

More and more of the world's population is turning its back on god. **Graham Lawton** asks why, and what an atheist world would really look like

Losing our religion

ON AN unseasonably warm Sunday morning in London, I do something I haven't done for more than 30 years: get up and go to church. For an hour and a half, I sing, listen to readings, enjoy moments of quiet contemplation and throw a few coins into a collection. At the end there is tea and cake, and a warm feeling in what I guess must be my soul.

This is like hundreds of congregations taking place across the city this morning, but with one notable exception: there is no god.

Welcome to the Sunday Assembly, a "godless congregation" held every other week in Conway Hall, home of the world's oldest free-thought organisation. On the day I went there were at least 200 people in the hall; sometimes as many as 600 turn up.

Founded by comedians Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans in 2013, the Sunday Assembly aims to supply some of the uplifting features of a religious service without any of the supernatural stuff. Atheism is also off the agenda: the Assembly is simply about celebrating being alive. "Our mission is to help people live this one life as fully as possible," says Jones.

The Assembly's wider goal is "a godless congregation in every town, city and village that wants one". And many do: from a humble start in a deconsecrated church in London, there are now 28 active assemblies in the UK, Ireland, US and Australia. Jones now works full-time to fulfil the demand for more; he expects to have 100 by the end of this year.

The people I joined on that sunny Sunday

are a small part of the world's fastest-growing religious identity – the "nones". Comprising non-believers of all stripes, from convinced atheists like me to people who simply don't care about religion, they now number more than some major world religions.

In London, admittedly, they are nothing special. The UK is one of the least religious countries in the world, with around half of the population saying they don't belong to any religion.

But elsewhere, their rise is both rapid and remarkable. A decade ago, more than three-quarters of the world's population identified themselves as religious. Today, less than 60 per cent do, and in about a quarter of countries the nones are now a majority. Some of the biggest declines have been seen in countries where religion once seemed part of the furniture, such as Ireland. In 2005, 69 per cent of people there said they were religious; now only 47 per cent do (see diagram, page 33).

"We have a powerful secularisation trend worldwide," says Ara Norenzayan, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. "There are places where secularisation is making huge inroads: western and northern Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and China."

Even in the US – a deeply Christian country – the number of people expressing "no religious affiliation" has risen from 5 per cent in 1972 to 20 per cent today; among people under 30, that number is closer to a third.

That's not to say that they have all explicitly

rejected religion; only 13 per cent of people around the world say they are "committed" atheists. Even so, it means there are almost a billion atheists globally. Only Christianity and Islam can claim more adherents. And alongside them are another billion and a half who, for whatever reason, don't see themselves as religious.

A century ago, these trends would have seemed inevitable. The founders of sociology, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, expected scientific thinking to lead to the gradual erosion and eventual demise of religion. They saw the rise of humanist, rationalist and free thought organisations in western Europe as the start of a secular revolution.

Born to believe

It didn't quite work out that way. Although parts of western Europe, Australia, Canada and New Zealand did secularise after the second world war, the rest of the world remained resolutely god-fearing. Even the official atheism of the communist bloc didn't really take hold at grass-roots level.

If anything, at the end of the 20th century, religion seemed to be resurgent. Fundamentalist movements were gaining ground around the world; Islam was becoming a powerful political force; the US remained stubbornly religious. Increasingly, secular Europe looked like an outlier.

Now, though, secularisation is back in business. "The past 20 years has seen a precipitous decline in religiosity in all



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