 20<sup>th</sup> century politics and economics
- Reductionistic but insightful





# Atheism and Ideologies: Liberal Humanism

- A system of thought that **rejects religious beliefs** and centers on humans and their **values, capacities, and worth.**
- The doctrine emphasizing a person's capacity for **self-realization through reason**
- Devoted to:
  - human progress
  - rational thinking
  - the flourishing of the human species for its own sake
- Celebrates:
  - Freedom
  - Independence
  - Choice
- Famous Proponents: Jean-Paul Sartre, Noam Chomsky & Steven Pinker
- Very popular in Europe and underlies most civic institutions



# Atheism and Ideologies: Scientism

- “the view that the characteristic inductive methods of the natural sciences are the only source of genuine factual knowledge and, in particular, that they alone can yield true knowledge about man and society.” - Bullock & Trombley, *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, 775.
- Methodological naturalism vs metaphysical naturalism
- Criticised for its reductionism and self-refutation
- Famous proponents: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Alexander Rosenberg
- Largely based on a poor understanding of philosophy of science

# The Future of Atheism and Ideology

- A Shift from Militant, New Atheism to more nuanced and religiously-informed atheisms
  - Atheism 2.0, Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*
- Recognition that Atheism that defines itself primarily contra religion is not sustainable. It needs to *believe in something*
- Liberal Humanism
- Transhumanism

# Resources

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- The Immanent Frame <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/>
- Christianity in its Global Context report:  
<http://www.gordonconwell.com/netcommunity/CSGCResources/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf>
- “Nones” on the Rise: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>