The Voice of the Secular World

Secular World Magazine

OUR PREMIER ISSUE

Leveraging science and reason to advance humanity for a better world

JULY / AUGUST 2025

Secular World
Magazine

JULY / AUGUST 2025

EDITOR'S STATEMENT

As publishers of *Secular World Magazine*, The Secular Community **thesecularcommunity.org** is proud to offer a space for voices committed to reason, evidence, and human progress. We believe in the power of open inquiry, constructive debate, and global solidarity to overcome the challenges facing humanity today.

This magazine is more than a publication—it's a platform for visionaries, reformers, skeptics, scientists, artists, activists, and everyday citizens who understand that the future must be shaped not by ancient dogma, but by our shared responsibility to one another and to the Earth.

In each issue, you'll find articles that challenge assumptions, celebrate cultural diversity, highlight science-based innovations, and offer practical pathways to a better way of living—free from superstition, grounded in reality, and driven by hope.

Whether you're a lifelong secularist or just beginning to question the frameworks handed to you, we welcome you into a growing global conversation. Together, let's explore what it means to live well, live justly, and live freely in a secular world.

— The Editors

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We believe thoughtful conversation is the cornerstone of a vibrant secular community.

In future issues, this space will feature letters and feedback from our readers—your insights, critiques, and reflections on the ideas we publish. Whether you agree, disagree, or want to expand the conversation, we want to hear from you.

For this inaugural issue, we're holding the space open as an invitation. Your voice matters, and we look forward to including it in upcoming editions.

To share your thoughts, please write to us at **editor@secularworldmagazine.org.**

Declaration of Policy and Aims

Human civilization has reached a crossroads. Our remarkable advancements in science, technology, and economic development have brought undeniable benefits, but they have also produced complex systems that now threaten the very ecosystems upon which we depend. Climate change, inequality, political instability, and widespread misinformation are symptoms of a world out of balance.

One of the most persistent barriers to lasting, rational solutions is the continued dominance of religious ideologies rooted in ancient texts and traditions. While often claiming moral authority, these belief systems too often divide us, suppress critical thinking, and obstruct evidence-based approaches to the pressing challenges of our time.

Now more than ever, it is essential that we embrace a worldview grounded in reality—not one shaped by supernaturalism, dogma, or blind faith. We must reclaim our shared human agency and face the future with courage, clarity, and compassion.

Secular World Magazine promotes a reason-based path forward, built upon these core principles:

Democratic and secular governance that protects freedom of thought and expression
Universal human rights and dignity for all people, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or belief
A just economic system that rewards contribution, ensures opportunity, and prioritizes well-being over profit
Environmental restoration and stewardship, honoring our role as caretakers of the planet

Through thoughtful analysis, storytelling, and global perspectives, *Secular World Magazine* is committed to showcasing solutions, advancing secular values, and inspiring a more enlightened, sustainable, and compassionate world. ◆

Global Secular Events
July–August 2025

July 2025

- **July 4th – United States' independence day**
  Commemorating its separation from Britain
- **July 14th– France's national holiday**
  Commemorating the 1789 storming of the Bastille and the French Revolution's ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity
- **July 18th – Nelson Mandela International Day**
  Honors Mandela's legacy of equality, advocacy, and community service
- **July 19th-22nd – Tall Ships Festival (Aberdeen, Scotland)** A majestic maritime celebration featuring over 50 historic sailing ships and live music
- **July 30th – International Day of Friendship**
  Promotes informal, cross-cultural bonds and global fellowship

August 2025

- **August 6th-8th – Sendai Tanabata Festival**
  Japan's vibrant "Star Festival," where large paper streamers honor a folktale of star-crossed lovers (Vega & Altair)—a cultural, secular celebration of craft and community
- **August 12th – International Youth Day**
  Highlights youth issues, leadership, and social inclusion around the globe
- **August 12th-13th – Perseid Meteor Shower peak**
  One of the most spectacular celestial displays of the year

Human Development Report 2025: A Matter of Choice

What is the Human Development Report?

The Human Development Report (HDR), published annually by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is a comprehensive assessment of global human well-being. Unlike traditional economic indicators such as GDP, the HDR focuses on people-centric metrics—emphasizing health, education, and income. The cornerstone of the report is the Human Development Index (HDI), a composite measure used to rank countries based on three dimensions:

1. Health – measured by life expectancy at birth
2. Education – measured by mean years of schooling for adults and expected years of schooling for children
3. Standard of Living – measured by Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP)

The 2025 edition, titled *A Matter of Choice: People and Possibilities in the Age of AI*, explores the dual impact of technological change and human agency. It stresses that while artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies can advance well-being, their true effect depends on how societies choose to deploy them.

Trends in Human Development

The 2025 HDR reveals troubling signs of stagnation. Global HDI growth has nearly flatlined, showing the smallest gains since the report's inception (excluding crisis years like 2020–2021). While some countries surged ahead, many others lagged or even declined, widening the gap between high and low HDI nations.

Key contributors to stagnation include ongoing conflicts, weak public health systems, educational disruptions, and income inequality. Although technological progress is accelerating, its benefits are unevenly distributed.

Top and Bottom Performers

Top 10 Countries by HDI:

1. Iceland – 0.972
2. Norway – 0.970
3. Switzerland – 0.970
4. Denmark – 0.962
5. Germany – 0.959
6. Sweden – 0.959
7. Australia – 0.958
8. Hong Kong (SAR) – 0.955
9. Netherlands – 0.955
10. Belgium – 0.951

Bottom 10 Countries by HDI:

184. Yemen – 0.470
185. Sierra Leone – 0.467
186. Burkina Faso – 0.459
187. Burundi – 0.439
188. Niger – 0.419
189. Mali – 0.419
190. Chad – 0.416
191. Central African Republic – 0.414
192. Somalia – 0.404
193. South Sudan – 0.388

India's Performance

India improved its rank from 133rd in 2022 to 130th in 2023, with an HDI score of 0.685, classifying it as a 'medium human development' country. Life expectancy reached a new high of 72 years. Education reforms have pushed the expected years of schooling to 13 years, and GNI per capita rose to USD 9,046. However, India also faces one of the highest inequality-related HDI losses at 30.7%.

