

# The merits of theories of secularisation with regard to religion essay



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Functionalist sociologists have claimed that religion has always been important in our society and that it continues to be. It is argued that religion has only ever been important to a relatively small number of people in society. While it is clear that religious practices and institutional organisation have changed, the question of whether this demonstrates that secularisation has taken place is debatable.

This essay critically evaluates the claim that secularisation is occurring in modern Britain. The claim derives from a broadly social constructionist position, namely one that views secularisation as being the product of industrial revolution and growth of scientific knowledge. Many sociologists have agreed that change in society will lead to changes in religion.

Furthermore, many have claimed that social change would lead to the weakening or even disappearance of religion.

The essay begins by outlining the involvement of religious institutions in the organisation and day-to-day running of society, to the extent to which religious organisations are able to exert influence and control over the running of the society in which they exist. It then reviews recent research on religious practice to explore the extent to which people involve themselves in Church membership, attendance and questions the reliability and validity of statistics relating to religious practice in Britain. The essay then goes on to investigate the level of individual consciousness, the extent to which people believe in concepts such as God.

This level may be significant in terms of secularisation, since religious activity may show relative decline in terms of practice and organisation,

however it may still exert a powerful influence over people's lives in terms of personal beliefs. In exploring these issues, the essay endorses a broadly social constructionist standpoint on secular Britain, although it also seeks to highlight a number of potential limitations to this position, particularly as these relate to defining and measuring religion and secularisation.

Many sociologists have tried to define secularisation, Bryan Wilson (*Religion in Secular Society*, 1966), describes secularisation as, "The process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose their social significance". While Peter Berger (*The Social Reality of Religion*, 1969) argues that it is "The process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols". For the purpose of this essay will be using Wilson's definition on secularisation and will be concentrating on changes in participation and practices between pre-industrial and Britain today.

On a commonsense level of perception, it is an inevitable conclusion that our society is less religious now than in the past, the evidence of its decline is apparently all around us. Fewer people are getting married now than in the past and Christian events such as Christmas and Easter do not embody a religious meaning anymore, for most people it is an excuse to enjoying a break from work. The role and the influence of the Church have faced significant changes over time. Previously, the Church was able to define and control the way in which people viewed the world.

It was able to propagate a clear, firmly controlled explanation of social life in a society that lacked mass education and mass communications. The Church

leaders were actively involved in all economic, political, military and cultural aspects of life, creating Britain as a political dictatorship organised around religious values. However this role has changed in modern Britain. With the growth of political democracy in the 20th century, the role of the Church has changed as the basis of its power has been eroded by the development of political parties.

The growth of scientific ideologies has meant that the Church no longer has a monopoly of knowledge, fatally weakened one of their greatest strengths, the ability to control how people see and think about the world. Although its specialist insights into “ religious questions” such as the meaning of life; may afford religion some influence in society. However the Church no longer has a judicial function, the ability to judge and punish deviants and politically has been relegated to the role of a pressure group.

Bryan Wilson (Religion in Secular Society, 1966) argues the “ loss of functions” by the Church can be seen as disengagement from the wider society as evidence of secularisation. While David Martin see this as being concerned with “ the ecclesiastical institution, and specifically with any decline in its power, wealth, influence, range of control and prestige. ” The Church as an institution has lost many of its former functions it performed in pre-industrial societies, such as education and social welfare, making it become a social institution.

Since the 1944 Education Act, the government has made Christian act of worship mandatory as part of a child’s education. State school no longer required by law to hold a daily act of collective worship, refer to the

appendix for Guardian news story. This therefore might explain a fall in religious membership and Church attendance, as people no longer use the Church to satisfy non-religious needs. However, many sociologists have claimed that the role of religion has been transformed in modern societies, rather than necessarily diminished.

Talcott Parsons (*Social Structure and Personality*, 1970) argues that evolution of society involves a process of structural differentiation, where various parts of the social system become more specialised and religious values become increasingly generalized, therefore performing fewer functions. This argument suggests that, while the Church has clearly lost some of its formal functions, it has become stronger as it has been forced to concentrate with religious matters.

