

# As Traditional Religion Declines, Superstition—Not Atheism—Is the Big Winner

Psychologist [Stuart Vyse](#) raised an interesting question recently at the [Skeptical Inquirer](#) website, “Why Are Millennials Turning to Astrology?” He also examines the related question of why [astrology](#) has a stronger appeal for liberals/progressives than it does for conservatives. He describes interest in astrology as “surging at the moment” – although my own records trace the surge at least back to the beginning of the millennium. It might be helpful to zip through some of the main points.

*How common is belief in astrology?* It’s hard to pinpoint. As Katy Heaney, who “kind of, sort of might, but not really” believes in it, [has noted](#) “Various polls [as of 2013] typically put the figure for true belief among Americans, Canadians, and the British at roughly 25 percent—a figure that would likely be much higher if only it incorporated those who kind of, sort of believe, as well as those who claim not to believe at all, but still read their horoscopes sometimes anyway, just to check, as a joke.”

*Traditional religion* [has been declining](#) for some time but superstition [has been a much bigger winner](#) than serious atheism has. That fact may help account for a 2003 British finding that older people [seemed less superstitious](#) than younger people. Rather than outgrowing superstitions, they probably did not acquire them in the first place.

*A belief in science does not preclude superstition.* A 2013 American poll [reported](#) a decline in belief in God along with a rise in belief in ghosts, witches—and Darwin [among the young](#). Darwin? Yes, interestingly, “sciencey” types who lack

scepticism about Darwin are often superstitious, despite the longstanding dismissal of occult beliefs from science. The 2003 study, done at a British science fair, found that [twenty-five](#) percent of the people who claimed a background in science also reported that they were very or somewhat superstitious.

*Liberal religion is much more friendly to superstition than conservative religion is*, as Vyse acknowledges. Baylor University [reported](#) a 2007 study showing that “conservative religious Americans are far less likely to believe in the occult and paranormal than are other Americans, with self-identified theological liberals and the irreligious far more likely than other Americans to believe. The researchers say this shows that it is not religion in general that suppresses such beliefs, but conservative religion.” *Discover* similarly [reported](#) in 2011 that “While religious conservatives are sceptical of astrology, as one would expect from orthodox conservative Christians, religious liberals are not.”

In line with these trends, popular online media, which generally lean to the liberal/progressive side of the scales, provide superstition as regular fare. In 2017, Dan Gainor [reported](#) at Newsbusters, “Top liberal sites like Vice, BuzzFeed, Bustle and even Cosmo push the occult on their young readers.” That same year, Canada’s national broadcaster, the CBC, featured a [good witch](#) who can guide us to the best free astrology websites.

So this is no transient hot weather story. It is a robust, longstanding phenomenon that liberals/progressives (especially millennials), including the “sciencey” ones, show more interest in occult ideas than others do. Is that counterintuitive, as many imply, or are we missing something?

Vyse offers an interesting take:

*... two factors are very likely combining to make astrology more appealing at the moment—liberalism and a*

*need for control. Astrology has a stronger appeal for liberals than conservatives, and in the United States, since November of 2016, the liberal world has been rocked. If ever there was a time when liberals might be looking for a compensatory sense of control, now is it.*

He is right about the liberal world being “rocked” by in 2016. A number of commentators at, for example, [CNN](#), [BBC](#), and [Newsweek](#), have noted that the fading, reliably liberal traditional media seemingly cannot just process the [unforeseen results and get on with things](#). 2020 is not far away, yet they hammer vainly on a locked glass door back in 2016.

So many media seem obsessed with the role that [fake news](#) or [the Russians](#) might have played in the results when demographics and party strategy [can account for the outcome](#). In other words, there has been a marked preference for occult explanations as opposed to transparent explanations of the 2016 election.

While I think Vyse is right about the immediate cause of a current surge, an underlying cause is also worth considering: Superstition feeds on itself. Like a drug habit, it at once satisfies and creates an appetite for more – in this case, an appetite for occult knowledge, as opposed to transparent knowledge. That appetite can affect a person’s perception of everyday reality.

In the case of liberals/progressives/millennials, transparent facts such as the decision of the Democratic Party to ignore [white working-class voters](#) in 2012 feel dreary compared to rumours of top-secret international machinations that “really” made the difference. The bad news is that such a worldview makes it difficult to diagnose problems and take corrective actions in everyday real time. Whatever happens in the 2018 mid-term elections, that attitude will not help them win.

So here’s the religion angle: It’s not science that holds

superstition in check in Western society. It's traditional Western religion, which insists on transparent truths (truths that all may know) and forbids attempts at occult, secret truths. Vyse notes that traditionally religious people would be much less likely to resort to the occult following an electoral disaster. In a universe that is in fact run by transparent rather than occult forces, that enables them to adjust to adverse events, whatever they may believe about currently cool science issues like Darwinism or climate change.

*Note:* At one time, astrology was [considered a science](#) because the heavenly bodies were thought to be so much greater than Earth that they must surely influence or govern events here. That was a reasonable, though incorrect, inference rather than a superstition. Even the great astronomer [Johannes Kepler](#) cast horoscopes on the side. Greater knowledge of the physics of our solar system later doomed astrology as a science.

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