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) showed progress, with

India rising from 108th to 102nd place, indicating ongoing improvements in female education, political participation, and maternal health.

AI and the Future of Human Development

The report's central theme—human choice in the age of AI—highlights how policy decisions can direct AI's impact on society. While nearly 60% of respondents in a global survey believe AI will open new opportunities, nearly half worry about job loss or displacement.

India stands out as a leader in AI skill penetration, underscoring the potential for developing economies to harness AI for inclusive growth. But without strategic frameworks, AI could exacerbate existing disparities. The UNDP urges governments to invest in education, regulate AI ethically, and ensure access to digital infrastructure to make technology a force for human development.

Conclusion

The 2025 HDR paints a nuanced picture: progress in some areas, regression in others, and a world on the cusp of transformative change. Whether the next chapter in human development will be one of inclusion or exclusion depends on our collective ability to make just, strategic, and human-centered choices.

The HDR is more than a report card—it is a call to action. It challenges countries to recognize that human development is not just about survival but about flourishing in a rapidly changing world. ◆

Celebrating Human Creativity

Luis Alfonso Orellana

Living Walls

In this explosion of color and imagination, street art breathes life into a historic building. Twisting organic forms seem to pulse with energy, as if nature itself were reclaiming the urban space. The vivid mural doesn't just decorate the walls — it transforms them into a statement about coexistence, creativity, and the power of public art to reimagine the everyday.

Amazing Minds in the Wild: Tool-Using Crows

In what will be an ongoing series celebrating the extraordinary capabilities of animals, we begin with a bird that defies expectations: the New Caledonian crow. Far from the pejorative term "birdbrain," this species demonstrates tool use, problem-solving, and forward planning—abilities once thought to be uniquely human.

Found on the remote South Pacific island of New Caledonia, these crows craft hooks from twigs and leaves to extract insects from tree bark and crevices. They not only modify tools for specific tasks but sometimes even store them for later use, suggesting a level of foresight more commonly associated with primates.

Their intelligence is not derivative of human training or contact but an evolutionary response to environmental challenges.

One famous experiment involved a multi-step puzzle box containing a food reward. The crow had to retrieve one tool to get another, then use that to get the food—an impressive feat of sequential reasoning. Remarkably, they succeeded, often without prior trial-and-error learning.

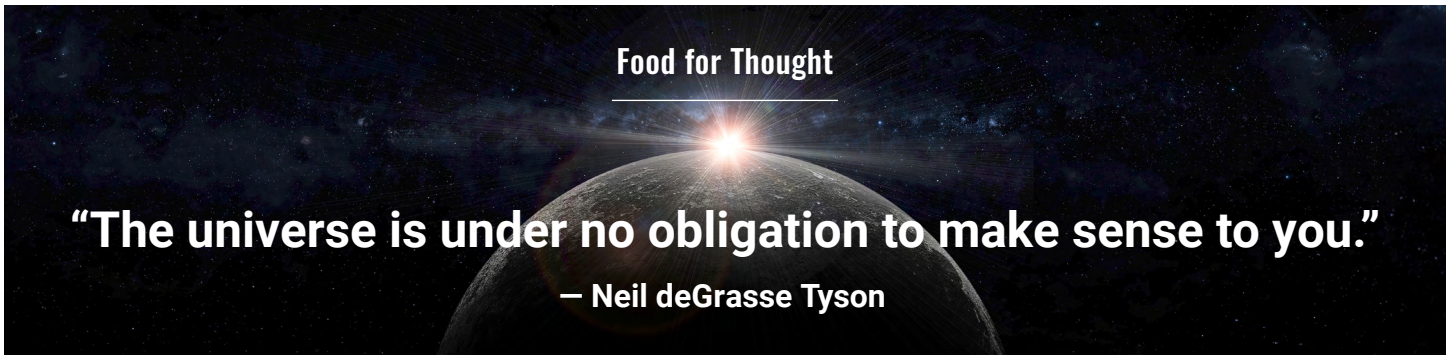
Researchers studying New Caledonian crows have found that their brains, though physically small, are densely packed with neurons in the forebrain—akin to the human prefrontal cortex. This anatomical detail may explain their surprising intelligence and problem-solving prowess.

CREDIT: YI-KAI TEA

What makes this all the more awe-inspiring is that these birds evolved their abilities independently of primates. Their intelligence is not derivative of human training or contact but an evolutionary response to environmental challenges. It's an elegant reminder that consciousness, creativity, and adaptation are not uniquely human traits.

For secular thinkers, the implications are profound. These birds challenge the traditional religious notion that humans are a wholly separate and superior creation. Instead, they demonstrate that intelligence is a spectrum, one shaped by natural selection rather than divine decree.

As we uncover more about animals like these crows, we not only come to better understand the world—but also our place within it. Nature needs no miracle to inspire wonder. ◆



The Human Brain Wasn't Built for the World It Created

By Joe Simonetta

We stand at a precipice—not because we lack intelligence, but because the intelligence we have is misdirected. Our behavior, our politics, and our obsession with money are governed not by wisdom, but by ancient neurological wiring, shaped for survival in a world that no longer exists.

The human brain evolved in layers. The oldest—what some call the reptilian and limbic systems—are unconscious and emotionally reactive. They're wired for fight, flight, status, and tribal belonging. These instincts helped our ancestors evade predators and compete for scarce resources. But layered on top is our most recent evolutionary gift: the neocortex, home to logic, empathy, foresight, and ethical reasoning. It's the part of us capable of civilization.

Unfortunately, in our collective behavior, the older brain still dominates. We are in the grip of primitive drives—craving power, hoarding wealth, fearing outsiders—while failing to activate the very faculties that could save us.

Politics is the clearest example. In theory, it should express our highest collective intelligence. But in practice, it often rewards the most primitive traits: dominance, deception, and short-term gratification. It's not about governing wisely; it's about winning, accumulating power, and staying in control. Not to serve, but to conquer.

