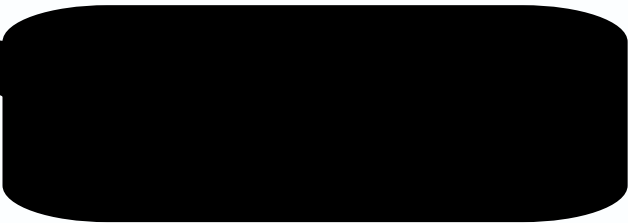
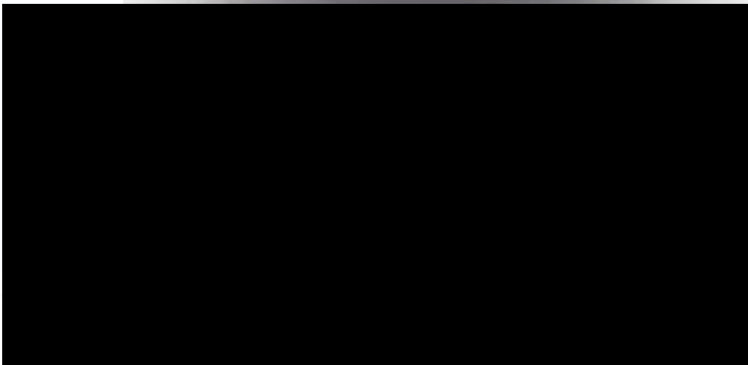
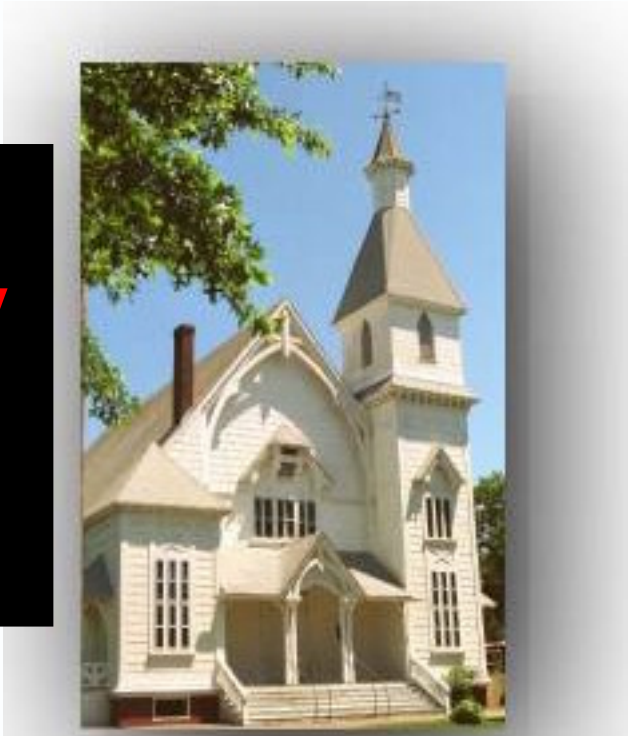


# A-Level Sociology

## The Sociology of Religion



# The Story So Far...



Having examined various aspects of religion (definitions, organisations, theories...) we can now turn to look at evidence for and against the **decline** of religion.

Or, to put it another way,

## “Secularisation...”



As with most things sociological, we need to begin by defining what we mean by two concepts:

### 1. Secular

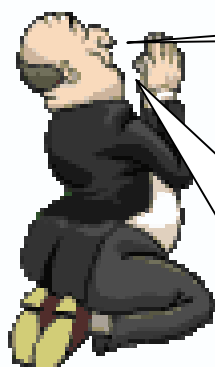
The term “secular” can be used to refer to anything that is “not religious” – in other words, if something is secular it is the opposite of religious.

### 2. Secularisation

“Secularisation”, in simple terms, refers to the idea that society and social behaviour is becoming increasingly less influenced by religious ideas and practices. In other words, religion and religious ideas are becoming increasingly less important to people

If you want to put this in more-sociological terms...

...this is how a couple of sociologists have defined secularisation:



**Bryan Wilson** ("Religion in Secular Society", 1966), refers to **secularisation** as:

"The process whereby **religious thinking, practices** and **institutions** lose their social significance".

**Peter Berger** ("The Social Reality of Religion", 1969) argues that **secularisation** is:

"The process by which sectors of **society** and **culture** are **removed** from the **domination** of **religious institutions** and **symbols**."



**Secularisation**, therefore, is a **process** whereby "**religious activity**" in any society progressively **declines** over time.



However, while it's one thing to **describe** something like "secularisation", it's quite another thing to be able to **demonstrate** that what we've **described** is actually **happening** in our society...

**In other words...**

How can sociologists **operationalise** the concept of secularisation?



Or, in simple terms, how can we **measure** the concept of secularisation so we can **test** whether or not it is occurring?



Any attempt to **test** the idea of a decline in religious activity ("secularisation") must involve **two basic ideas**:

**Firstly**, it must be **comparative**.

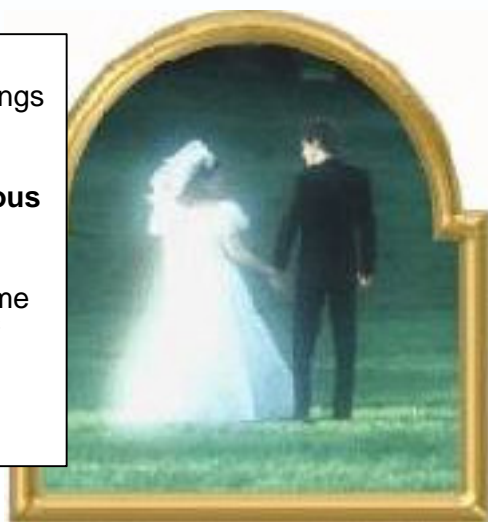
That is, if we, as a society, are "less religious" now, it follows that we must have been "more religious" in the past. We need, therefore, to examine religious activity in both the past and the present.

