

# Religious decline does not equal moral decline, says researcher

January 13 2016, by Kath Paddison

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Morality is not rooted in religion and religion matters less for moral values now than it did 30 years ago, says a University of Manchester researcher.

Dr Ingrid Storm's findings, based on her analysis of European survey data, found that religious decline does not equal moral decline.

According to Dr Storm, whose research is published in *Politics and Religion*, involvement in [religion](#) makes the most difference to morality in the most religious countries, and matters less for [moral values](#) now than it did in the 1980s.

"Religion has been in sharp decline in many European countries. Each new generation is less religious than the one before, so I was interested to find out if there is any reason to expect moral decline" she said.

Her study found that religion is only related to some moral values, and more so in religious countries and when people do not trust the state.

The respondents to questionnaires in 48 European countries over the period from 1981 to 2008 were asked how often they would justify various contentious behaviours, which she classified into two moral dimensions.

The first is about the individual going against tradition, for example it includes justifying abortion and homosexuality. The second moral

dimension is more about justifying behaviours that are against the law and could harm others, such as lying, cheating and stealing.

Dr Storm said: "More Europeans are now willing to justify behaviours that go against tradition, but attitudes have not changed when it comes to breaking the law or harming others.

"As religion has declined in Europe there has also been an increase in acceptance of personal autonomy on issues concerning sexuality and family. Each generation is more liberal on these issues than the one before. In contrast, we find no evidence that moral values have become more self-interested or anti-social."

The research also found that religious people are slightly less self-interested on average, but this can largely be accounted for by their age. This is because the average religious person is older than the average nonreligious person, and older people, whenever they were born, are less likely to justify self-interest values.

"Religious faith and worship also makes most difference to morality in the most religious countries. To be effective, religious norms need to be validated by a moral community of other religious friends and family and social and political institutions" concluded Dr Storm.

**More information:** Ingrid Storm. *Morality in Context: A Multilevel Analysis of the Relationship between Religion and Values in Europe, Politics and Religion* (2015). [DOI: 10.1017/S1755048315000899](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048315000899)

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