And at the center of this dysfunction is money—not as a tool for exchange, but as a distorted symbol of personal worth. We treat money—the symbol of wealth—as if it were wealth itself. But true wealth is something else entirely: clean air, fertile soil, potable water, stable climate, healthy relationships, safe communities, time, peace, and purpose.

Yet we sacrifice all of this in pursuit of abstract numbers—profits, GDP, portfolios—often at the expense of our future. We are, in a very real sense, burning the planet to keep score.

Why do we do this? Because our brains never evolved for planetary stewardship. They evolved to respond to immediate threats and local concerns. But today's world is global, complex, and interdependent. The challenges we face—climate instability, ecosystem collapse, global inequality—require long-term thinking, emotional regulation, and collective empathy. These are capacities of the evolved mind. But our systems reward the opposite.

We've built machines we barely understand—and entrusted them to minds still driven by impulse.

Humanity's greatest threat may not be climate change, war, or inequality—but the limits of its own brain.

This is not a condemnation of humanity's character, but an honest look at how our brains have evolved. We are not evil. We are unevolved. And unless we consciously train the brain to override its reflexes—unless we elevate reason over impulse—we will remain on a path not of progress, but peril.

The problem is not just bad policy or corrupt leadership. It is a deeper issue of mental development. Politics will not be fixed by replacing one party with another. Economics won't be healed by tweaking interest rates or tax codes. These are surface solutions to a deeper dysfunction: the mind behind the machinery.

What we need is not just better leaders, but better minds. Minds capable of deferring gratification, holding complexity, and feeling a shared responsibility for life on Earth. Minds that can distinguish symbol from substance, and ego from empathy.

Until that evolution happens—individually and collectively—our systems will continue to fail us. And we will continue to mistake illusion for truth, symbol for wealth, and dominance for wisdom.

The clock is ticking. Our survival as a species may depend not on our next invention, but on our next thought. ◆

Secular Community board member, Joe Simonetta is a sustainability advocate and author of TAOLISM: The Architecture of Life. Learn more at www.taolism.org.

The Real Creation Story – Part 1
How Science Tells the Story of Us

A UNIVERSE IS BORN

This is the story of how we came to be—told not through ancient myth, but through science, as best we know it today. For most of human history, our origin was shrouded in religious tales and cultural legends. But in just the last few centuries, science has begun to piece together a far more astonishing—and still unfolding—story.

Why does this story matter? Because understanding our cosmic beginnings gives us context. It reveals not only how we arrived here, but also how deeply connected we are to the universe itself. Science is a process of discovery. As new evidence emerges, our story evolves. That's what makes this tale so extraordinary: it's real, and it's alive with possibility.

The Beginning of Time and Space

Nearly 14 billion years ago, all matter, energy, time, and space were contained in a single, infinitely dense point. Then, in an instant, everything changed. In an event we now call the Big Bang, the universe burst into existence, expanding at unimaginable speed. Time and space began. Matter and energy erupted outward, forming the raw material of everything that would follow.

What triggered the Big Bang? We don't yet know. Some theories suggest a multiverse, where universes are constantly being born. Others propose a previous universe collapsed and rebounded. These are questions still at the frontier of science.

The First Matter

In the first fractions of a second, the universe was a searing sea of energy. Tiny building blocks of matter—quarks and anti-quarks—flashed into existence, annihilating one another in bursts of light. The quarks that survived began forming protons and neutrons, the ingredients for all atoms.

Moments later, forces like gravity and electromagnetism separated out, shaping the behavior of all matter forever. Hydrogen and helium nuclei formed. But it would take 400,000 years of cooling before electrons could settle into orbit, creating stable atoms. With atoms came transparency—and with that, the first light filled the cosmos.

Light in the Darkness

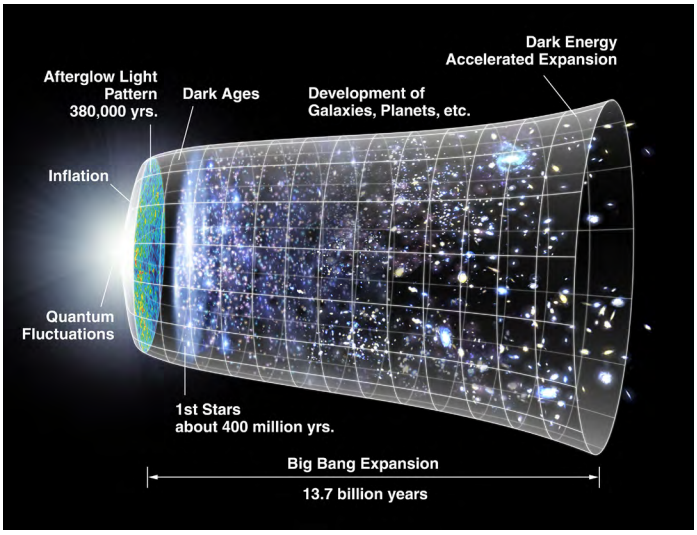
As the universe cooled, light finally broke free. This period, known as recombination, allowed photons—particles of light—to travel freely for the first time. The glow from that era still echoes through the universe today as the cosmic microwave background.

From this point on, gravity took center stage, pulling together clouds of hydrogen and helium to form the first stars.

STARS AND GALAXIES

From Atoms to Stars

As the universe expanded and cooled, matter began to



CREDIT: JET PROPULSION LABORATORY

gather under the pull of gravity. Vast clouds of hydrogen and helium—called nebulae—began to collapse inward. Small variations in density, combined with the relentless pull of gravity, allowed these clouds to fragment, forming dense knots of gas.

Within these knots, temperatures soared. Eventually, deep in their cores, a threshold was reached: hydrogen atoms began to fuse into helium. This process, known as nuclear fusion, released immense energy—and a star was born. These first stars brought light and structure to the young cosmos, ending the age of darkness.

The Birth of Galaxies

As more stars ignited, they began to cluster together under the force of gravity, forming galaxies. Some galaxies were small and irregular; others, like our Milky Way, grew into vast spirals. Each galaxy became a system of billions—or even trillions—of stars, orbiting a shared center of mass.