Now the specialised role of religious institutions exerts influence through the norms and values they put forward, rather than through direct involvement in the country. Therefore for Parsons the role of the Church is transformed in modern society; it performs a different role, but one that is no less important. However Steve Bruce (*Religion in Modern Britain*, 1985) referred to this process as 'social differentiation'. He argues that the Church used to provide values and morals to individuals but now society is more individualistic and this is no longer the case.

Therefore religion and religious morals are becoming less important in modern society. From a different perspective, Berger (*The Social Reality of Religion*, 1969) has argued that, in pre-industrial societies, religion forms is the only plausible explanation for social life. However, when scientific and

rationalist ideologies was developed like, the Theory of Evolution, the Church's role as only prophet of the world will inevitably decline and result in political decline. Therefore religious frameworks lose their relevance, their plausibility and consequently their influence.

Berger sees this as evidence of a shift in the role for religious institutions but not evidence of secularisation. Therefore the role of religion has shifted from focusing on explaining everyday meaning to explaining deeper meaning such as life and death. In terms of the societal level of religious organisation, the evidence presented both for and against the concept of secularisation is inconclusive. The cultural level focuses on religious institutions themselves, the extent to which people practice their religious beliefs.

There are a number of ways in which we can measure the concept of religious practice, such as Church attendance, membership and ceremonies like marriages and baptisms. Although marriage may be a helpful indicator of religious attachment however it might not be particularly valid method of measuring secularisation. As the Church of England does not allow divorcees to marry in Churches, also social customs and conventions could influence the marriage rate, rather than strong religious belief and commitments.

This view is also associated with the number of children being baptised. Membership levels of Christian organisations in Britain are one of the strongest indicators of religious commitment. However, the methodology in which statistics are collected needs to be considered, Christian denominations retain an electoral roll of their members entitle to vote on decision regarding

the Church. While the Roman Catholic Church counts all those who attend mass as members.

The percentage of the adult population as members of Churches has declined from 30% – 12%. While the Church of England has seen its membership decline from 13.5% of the adult population to 4% of that population, which is relatively small in terms of the population as a whole. However there has been a slight increase in Roman Catholic membership. This could be due to the unreliable method in which it is measured or because the Catholic Church employs a stricter control over members than non-Catholic Christian Churches.

This concludes that membership of religious organisations has and is facing a progressive decline, this could be due to older members dieing and not being replaced. Using the English Church Census to monitor Church attendances over the past 150 years there has been a decline in attendance over this period from a high of 50% of the adult population in the 1850's to a low of 10% in 1989. Furthermore, in the past 20 years we can notice that there has been a stable decline in Church attendances in general. In 2000 only 7.5% of British adults attend Sunday Church, a decline of 22% since 1990.

However the overall decline in religious practice seems to have been most noticeable amongst the larger Churches (Anglican and Roman Catholic), where attendance seems to have declined consistently. Anglicans have twice as many priests and four times more Churches, which may seem why Anglican Churches seem emptier than Catholic ones. Amongst smaller

denominations the picture is patchier, with some showing a decline but others showing an increase. However most denominations are statistical small that any small alterations tend to transform into large percentage increase and also the technique of counting the attendance is unreliable.

The statistical evidence does indicator that only a small proportion of people in today's society actively practice religion in term of membership and attendance, but there is also little evidence to suggest that religious practice in the past was significantly greater if the social factors are exclude that contributed to the apparently large number of people practising religion in the past. Brierley's argues that the statistics suggest that there has been a general increase in religious participation amongst other religions over the past 25 years as measured by numbers of those attending services.

There has been a 16% increase in the number of active members and an increase of 12% in the number of building and group within the UK. This signifies that religion amongst other domains is progressively rising. 1 This is the result of immigrants into Britain, which has changed the religious climate of modern Britain, increasing the religious diversity. Immigrants have brought their own religious practices. These practices tend to be higher; this could be due to immigrates want to maintain some form of common identity and values, rather than it being an indication of religiosity.

Callum G. Brown (The death of Christian Britain, 2001) sees 'ethic defence' as an important role in today society. Also as first generation immigrants settle and start families, their numbers increase. This then increases the numbers of original immigrant groups; therefore there are more people in



the religious participation age group, rather than an increase in religious practice. Apart from non-Christian denominations, there has been a development and increase in participation of sects and cults over the past 25 years. However sects and cults are numerically small that any slight changes tend to translate into large percentage fluctuations.

