

Reasons for the decline of religion in UK and Europe

Here are some explanations offered by sociologists for the decline of religion.

Thinking things through

Sociology investigates the social phenomenon of religion. Looking at data, sociologists try to make sense of it and come up with theories for what is happening and why. Here are some ideas for why religion is declining in the UK and Europe. Choose at least three: two that you think are strong explanations and one that you think is less strong. Comment on your choices.

Note that sociology starts from a naturalistic (essentially non-theistic) perspective. It assumes that the features and functions of society arise from within the behaviour and experience of individuals and societies. It is not looking for supernatural explanations. What difference does this make to the theories offered here? (E.g. it doesn't argue that God doesn't exist, because it is only looking at what people believe and how they act.)

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| In the early 20th century, sociologist Max Weber described the world of the Middle Ages as an 'enchanted garden'. People believed in angels, demons, ghosts and spirits. Weber argued that developments in science and philosophy in 17th-18th centuries meant that people started looking for natural explanations rather than supernatural ones. The world became 'disenchanted'. | Sociologist Steve Bruce suggests that we now have a technological worldview. If there is a plane crash, for example, we now look to find out what technical error there was – we don't ask if God did it. A scientific worldview is taking over from a religious one. |
| In the 1960s, Peter Berger said that from being in a world dominated by Christianity to one with a wide range of belief systems, people are no longer united by a set of beliefs. The more diverse claims there are to truth, the less plausible the claims become. | The place of religion in society is getting smaller. Where once the Church ran most schools and hospitals, now the UK and much of Europe have robust state healthcare and education systems. People don't need religion so much – you can get married or buried without a Christian minister. Now, religion seems to be more about a person's private life. |
| There is generational decline. You may have religious grandparents, but your parents are less likely to remain committed, and you are much more likely to be non-religious. | Some people may keep some religious and spiritual beliefs but are not interested in being part of a religious institution. They may reject them because they think these institutions have not kept up to date with matters of morality, equality or justice. |
| Some argue that Christian churches have lost their core beliefs – if even Christian leaders don't believe in miracles or the resurrection, why should anyone else? | We know more about the world around us, such as from 24-hour news via social media. There is an increased sense that religion is associated with conflict. Even if that is statistically small in extent, it gets lots of focus, increasing the negative impact. |
| People being surveyed may be being more honest now. When religion was more significant, people may have felt some pressure to say they believed or practised. As religion declines, people do not feel under any pressure to do that any more. | There is a shift from people feeling a sense of obligation to go to church, for example, to going because they choose to. This might mean that fewer people attend church, but they may be the ones who are more committed in terms of belief and practice. |