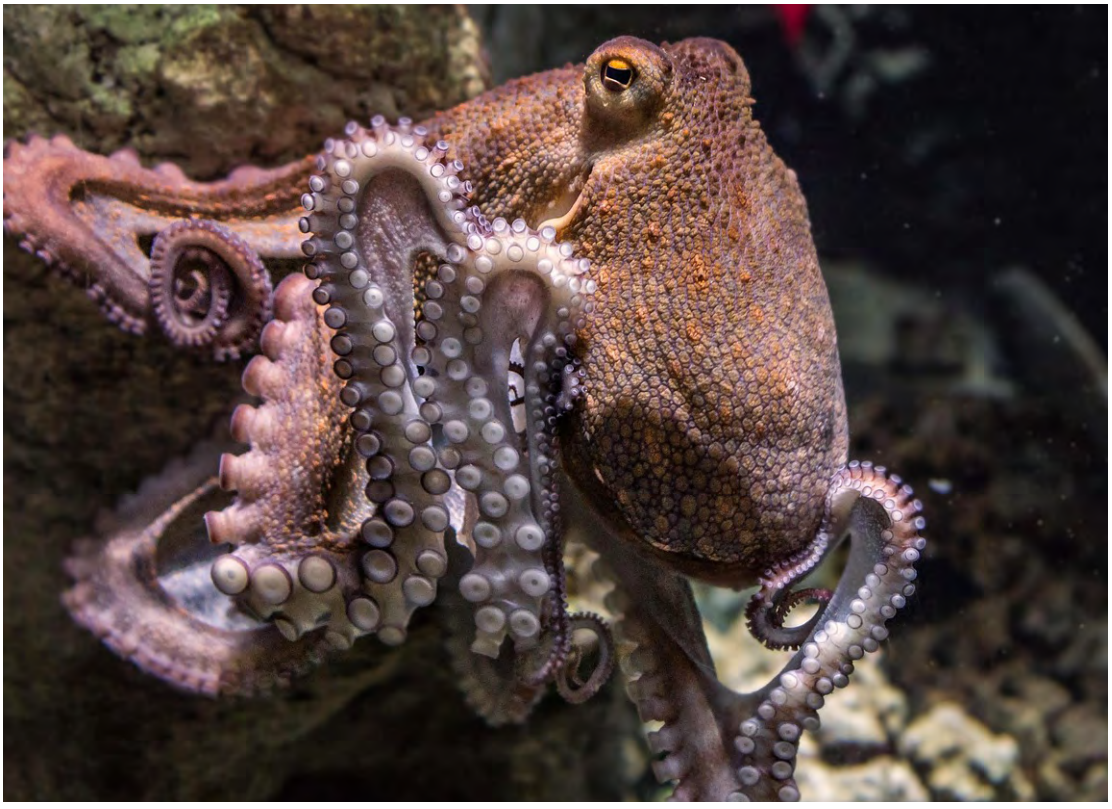
These early galaxies played a crucial role in cosmic evolution. They served as stellar nurseries, fueling generations of star formation, and slowly assembling the heavier elements required to form planets and life.

Our Galactic Home

Our home galaxy, the Milky Way, likely formed more than 13 billion years ago. It's a sprawling spiral, 100,000 light-years across and containing over 100 billion stars. Somewhere within one of its modest arms, our own Solar System would emerge billions of years later. ◆

IN THE NEXT ISSUE: Part 2 - How stars created the elements of life – and how one massive cloud of debris would become our Sun.

Nature's Awe



CREDIT: PIXABAY

With three hearts, blue blood, and a brain that extends into its limbs, the octopus defies expectation. Able to solve puzzles, change shape, and vanish into its surroundings, it offers a glimpse into a wildly different — yet remarkably intelligent — way of being.

The Plastic That Melts Into the Sea: A Breakthrough in Ocean-Safe Innovation

For decades, plastic has been a symbol of convenience—and a catastrophe for the planet. From the Great Pacific Garbage Patch to microplastics in our bloodstream, the mounting crisis has driven researchers around the world to seek alternatives. Now, a breakthrough from Japan could turn the tide.

In early June 2025, scientists at Japan's RIKEN Center for Emergent Matter Science and the University of Tokyo unveiled a new kind of plastic with a remarkable property: it dissolves in seawater within hours, leaving no harmful residue.

Unlike conventional plastics, which take centuries to break down and release toxic microplastics in the process, this new material—based on supramolecular chemistry—disintegrates into non-toxic molecules that can be fully digested by marine bacteria. No microplastics. No greenhouse gases. No damage to marine life.

LAB-TESTED, NATURE-APPROVED

Under lab conditions, the material dissolved in seawater in less than an hour when stirred. In soil, it took roughly 200 hours, or about 8 days—and may even enrich the soil by breaking down into nutrient-like byproducts.

The plastic is also non-flammable, non-toxic, and releases zero CO_2 as it degrades. These properties make it not just ocean-safe, but climate-friendly as well.

Dr. Ryohei Onda, one of the lead researchers, described the breakthrough as "a new class of plastic" designed with "planetary biodegradability" in mind. Early trials have shown promising mechanical strength comparable to petroleum-based plastics, making the material viable for packaging, single-use items, and other commercial applications.

NOT JUST HYPE

Skeptics might assume this is another overhyped lab invention. But this isn't vaporware. The team has published peer-reviewed data and is actively working with potential industry partners to develop a protective coating—a critical step that would allow the plastic to be used in real-world applications without dissolving prematurely.

Still, significant challenges remain: scaling production, maintaining durability during use, and ensuring the coatings themselves are biodegradable. As of now, there is no fixed timeline for commercial release.

WHY IT MATTERS

According to the UN, over 11 million metric tons of plastic enter the ocean each year. If this innovation delivers on its promise, it could revolutionize how we think about plastic—not as a permanent pollutant, but as a tempo-

rary tool designed to vanish without a trace.