The method of counting participation is difficult to measure, this making it highly unreliable to measure and count. In spite of this development can be viewed, as evidence of secularisation as members now have little commitment therefor there has been a weakening of the role of religion in institutions. However sects are actively seeking new members while established are not. Apart from the growth of sects and cults there has a significant development in New Religious Movements (NRM's), which have led to increased popularity in activities such as astrology, yoga, tarot reading and meditation.

Andrew Greeley (The Persistence of Religion, 1973) believes the growth of new religious movement represent “resacralisation”. An anti-secularisation viewpoint sees religious participation in the past as being largely overestimated. Martin (Sociology of English Religion, 1967), questions the reliability and validity of religious statistics. He views the demographic content as being not valid and questions the accuracy in the method of collections. He believes people's religious belief cannot be measured from statistics about religious practice.

People may be religious; however choose to express their belief in different method. This viewpoint is shared with Demaroth and Hammond (Religion in

Social Context, 1969) “ We should avoid the quick assumption that Church members are always highly religious in their personal beliefs and activities, or that Church non-members are otherwise non-religious”. Martin argued that some people attended Church for social motive, rather than holding strong religious belief.

This resulted in Church attendance numbers being inflated, this questions whether or not it is valid to interpret declining attendances as evidence of a gradual loss of religious faith in society. Finally we are going to see whether secularisation is occurring within individual beliefs. However there is a problem measuring religious belief, as it produces a subjective response. The 2001 British census indicates 72% of the population described themselves as being Christian and 23% of the population have no religion or didn't state it.

However the 390, 000 people who responded to the Internet campaign and put their religion as `Jedi Knight' distorted the figures. From these results the majority of Britons today see themselves as Christian however opinion poll evidence on February 2004 seems to suggest that only 67% Britons believe in a god or a higher power, while 10% of people never believed in god. From these statistics only 27% of people regularly pray and 21% regularly attend organised religious service. This suggests that the majority of people retain religious beliefs, but only small proportions of people are institutionally active within an ecclesial setting.

Grace Davie (Religion in Britain Since 1945, 1994) has described this phenomenon as `believing without belonging'. There has been a movement

away from organised group identity to more of individualistic form of engaging spirituality; religious media programs such as Songs of praise remain popular. She notes that opinion poll data reveal that younger generations are less religious than older ones, “ Not only have young people left our Churches, they are, it seems, rejecting even nominal belief”. If this still continues when they get older, this could evidence for secularisation.

While the existence of fundamentalist in Britain, the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland provides an argument that Britain still has very strong religious belief. Religious fundamentalisms have risen mainly in responds to globalization to defend their traditional beliefs, as globalization demands rational reasons. Religious belief persist in some way in modern society, they provide a general moral framework for behavior. They have become separated from their religious origins, such that there is no longer a clear connection between moral values such as “ Thou shalt not kill” and a necessary belief in god.

This therefore allows us take on these value without having to buy-into the institutions. However the ethics and morals have to adapt to the changes in modern society. A recent news article published in the Guardian Newspaper “ Church in push for new priests to fight numbers crisis, May 2004”, highlights the issue where the Catholic Church is considering relaxing the rules concerning celibacy of priests. In today society no specific ideology dominates society while in the past, religious ideologies dominated as they could provide an explanation and meaning about the world due to the lack of scientific ideologies development.

Although, when science develops it started to present a challenge to some forms of explanation and, in many respects it succeed over religious explanations. However, some things remain inexplicable by science; life after death. Since these are questions that need to be answered, the most plausible explanations we have are provided by religious ideologies. Therefore scientific ideologies became powerful in some areas, while religious ideologies remain powerful in other areas.

Many sociologist believe that we are witnesses a process of desacrilisation, where the human consciousness has become secularised by the replacement of religion with science. Berger (1969: 117) sees that the world no longer believes in the supernatural, but in rationality. He claimed that modern society is characterised by ' disenchantment' of the world. However postmodernism theory suggests that there is a movement away from scientific rationality. Bruce (Religion in Modern Britain, 1985) argues that religion pluralism occurs due to a number of reasons, all in which have ' undermined the communal base to religious orthodoxy'.

