The Decline of Christianity in Modern Europe

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Europe was once considered the epicenter of the Christian religion. For centuries Christianity was not only the main religion of Europe it was also a main political power. The Roman Catholic church, and in turn the Christian faith, enjoyed great power at various times throughout history in the European countries and influenced the culture in many ways. However, today there has been a moral and spiritual decline in Europe of staggering numbers. This short essay will explore possible reasons for Christianity’s decline in Europe in the last century and whether or not there is a possibility that the church could start regaining traction in the region.

The transition for a predominately Christian Europe to a culture that is apathetic towards the church is known as secularization. Secularization simply means moving from ecclesiastical to civic or lay rule.¹ The word first came into usage around 1611.² When the term is heard it is often immediately associated with lack of religion. The secularization of Europe is not to say that Europe is without religion altogether, but rather, that religion has been and is still on a decline. The sobering effect of this decline is that it is giving rise to Islam which is projected, if the current rate of secularization remains, to become the predominate religion of Europe.³

The question becomes, how drastic is the decline of religion, specifically Christianity, in Europe? What are the causes of that decline? Is there any way to curb the decline towards incline? There are many possibilities to answer these questions and a few shall be taken under consideration.

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² Ibid.
Science is often identified as a reason for spiritual decline. Darwinian Evolution is a key factor in the falling away that we see in religious circles. Howard notes that since the science of Darwinian Evolution became the accepted standard, it would no longer be possible that the Bible could serve as a textbook of history or science.\(^4\) Of course, this is not a phenomenon that is local to Europe alone, it has also been seen in the American culture as well.

With sacred Scripture thrown out of the education system comes the logical consequence of Biblical illiteracy. The gravity of this can be seen in the results of a 2014 survey taken by the Bible Society in Britain that states that 57 percent of kids ages 8-15 had never heard of David and Goliath and 54 percent of parents believing that the storyline of the popular book and movie, \textit{The Hunger Games}, was found in Scripture.\(^5\) The impact of the Bible being removed becomes clear in light of these statistics and recognizing that only 56 percent of parents under the age of 36 had been exposed to Biblical stories in school.\(^6\)

Another aspect of Biblical illiteracy is misinformation. People simply do not know what the Christian faith actually teaches and take what they hear for granted instead of seeking the answers themselves. Richard Dawkins, a leader in the New Atheism Movement that is discussed later in this paper, is notorious for proclaiming misinformation about Scripture and Christianity. An example of this misinformation can be seen in his book \textit{The God Delusion}.

But if your whole upbringing, and everything you have ever been told by your parents, teachers, and priests has led you to believe, really believe, utterly and completely, that sinners burn in hell (or some other obnoxious article of doctrine such as that a woman is the property of her husband), it is entirely plausible that words could have a more long-lasting and damaging effect than deeds.\(^7\)

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Richard Dawkins, \textit{The God Delusion} (Boston, MA, USA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 357-358.
Dawkins puts forth that according to Christian Doctrine women are the property of men. Of course that notion is absurd and not a reality of the Christian faith. But if people take Dawkins at his word without investigating the matter themselves, Biblical illiteracy thrives.

However, science and the removal of Scripture from the classroom cannot be the only reasons for the decline of Christianity in Europe today. The wealth of information that is now available at the click of a button via the Internet has had a profound effect on the church in Europe, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II was noted for apologizing for past sins committed in the name of Christianity by the church. However, with rapidly available information about events such as the Inquisition and the Crusades, as well as other black spots in church history, people began to become skeptical to a higher degree of the church than in any other time in history. This is not to say that technology itself is the cause, or a cause at all, of the decline of Christianity. Instead, this shows that knowledge of the hypocrisy of the church has led to increased skepticism.

Similar to the wealth of information currently available about past sins of the church, modern events, such as World War I and World War II, have had a deep impact on how people view the church and its teachings. Many people cannot come to grips with how a religion that preaches love and peace could have so many nations that claim that religion engaged in long violent campaigns that killed hundreds of thousands. A similar example would be the outcry seen in the last two decades against Islam around the world in the wake of the September 11th,

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9 Ibid.

2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. Whether right or wrong, the wars and killings are viewed as hypocritical of the Christians involved in the conflicts.

The last reason that will be discussed in this exposition will be the rise of atheistic philosophy in mainstream media outlets. Europe has been considered the headquarters of the great philosophers for centuries. Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and many that would follow all resided in Europe. Europe was the home of the Reformation which included many philosophical arguments regarding doctrine and the practices of the Roman Catholic Church. In short, philosophy has always been at the core of European academia.

One of the contributing factors in Christianity’s decline in Europe, as well as around the globe, is the rise of a movement called New Atheism. New Atheism is different from the classical atheistic view in the sense that they do not only reject the idea of a god, they believe that a belief in god is fundamentally bad.11 One of the leading proponents of New Atheism is Richard Dawkins. Dawkins is an award winning scientist and also a Fellow of the Royal Society12 which serves as a scientific knowledge advisory to the British Government. Dawkins view on fundamental Christianity is evident in a quote from his award winning book The God Delusion.

Fundamentalist religion is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of countless thousands of innocent, well-meaning, eager young minds. Non-fundamentalist, ‘sensible’ religion may not be doing that. But it is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a virtue.13

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13 Dawkins, 323.
Dawkins shows a clear contempt for religion of any type but especially for people that he labels as fundamental. It is this mindset that has permeated the universities in Europe and has also started to show in the United States. With professors indoctrinating students with this kind of hostility towards religion it is no wonder that the younger generations have no place for the church in their lives. The fact that Dawkins serves on the Royal Society also demonstrates why, at least in Britain, the decline of Christianity is being propelled by the school system run by the government.

The list of reasons for the decline of Christianity in modern Europe is by no means exhaustive. However, it shows us clearly that the world is moving towards post-Christianity at an alarming rate. The question that must be answered is whether or not this can ever be changed? To begin, it is not surprising to find the falling away from the faith in mass numbers. Jesus was clear when he said, “And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.” (Matthew 24:10-12 ESV) Christ saw this coming and warned us to be ready for this day to come. However, he did not say that nothing can be done about it. He charged us to go into the world and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). This includes nations that have fallen away.

The church is at a crucial moment in its history. There is a small window of opportunity to regain ground that has been lost. However, this will not be easy ground to take back. The unspoken elephant in the room that is the real reason for the decline of Christianity is the church and its own complacency toward righteousness. All of the reasons for decline given in this essay ultimately point back to a church that has not stood for itself and has slowly watched its influence erode away. The way to combat this is for the church to once again to take a stand for righteousness because to whom much is given, much is required (Luke 12:48).
Bibliography