Imagine water bottles that disappear after use, food wrappers that enrich the soil, and packaging that breaks down safely in rivers and seas. This is not science fiction. Thanks to smart chemistry and ecological foresight, it may be our near future.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

In an era of climate anxiety and eco-fatigue, this story offers a rare shot of hope. It reminds us that science, when guided by responsibility and imagination, can still save us—and perhaps even the ocean itself. ◆

SIDEBAR: FAST FACTS

- Breaks down in seawater: within 1 hour (lab conditions)
- Breaks down in soil: approx. 8–10 days
- Emissions: No CO_2 released during degradation
- Safety: Non-toxic, non-flammable
- Applications: Packaging, disposable plastics (pending coating tech)

REVIEW

***Ocean with David Attenborough* is a compelling and visually stunning documentary that serves as both a celebration of marine life and a stark warning about the threats facing our oceans. The release of the film coincided with World Oceans Day (June 8th), underscoring its urgent conservation message.**

A Journey Through the Depths

At 99 years old, Sir David Attenborough brings a lifetime of experience to this exploration of the seas. The documentary showcases breathtaking footage of kelp forests, coral reefs, and deep-sea ecosystems, revealing the ocean's vital role in sustaining life on Earth. Attenborough's narration emphasizes that the ocean is not just a vast expanse of water but a complex, interconnected system crucial for the planet's health.

Confronting Environmental Destruction

Ocean doesn't shy away from depicting the devastating impact of human activities. The film presents harrowing scenes of industrial overfishing, bottom trawling, and coral bleaching, illustrating how these practices are decimating marine habitats. Attenborough refers to the exploitation of ocean resources as "modern colonialism at sea," highlighting the ethical and ecological implications of such actions.

A Message of Hope and Resilience

Despite the grim realities, the documentary offers hope by showcasing the ocean's remarkable capacity for recovery. Examples of marine protected areas where ecosystems have rebounded underscore the potential for positive change if humanity takes decisive action. Attenborough's call to protect 30% of the world's oceans by 2030 aligns with global conservation goals and serves as a rallying cry for immediate intervention

Critical Reception

Critics have praised Ocean for its powerful storytelling and stunning visuals. The Guardian describes it as a "visual marvel" that balances warning with hope, while Film Review Daily calls it "one of the most important films ever made."

Conclusion

Ocean with David Attenborough is more than a documentary; it's a clarion call to recognize the ocean's critical role in our planet's future. Through compelling imagery and heartfelt narration, Attenborough urges viewers to take action before it's too late. This film is a must-watch for anyone concerned about the environment and the legacy we leave for future generations.

AI on the Road:
How Self-Driving Vehicles Are Steering Us Toward a Safer, Greener Future

The convergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and transportation is not just a technological revolution—it's a potential game-changer for public safety, climate action, and urban efficiency. Self-driving vehicles, once the stuff of science fiction, are already on roads in several countries and promise to transform the way we move while reducing emissions, accidents, traffic congestion, and the hours lost in gridlock.

DRIVING DOWN EMISSIONS

Transportation is one of the largest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions globally, accounting for roughly 20–25% of total CO_2 output. Self-driving electric vehicles (EVs) offer a powerful one-two punch: zero tailpipe emissions combined with AI-optimized driving that reduces energy waste. AI systems enable smoother acceleration, deceleration, and routing, leading to significant fuel and battery efficiency gains. When networked with smart infrastructure and traffic management systems, these vehicles can further optimize flow, reduce idling, and support better urban planning.

EASING URBAN CONGESTION

Beyond environmental and safety benefits, self-driving vehicles could radically improve how people navigate cities. Urban congestion costs trillions in lost productivity and wasted fuel, with the average commuter in some cities spending over 100 hours per year stuck in traffic. AI-powered vehicles can alleviate these inefficiencies by communicating with each other and infrastructure to prevent bottlenecks, eliminate unnecessary stops, and reduce traffic waves. Ridesharing fleets of autonomous vehicles can reduce the number of cars on the road, freeing up space and time.

SAFER STREETS AHEAD

AI-powered vehicles have the potential to dramatically reduce traffic accidents, which claim over 1.3 million lives every year according to the World Health Organization. Unlike human drivers, AI systems don't get tired, drunk, distracted, or angry. With multiple sensors and real-time processing, autonomous vehicles can anticipate hazards, maintain safe distances, and respond

to dynamic environments faster than most humans. While the technology is not perfect, early data from pilot programs already suggests reductions in collisions and near-misses.

LEADING THE WAY: GLOBAL INNOVATORS

United States – Home to Tesla, Waymo (Google), and Cruise (GM), the U.S. is a major force in autonomous vehicle development. States like California and Arizona already host extensive pilot programs.

China – With companies like Baidu's Apollo and Pony.ai, China is rapidly deploying autonomous taxis in cities like Beijing and Guangzhou. China's robust 5G infrastructure and top-down regulatory support accelerate rollout.

Germany – As an automotive powerhouse, Germany is advancing self-driving tech through companies like Mercedes-Benz and Volkswagen, focusing on highway autonomy and AI integration with smart infrastructure.

South Korea – Hyundai and Kia are investing heavily in AVs, with government support helping to establish pilot zones and legal frameworks.

United Arab Emirates – Dubai aims to make 25% of all

transport autonomous by 2030, positioning itself as a testbed for futuristic mobility.

CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS

Despite progress, barriers remain. Ethical dilemmas in programming crash responses, the risk of job displacement among professional drivers, and unresolved questions about liability and insurance still require robust debate. Infrastructure in many countries also needs significant upgrades to fully accommodate AVs, including smart roads and updated traffic systems.

A SECULAR CASE FOR SMARTER TRANSIT

From a secular perspective, the case for self-driving vehicles is rooted in reason and evidence. These systems rely on data, not divine protection, to save lives and reduce harm. They demonstrate how technology, when guided by ethical foresight, can advance the common good—protecting our planet and each other. It's not about worshiping machines, but about trusting in the power of human ingenuity, problem-solving, and scientific progress.