The incorporate of Scotland and Ireland to England brought different religious traditions, while immigration has lead to a plurality of religious group. Wilson (Religion in Secular Society, 1966) argued that religion pluralism has meant that religion ' has lost force as an integrative influence'. Industrialisation reduced the contract between social classes and helped create new, pre-dominantly working class form of Christianity such as Methodism. Social fragmentation of society occurred due to modernisation and industrialisation creating plurality of cultural and religious group.

Therefore no longer could a single religion could be support without causing conflict. The plurality of religion reminds individuals that their beliefs are a personal preference, a matter of choice, and no longer part of their membership of society. Religion is now an individual pursuit for finding meaning rather than a collective act of worship. Bruce, believe that religious pluralism has created ‘ new voluntarism’, where religious beliefs become a matter of choice for the individual to discover their ultimate meaning.

Therefore the importance of religion has not decline but its form of manifestation has changed. Allowing people today their own greater freedom than ever before to search for and create their own ultimate meanings.

Wilson argues that pluralism has created a number of religions in society each with its own version of the ‘ truth’ resulting in religious values no-longer being community values. Religion no longer provides and reinforces moral values to the whole society therefore it no longer performs its traditional function of promoting social solidarity.

Berger (*The Sacred Canopy*, 1967) and Thomas Luckmann (*Life-World and Social Realities*, 1969) make similar argument. Instead of one religious institution with a single, unchallenged view of the supernatural, there are now many with diverge views. Scientific frameworks have challenged religious ideological structure, but also religious pluralism has developed, no longer allowing the Church to monopoly religion. Berger (1967: 133-138, 151-153) views evidence for secularisation as inconclusive because religion has changed in form. He sees religion as an ideology and believes it is “ alive and well”.

He argues that modern society religion has undergone privatisation; matter of individual choice and become pluralistic, making religion a voluntary activity. Therefore, religious institutions not only have to compete with each other but other ideologies for believers. As Berger argues “ Religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities”. Whilst Ian Thompson (Religion, 1986) puts it: “ The religious views which at one time could be imposed now have to be marketed and sold to potential customers”.

In the last 30 years ecumenical movement has emerged to reverse the trends towards religious pluralism. However Wilson (Religion in Secular Society, 1966) interprets the ecumenical movement as further evidence of secularisation. He argues that ‘ Organisation amalgamate when they are weak rather than when they are strong, since alliance means compromise and amendments of commitment’. In conclusion there is no clear conclusive evidence to suggest modern Britain has been or becoming secularised, even after examining the three main indicators.

While recent 2001 census figures suggest Britain is still largely religious. The statistical evidence does illustrate that only a small percentage of people in society actively practice religion but there is also little evidence to suggest that religious practice in the past was significantly higher, if the social factors that aided to the high number of people practising religion in the past are excluded. However there has been a movement away from traditional form practising to more of a privatization, a matter of individual choice, which has helped the growth of the New Age Movement.

New Religious Movements influence power is not particularly significant, but represent a form of religious vitality. This has resulted in the continuous decline in social importance. While religious pluralism has created new voluntarism. The Church as an institution has lost many of its former functions it performed in pre-industrial societies. Wilson sees it as disengagement from the wider society as evidence as secularisation. While Parson argues that society as undergone structural differentiation, making it more specialized and performing fewer functions.

The role of the Church has transformed in modern society; it performs a different role, but one that is no less important. While scientific ideology has succeeded over religion in some areas, religious values, ideas and norms still present people with moral guidelines by which to live. Therefore we may be seeing a reversal of ideological, rather than a replacement. Scientific and religious ideology have always coexisted however I modern society scientific ideological more plausible forms of explanation of life then in the past.

Therefore the role of religion has shifted from a focus of explaining everyday meaning, which has been replaced by scientific ideology to explaining deeper meaning such as life and death. For variety of reason especially methodological it does not appear that the theory can be adequately tested. This is due to sociologists using the term ' secularisation' in many different ways. This has led to confusion as writers discussing the process of secularisation are often arguing about different things.