

Reason vs. Religion: How Society Became Increasingly Secular

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Reason V.S. Religion:

How Society Became Increasingly Secular Throughout Time

In the 11th grade I wrote an essay regarding the troublesome state of the Catholic Church, and the obvious decline of church attendance and engagement compared to prior years. The thesis of that essay maintained the culprit for the Church's apparent downfall was the emergence of technology. I proposed that social media, cellphones, and modern technology in general had diminished our attention spans to the point where we could no longer bear a 60-minute-long mass. While I still believe this to be somewhat of a factor in the downfall of the church, I no longer believe it is a major one. Instead, I theorize that the primary catalyst for the collapse of the Church¹ is "The Enlightenment" and continual gains in human intelligence throughout history.

A natural rebuttal to this thesis statement may be "*How can one prove that humans have become more intelligent over time?*" Intelligence may seem more like a qualitative variable than a quantitative one. However, The Flynn Effect, a widely researched and accepted phenomenon, shoots down this objection. The Flynn Effect is based on the idea that human intelligence improves with every generation, particularly in terms of IQ (intelligent quotient)- "Flynn's study revealed a 13.8-point increase in IQ scores between 1932 and 1978, amounting to a 0.3-point

¹ Not specifically referring to the Catholic Church.

increase per year, or approximately 3 points per decade” (Trahan). This 3-point per decade increase in IQ is the most used and accepted understanding of the Flynn Effect, and it certainly supports the idea that humans have become smarter over time and will continue to get smarter in the years to come.

As a species, Homo sapiens have evolved from primitive “cave men” who swung around stone tools, to (some three million years later) incredibly intelligent creatures with complex social hierarchies and cognitive capabilities far superior to any other species on Earth. While this gradual progression has been present throughout human history, the rate of said progression seems to have accelerated over the last 500 years or so. Historians and philosophers refer to this period of rapid advancement as “the Age of Enlightenment.”

The Age of Enlightenment, or The Enlightenment for short, was somewhat of a scientific revolution that emphasized objectivity and the scientific method, celebrated clarity, and thus lack of ambiguity, subscribed to the idea of universality, and detested the vernacular (common speech) (Stromberg, pg. 127). The enlightenment was the spark for several significant and society-altering changes.

In the several centuries leading up to The Enlightenment, the Church had unparalleled power and domination over European society and culture: the universities were controlled by the Church, important artwork of that era was religiously themed, and even the architecture was influenced by theology (Stromberg, pg. 7). However, the Church would eventually lose this control. The regression of the Church’s power and influence was slow and gradual, nevertheless, the Church today is completely unrecognizable when compared to the Church of the Middle Ages.

An effective way to measure the Church's decline is through observing attendance over time. According to a particularly relevant and eye-opening Pew Research Center article, "65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade". Furthermore, it is apparent each generation is less interested in religion than the generation that preceded them. For example, 84% of the silent generation (1928-45) identify as Christian and 10% of them are unaffiliated, while only 49% of millennials (1981-1996) identify as Christian with 40% of them being unaffiliated. This is a massive difference for two generations that are only 50-60 years apart.

A constructive way to evaluate the relationship between human intelligence and religion is to recount the storied history between the two variables and how they have interacted over time. Before the Enlightenment, was a sustained period of stasis-based thinking which is commonly referred to as the "medieval world view," when humans were thought to be static in nature, unable to mobilize socially or economically. This attitude was a byproduct of autocratic governments, as well as the "Great Chain of Being"- a concept that suggested the world consisted of an unbreakable hierarchy: God; Angels; Kings and Queens; Commoners; Animals; Plants; Non-Living Things. Most alive during this era also subscribed to the geocentric model, which claimed that the earth was fixed and the center of the universe. Until The Age of Enlightenment, these theories would not be discredited. (Lovejoy).

The "Great Chain of Being" was challenged during the era of the French Revolution, when countries began to implement democratic governments and subsequently promote liberalism. This allowed peasants- who were once permanently stuck at the bottom of the social hierarchy- to participate in government and partake in free trade. These ideologies, in a way,

narrowed the gap between “kings” and “peasants” and made it possible for low-status people to mobilize and climb the social/economic ladder.

The geocentric model, on the other hand, was debunked by renowned astronomers Galileo, Copernicus, and Kepler and replaced with the heliocentric model. This model suggested that the earth was neither fixed nor the center of the universe, and that it rotated around the sun. It is important to note that the people who were alive during that period of transition (between medieval and enlightened thinking) found these new theories to be incredibly troubling and problematic. The “Great Chain of Being” not only supported the notion of God’s existence, but also the idea that humans are all part of some divine plan. The geocentric model upheld the assumption that humans are the center of the universe and furthermore supported the themes of the Old Testament, where God is the ultimate creator.