As nations grapple with climate crises, overburdened infrastructure, and clogged roadways, autonomous vehicles may not be a silver bullet—but they are certainly part of the solution. The road ahead is long, but AI may be the key to making it safer, cleaner, and more equitable for all. ◆

Celebrating Nature

When the Ocean Glows

On moonless nights along beaches in different parts of the world, the ocean glows blue when stirred. This bioluminescence comes from microscopic plankton—a reminder that even the smallest life forms can light up the world.

Awe isn't something you wait for—it's all around you, if you look. Whether in nature, the cosmos, or human kindness, awe connects us to something greater than ourselves.

Shifting Beliefs: The 2010–2020 Global Religious Landscape

In June 2025, Pew Research Center released its in-depth analysis, **How the Global Religious Landscape Changed from 2010 to 2020**, drawing on more than 2,700 surveys. The findings offer a compelling snapshot of how religion—and its absence—is transforming worldwide.

1. Christianity: Still Growing, But Losing Ground

- Christians increased by **122 million**, from **2.18 billion to 2.30 billion**, yet their share of the global population fell from 30.6% to 28.8%.
- The decline is primarily driven by **disaffiliation**, especially in Europe and North America. For instance, the U.S. saw its Christian share drop from 78.3% to 64%, while the "nones"—the religiously unaffiliated—climbed from 16.5% to 29.7%.
- Sub Saharan Africa now hosts the **largest proportion of Christians (≈30.7%)**, surpassing Europe (22.3%) due to higher fertility and youthful demographics.

2. Islam: The Fastest Growing Major Faith

- Islam added **347 million** adherents—the largest growth in absolute terms—boosting its share from 23.8% to 25.6% of the global population.
- This surge isn't due to conversion, but rather natural increase: Muslims tend to be younger (average age ~24 vs 33 globally) and have higher fertility, with low disaffiliation.

3. The Rise of the "Nones"

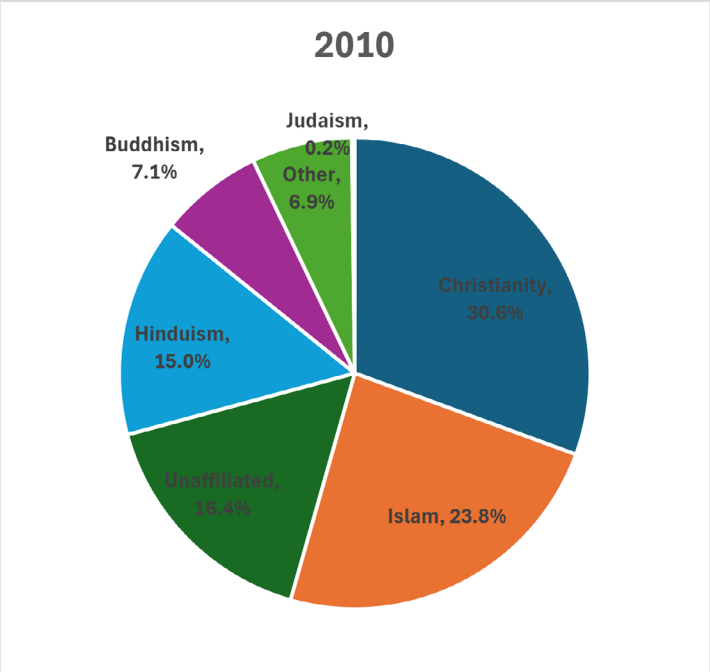
- The non religious grew by **270 million**, reaching **1.9 billion** and **24.2%** of the world's population—overtaking Hindus as the third-largest identifiable group.
- This growth is especially interesting given their demographic disadvantage (older age, lower fertility). It's largely fueled by **religious switching**, particularly former Christians abandoning their faith.

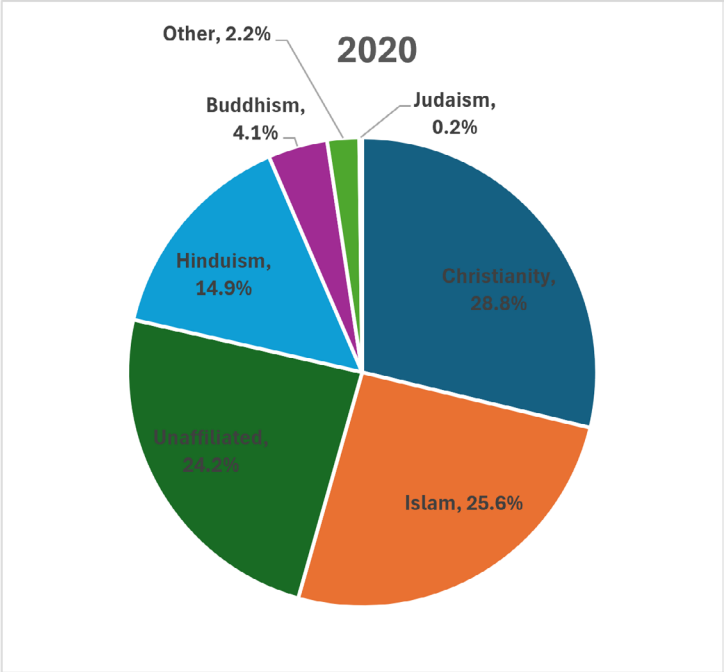
4. Other Religions: Mixed or Minimal Shifts

- **Hinduism** grew in absolute numbers (+126 million), staying steady at ~14.9% of the global population.
- **Buddhism** declined by 19 million, shrinking from 343 million to 324 million—a 4.1% global share.
- **Judaism** and "other religions" (like Baha'i, Sikhism, Jains) largely held their share (0.2% and ~2.2%, respectively).

5. Geography of Faith: Regional Realignments

- **Sub Saharan Africa:** Christian share up; now home to ~30.7% of the world's Christians, up from 24.8%.
- **Europe:** Christian share declined sharply through disaffiliation.
- **Middle East North Africa:** Jewish share rose as Israel's Jewish population grew from 5.8M to 6.8M.
- **Unaffiliated "nones"** saw major gains (≥5%) in 35 countries—including the U.S. (+13%), Australia (+17%), Chile and Uruguay.





