

Resilient Faith

Scientists and the secular-minded predict the demise of religion, but around the globe it is thriving

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Ever since Edward Gibbon's [Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire](#), scientists and secular-minded scholars have been predicting the ultimate demise of religion. But in many places around the globe religious fervor is increasing.

New religious movements continue to arise at a furious pace – perhaps at the rate of two or three per day. There are now nearly two billion self-proclaimed Christians (about one-third of humanity), 25% of whom are [Pentecostals](#) or charismatics (people who stay in mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches that have adopted Pentecostal practices like healings, speaking in tongues, casting out demons and laying hands upon the sick). In Africa, for example, the Winner's Church, a Pentecostal church that celebrates new-found market wealth and success, is only a dozen years old, but already has more than 50,000 thousand members in 32 branches on the continent. During the same period, the Falun Gong, a Buddhist offshoot, has grown to perhaps 100 million adherents in east Asia and the al-Qaida-led jihadi movement has spread across the Muslim world.

The United States – the world's most economically powerful and scientifically advanced society – is also one of the world's most professedly religious societies. Evangelical Christians and fundamentalists include about 25% of Americans, and together with charismatics constitute about 40% of the American population. About the same number believe that God speaks to them directly. Among Americans, 90% pray for God's intervention in life and 90% believe God cares for them. Even in western Europe, the most secular of societies, more than 60% of the population believes in the soul.

One underlying reason for religion's endurance is that science treats humans and intentions only as incidental elements in the universe, whereas for religion they are central. Science is not particularly well-suited to deal with people's existential anxieties – death, deception, sudden catastrophe, loneliness or longing for love or justice. It cannot tell us what we ought to do, only what we can do. Religion thrives because it addresses people's yearnings and society's moral needs. But there are also deeper evolutionary and historical reasons for religion's endurance.

Although science may never replace religion, science can help us understand how religions are structured in individual minds (brains) and across societies (cultures) and also, in a strictly material sense, why religious belief endures. The science suggests that religion is neither a naturally-selected adaptation of our species nor innate in us. Nevertheless, several factors in religion's persistence involve naturally-selected elements of human cognition as well as what have become, since the upper paleolithic, near-universal conditions of human history.

Evolved elements of cognition that favour religion include the inherent susceptibility of religious beliefs to modularised (innate, universal, domain-specific) conceptual processing systems. Cross-cultural experiments in developmental and cognitive psychology point to a universal "theory of mind", or folkpsychology, that favours survival and recurrence of notions of a spiritual soul and the supernatural within and across minds and societies. Historical conditions for religion concern the problem of forming large-scale groups of genetic strangers able to compete with other predatory human groups. A quantitative cross-cultural analysis of 186 societies found that the larger the group, the more likely it culturally sanctioned deities who are directly concerned about human morality. Such moral concern also translates into greater propensity for conflict and warfare with other groups, although experiments in western societies show that activation of God concepts leads to reduced cheating and greater generosity between anonymous strangers.

The story of humanity has been the religious rise of civilizations, however secular in appearance the recent chapters of the story appear, including civil and human rights. But that's another story.