

assess the view that
religion no longer
acts as a 'shared
universe of meaning'
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[Religion](#)



Some sociologists would agree with this statement that religion no longer acts as a shared universe of meaning for people today and they explain this using secularisation. The word secular means not sacred, not spiritual and not religious therefore secularisation refers to the process of becoming less religious. Woodhead and Heelas identified two versions the disappearance thesis which states that modernity is bringing about the death of religion, the significance of religion is declining for both society and the individual and secondly the differentiation thesis which states religion is declining in social significance however is still significant in some people's private lives and always will be. However in the House of Lords there are still bishops and archbishops, so a lot of political influence, as they pass and accept laws that potentially changes our world. Bruce (2002) states that the social significance of religion is declining, it no longer acts as a shared universe of meaning for people because it is being replaced with science and other ideologies. He backs up his work by looking at the power and prestige of religious institutions and how what was once the most important building, the church, can now be seen in ruins in being put to secular use for example in Bournemouth, Dorset, UK one church has been turned into a nightclub named ' Halo' and another has been turned into a Tesco Express.

Lyotard (1984) who is a postmodernist states that a postmodern society is characterised by a loss of confidence in metanarratives - the big stories or grand explanations provided by science, religion and politics. This is because their claim to the truth has been questioned as there is now more than one answer and as a result of this traditional institutional religion has been undermined. Bauman goes further to say that this produces a ' crisis of

meaning' which traditional religions cannot deal with this crisis which explains their decline. However he argues that although there has been a decline in traditional religions there has been an increase in new religions or new expressions of religiosity which restore meaning. However they are very different from the old religions and more based around individuals to fit their particular identities, this means they can pick and choose between different ones and leave once they offer them no more, Giddens calls this a 'pick and mix mentality'.

However if you look at religion in terms of fundamentalists, who are rapidly on the increase, then this would suggest religion does act as a shared universe of meaning as it has brought them together as a collective group who all share the same meanings and socialise their children with the same values. Religion for fundamentalists brings a lot of meaning to and plays a large role in their life. Functionalist's sociologists would also disagree with the view that religion no longer acts as a 'shared universe of meaning' for people today as they believe that religion is a necessity to a smooth running society. Emile Durkheim, a founding father of sociology, looked at Australian aborigines in order to understand what religion meant for people, he found that they had 'sacred' items which they worshipped and this gave them group solidarity and created a collective conscience. However this study is seen to be outdated therefore it cannot be compared and generalised for people today and it doesn't look at western societies which Bruce says are the 'secular west'.

Bellah, who is a neo-functionalist, however modernises Durkheim and other functionalists views, he looks at a civil religion known as 'Americanism' he found that religion did act as a 'shared universe of meaning'. He found that in America most of the people had American flags in their front garden, during school the children did the 'pledge of allegiance' and also on every dollar bill it says 'in God we trust'. Because they all follow or have these things it creates group solidarity and a collective conscience. In conclusion, there are many reasons for the decline of religion such as science and other things being more important however some sociologists would argue that this small decline has created a fundamental response and people are stripping their lives back to the basics of religion, taking the word of their God literally.