6. Demography and Disaffiliation: What's Driving Change?

- **Multiplying young populations with higher fertility** have propelled the growth of Muslims (and Christians in Africa), while **aging, less religious regions** (Europe, N. America) have seen declining affiliation.
- **Disaffiliation and religious switching**, especially among Christians in the West, have contributed significantly to both the reduction in Christian share and rise in "nones," even among demographics where natural growth is limited.

Secular-Lens Insights for Readers

1. **Numbers don't tell the whole story:** Even groups that gain followers may shrink proportionally if global population growth outpaces them.
2. **Youth demographics are everything:** Fertility and age structure—not theology—are often the key levers of religious growth.
3. **Affiliation trends in the West reflect broader cultural shifts:** Rising secularism, ideological liberalization, scientific influence, and generational change all play a role.
4. **Geography is destiny… somewhat:** Regional population dynamics can dramatically reshape the global religious map without any mass conversion movement.
5. **"Nones" matter:** The surge in the non-affiliated challenges traditional faith institutions and signals complex, nuanced spiritual identities.

Conclusion

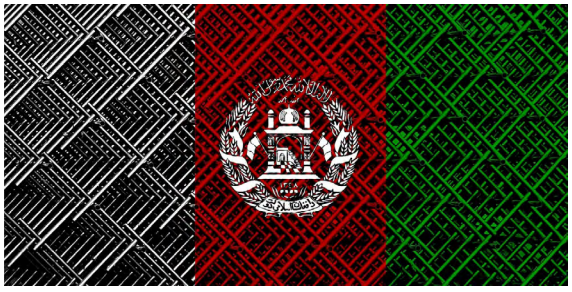
From 2010 to 2020, the global religious landscape experienced profound recalibrations: **Islam's demographic momentum, Christianity's relative retreat**, and a **dramatic rise in secular identities.** These trends reflect deeper demographic, generational, and cultural forces—shifting the world toward a more diverse, secular and religiously youthful tapestry. ◆

The Taliban:
A Handmaid's Tale on Steroids

When Margaret Atwood penned The Handmaid's Tale, she envisioned a dystopian theocracy that reduced women to silent vessels of reproduction, their rights stripped by religious dogma masquerading as law. What she described as speculative fiction has, in many ways, become a brutal reality in Afghanistan under Taliban rule — only more draconian, less fictional, and far more dangerous.

Since reclaiming power in August 2021, the Taliban has unleashed a sweeping campaign to erase women from public life. Girls beyond the age of 11 are banned from school. Women are forbidden from working in most government roles, traveling without a male guardian, or even entering parks or gyms. Female journalists have been silenced. Even basic medical care for women is often withheld unless administered by female practitioners — who themselves are increasingly barred from practicing.

The Taliban's decrees read like an unedited script from Atwood's Gilead. But this is not a television drama; it's an actual system of gender apartheid enforced with armed militias and medieval brutality. And unlike Atwood's story, which served as a warning, the Taliban's Afghanistan is enabled by a dangerous blend of religious extremism, international apathy, and a lack of accountability for crimes against humanity.



A GOVERNMENT OF GHOSTS AND GUNS

The Taliban has no democratic mandate. It rules by fear and faith — a narrow, patriarchal interpretation of Islam that criminalizes dissent and silences half the population. Their governing ideology is not simply conservative or "traditional"; it is a totalitarian regime that weaponizes religion to enforce obedience and punish modernity. Public floggings, disappearances of women's rights activists, and morality police enforcing mandatory dress codes are part of daily life. Even cell phones have become risky: images, texts, or posts critical of Taliban policies can land someone in prison — or worse.

THE GLOBAL DOUBLE STANDARD

The world has largely normalized this oppression through silence. While Western leaders speak loudly about human rights in theory, their actual policies toward the Taliban reflect a disturbing tolerance. Billions in frozen assets remain unused, and sanctions are often applied unevenly, punishing civilians more than warlords. Meanwhile, humanitarian aid is increasingly funneled through Taliban-controlled agencies, cementing their grip on society.

Compare this to the outcry over dystopian fiction. The Handmaid's Tale inspired mass protests, memes, and political movements in the West. Yet when real-life handmaids are being forced into cloistered submission in Kabul, the outrage is muted, the headlines fleeting.

RELIGION WITHOUT MERCY

At the heart of Taliban rule lies an ideology that fuses authoritarianism with fundamentalist Islam — a dangerous combination that resists change, shuns reason, and thrives on control. Women, in this framework, are not seen as citizens but as subjects: to be covered, confined, and controlled.

It is here that secularism finds its most urgent calling. A secular government — one that respects freedom of belief but is not ruled by it — is the antidote to religious totalitarianism. Afghanistan's descent is not just a tragedy for its people; it is a cautionary tale for the world. When religious orthodoxy becomes law, liberty dies — first for women, then for everyone.

THE ROAD TO RESISTANCE

Despite everything, Afghan women continue to resist. Underground schools are operating in defiance of the ban. Women's rights groups in exile document abuses and lobby international bodies for action. These acts of defiance are courageous — but they should not be solitary. Global support must be louder, more coordinated, and more consistent.

If the world truly believes in human rights, it must act as if Afghan women matter as much as fictional handmaids. The Taliban's rule is not merely unjust — it is an affront to every principle of modern civilization. And silence, history teaches us, is complicity. ◆

Secular Snapshots:
Short facts to spark big thoughts

INTERGALACTIC INSIGHT
To reach the nearest large galaxy, Andromeda, you'd need to travel at the speed of light—186,000 miles per second—for about **2.5 million years**. Fortunately, the Milky Way and Andromeda are already on a collision course… but not for another **4 billion years**.

HUMAN EVOLUTION
Modern Homo sapiens evolved around **300,000 years ago** in Africa. For most of our existence, we remained there. Around **60,000 years ago**, migration spread humans into Asia, followed by Europe, Australia, and finally the Americas around **12,000 years ago**.

SUSTAINABILITY
The modern concept of sustainability—meeting the needs of the present without compromising future generations—was introduced in **1987** by the UN's Brundtland Report (Our Common Future). It remains a guiding principle for global development.