With the culture of medieval society being so deeply rooted in theology, it is natural that the average person of this era would resist these ideas because they completely contradicted their beliefs and way of life. Religion often provides people with a sense of comfort and security, not to mention a sense of purpose, thus ideas that threaten something so deeply personal are inevitably going to be perceived as disturbing. William James was a psychologist who focused on this relationship between religion and a person’s general happiness. “...we must also acknowledge that the more complex ways of experiencing religion are new manners of producing happiness, wonderful inner paths to a supernatural kind of happiness, when the first gift of natural existence is unhappy, as it so often proves itself to be” ... “If a creed makes a man feel happy, he almost inevitably adopts it” (James, pg. 62). This led to a natural wave of resistance that would continue as The Enlightenment progressed.

One of the most prominent figures in the early days of The Enlightenment was Immanuel Kant. Kant is thought by many to be a defender of scientific reason and The Enlightenment, but he is also considered by many to be a proponent of romanticism. An example of this is his aesthetic theory- where he contends that beauty is rooted in reason (Stromberg).

Nevertheless, Kant's work and his stance on religion paved the way for a philosophical system known as "positivism": which holds that humans should only focus on things that can be proven using scientific reason. Kant rejected "Argument from Design"- an argument that points to the complex design of the world as evidence of an intelligent designer (God). Kant believed that religion and science are not related, and furthermore, one cannot prove the existence of God by using the scientific method.

In the 17th century, Baruch Spinoza and Richard Simon, led an attack on the historicity of the Bible. Spinoza believed that you could write a biography on Jesus in the same manner that you would for Julius Caesa, he was simply a human whose life could be studied like any other person. This, of course, contradicted the New Testament depiction of Jesus as the Messiah and the "begotten son of God." Sir James Frazier would go on to point out that the story of Jesus is not unique and that versions of the story of Jesus, his resurrection and sacrifice, had been told for thousands of years. The Higher Criticism movement maintained that the Bible is a product of the environment it was written in and does not stand the test of time. It also criticized the Bible for being paraphrased numerous times and the fact that the translations are unreliable and inaccurate (Stromberg, pg. 116).

While those modern ideas certainly posed a threat to religion, no modern ideology was as groundbreaking, controversial, and destructive to the integrity of the Church as Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution. Darwin had several influences, such as Charles Lyell and James Hutton,

who were major contributors to the Theory of Uniformitarianism which holds that the earth experiences gradual, uniform change over long periods of time. As opposed to the Catastrophism Theory, which suggested that sudden catastrophes are what shaped the earth. Lyell and Hutton also emphasized the notion of “deep time,” which debunked the theological myth that the earth was created 6,000 years ago and instead suggested that the earth is billions of years old, not thousands. Darwin was also influenced by Thomas Malthus and Herbert Spencer. Thomas Malthus’ work is commonly known as “dismal science” and revolves around the subject of overpopulation. He theorized that favorable traits would be preserved. Herbert Spencer, on the other hand, was a big proponent of the “survival of the fittest” ideology and focused on the reproduction of physical characteristics. These influences served as vital precursors to the Darwinian theory of natural selection: which, in short, maintained that the vast age of the earth enabled accumulation of gradual changes in species; useful adaptations would last; and advantageous mutations would lead to speciation (proliferation of species).

Darwin’s work met substantial backlash as it effectively debunked some of the most basic and fundamental theological concepts. Many who agreed with his theories were effectively shunned by the Church. For example, a bishop of the Church excommunicated Gregorio Chil y Naranjo for his work defending Darwin and Lamarck (White). Darwin’s theory refutes the Argument from Design by replacing the notion of a ‘designer god’ with natural selection. In other words, humanity can be explained by natural and unintentional evolution of species through variation, adaptation, and deep time. His work also refutes the “Great Chain of Being” as we are in no way superior to other species. Again, Darwin is not the first to talk about these concepts but because he was able to prove and demonstrate them so effectively his work has become the hallmark of all evolutionary studies.

In conclusion, I believe that because of the Age of Enlightenment and increased human intelligence, the Church has become obsolete. While I feel strongly about this, I also acknowledge the fact that religion will always have a place in society. The psychologist William James often spoke of this and asserted that it does not matter if religion is true or not, and furthermore, that spirituality (not a specific religion) will always serve a deep purpose in society- no matter how intelligent we become. The existence of God is a natural way for people to explain the world around them, and I cannot envision a world without some form of spirituality. Nevertheless, when it comes to the Catholic church (specifically) I predict the trend of increased intelligence and decreased church attendance to continue as time progresses.

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