TIPPING POINTS
Earth's climate has tipping points—thresholds beyond which changes become irreversible. At **1.5°C** of warming: coral reefs may collapse, ice sheets begin to melt, and thawing permafrost releases greenhouse gases. At **2.5°C**, Arctic sea ice vanishes, glaciers retreat, and monsoon systems destabilize.

We've already warmed the planet by approximately 1.1°C—and 2024 likely averaged over 1.5°C, setting a new record.

ENDANGERED SPECIES
As of 2024, the IUCN Red List assessed over **166,000** species, with more than **46,000** threatened with extinction—including 41% of amphibians, 27% of mammals, and 13% of birds. Biodiversity loss affects not only ecosystems—but also humanity's long-term survival.

THE PALE BLUE DOT
In 1990, Voyager 1 took a photo of Earth from **3.7 billion miles away**, showing our planet as a tiny speck in the vastness of space. This "Pale Blue Dot" inspired Carl Sagan's reflection: "That's here. That's home. That's us." A humbling reminder of our shared responsibility.

SECULAR BY THE NUMBERS
Globally, about **16%** of people were religiously unaffiliated in 2010. That number rose to nearly **24% by 2020**. In the U.S., secular individuals now make up **28%** of adults—part of a growing global trend toward reason and humanism.

WAR AND PEACE
Since 1945, the world has seen over **250 armed conflicts**. While religion is sometimes cited, root causes often involve power, resources, and ideology—underscoring the need for evidence-based diplomacy and cooperation grounded in shared human values. ◆

Spotlight on Bangladesh:
Resilience and Rhythm on the Bay of Bengal

Tucked along the northeastern edge of the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh is a country defined by water, resilience, and a vibrant cultural identity. From the rhythmic pulse of its poetry and music to the colorful traditions of its festivals and textiles, Bangladesh is a place where ancient heritage meets youthful energy. Though often overshadowed by its larger neighbors, Bangladesh is home to over 170 million people with a rich cultural heritage shaped by both struggle and creativity.

A LEGACY OF LANGUAGE AND LIBERATION

Language holds a unique place in Bangladeshi identity. The Bengali Language Movement of 1952—where students gave their lives demanding recognition of their mother tongue—sparked the nation's eventual independence in 1971. Today, Bangladesh celebrates International Mother Language Day every February 21st, a UNESCO-recognized tribute to linguistic and cultural rights.

The Bengali language, one of the most spoken in the world, is a wellspring of literature and expression. Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, whose poetry and music are deeply embedded in Bangladeshi culture, wrote the country's national anthem, as well as India's. Contemporary writers continue this literary tradition in both Bengali and English.

ART, MUSIC, AND THE SPIRIT OF THE PEOPLE

Music in Bangladesh blends devotional songs like Baul and Lalon with classical forms and modern genres. The Baul singers, often wandering minstrels, express secular and mystical themes through deeply personal and philosophical lyrics. Dhaka's contemporary music scene thrives with rock, pop, and fusion acts that bridge generations and traditions.

The visual arts are just as dynamic—folk painting styles like Nakshi Kantha (embroidered quilts) and rickshaw art adorn daily life. In recent years, Bangladesh has emerged on the international art stage through biennales, photography festivals, and a growing community of contemporary artists.

FESTIVALS AND CELEBRATIONS

In Bangladesh, the calendar is marked by lively festivals that bring people together regardless of religion. The Bengali New Year, Pohela Boishakh, is one of the most unifying cultural events—featuring colorful processions, folk music, and traditional foods. Other major events include the springtime Holi festival, Eid celebrations, and the Durga Puja of the Hindu community, all observed with vibrant participation.

These celebrations often embody the country's deep sense of solidarity, hospitality, and joy—even in the face of hardship. Community is central, and despite natural challenges such as monsoons and cyclones, Bangladeshis display extraordinary resilience and warmth.

TRADITIONAL FOODS AND CULINARY HERITAGE

Bangladeshi cuisine is a flavorful reflection of its geography, culture, and communal traditions. The national dish, hilsa (ilish) fish curry, prepared with mustard seeds and mustard oil, is a delicacy often served at weddings and festivals. Another favorite is bhuna khichuri—a fragrant

blend of rice and lentils—typically accompanied by beef curry, fried eggplant, and boiled eggs, especially during religious holidays.

Panta bhaat, or fermented rice soaked overnight in water, is a staple among rural families and has become a cultural symbol of Pohela Boishakh, the Bengali New Year. Street food like fuchka (crispy puris filled with spicy mashed potatoes and tangy water) captures the urban flavor of Dhaka, while desserts such as mishti doi (sweet yogurt) and roshogolla (syrup-soaked cheese balls) complete celebratory meals.

Food in Bangladesh is more than sustenance—it's a cultural expression, a marker of celebration, and a gesture of hospitality. Across regions and religions, shared meals are a cornerstone of community life.

Youth and Innovation

Over half of Bangladesh's population is under the age of 25, bringing energy to tech startups, education reform, and social activism. Dhaka's booming tech hubs and remote learning platforms are helping to bridge digital divides. NGOs and grassroots efforts often spearhead progress in women's rights, climate adaptation, and public health.

A SECULAR HEART WITH SPIRITUAL DIVERSITY

Bangladesh is officially a secular republic, with a Muslim majority and significant Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian minorities. While the country has seen challenges around religious extremism, it also hosts a long tradition of tolerance, folk spirituality, and interfaith co-existence. The secular ideals embedded in its founding documents still resonate with many of its citizens.

CONCLUSION

To know Bangladesh is to recognize a land of paradoxes—densely populated but deeply communal, historically challenged yet forward-looking. Its culture is a testament to the beauty of survival, adaptation, and creative expression. In music, language, textiles, food, and tradition, Bangladesh continues to write its own remarkable story. ◆

Think Forward

What kind of world do we want to leave behind?

One where every child can read.

One where forests stand tall.

One where truth, kindness, and reason are guiding lights.

Secular values aren't just critiques—they're blueprints.

Secular World
Magazine

The Voice of the Secular World is Growing

Thank you for reading!

Please consider donating to help support

secularworldmagazine.org