**Secondly**, since it's not possible, **methodologically**, to **directly measure** "secularisation", we have to develop a set of **indicators** by which we **can** measure religious activity.

These "indicators" can, of course, be **anything** we choose.



Normally, however, such **indicators** tend to be things like **attendance at religious services, membership of a religious organisation, time devoted to religious activities** or even, in some instances, the number of people **marrying in Church...**



Which, as we'll see, is one reason why sociologists have found it **difficult to agree** about the **relative importance** of **different indicators**.

However, since we need to think about how to **measure** the concept of secularisation, it might be useful to examine what **Bryan Wilson** ("Religion in Secular Society", 1966) suggests are **three distinctive levels of analysis** it is necessary to consider:

### 1. Religious practice

This is the **cultural level of analysis** that involves thinking about the extent to which people involve themselves in Church **membership, attendance at religious services** and so forth.

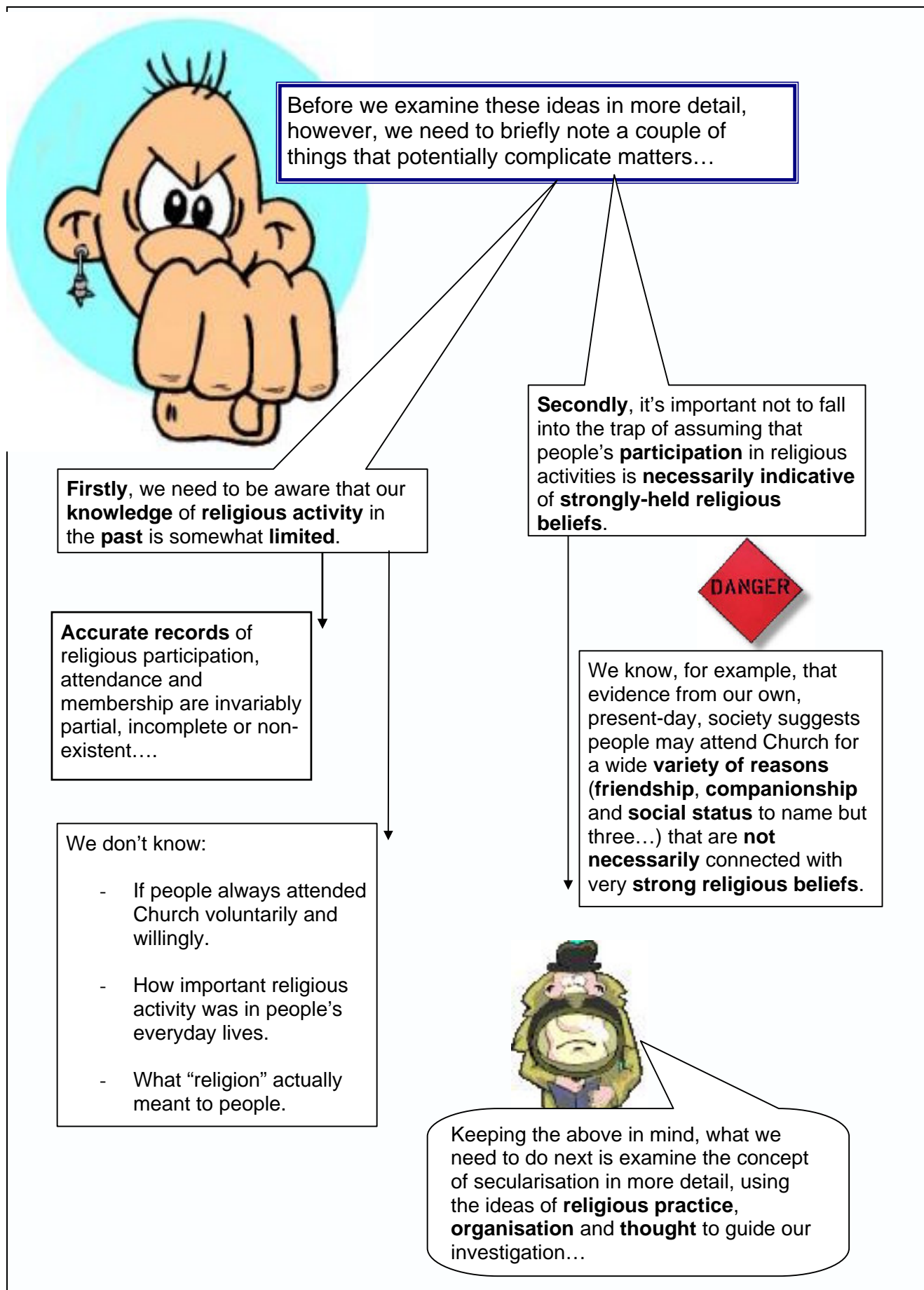


### 2. Religious organisation

The level of **society as a whole** and involves thinking about the extent to which **religious organisations** (such as an **Established Church**, for example), are **actively involved** in the day-to-day **secular order** - in short, the extent to which religious organisations are able to exert **influence** and **control** over the running of the society in which they exist.

### 3. Religious thought

This is the level of **individual consciousness** and it involves thinking about the extent to which people **believe** in ideas like **God, good and evil, sin** and so forth. This may be significant in terms of **secularisation** since **religious activity**, while possibly showing a **relative decline** in terms of **practice** and **organisation**, may still exert a powerful influence over people's lives in terms of their **personal beliefs**.



**Religious Organisation...**

In basic terms, we need to examine the involvement of **religious institutions** in the organisation and day-to-day running of society. This involves an **historical comparison** of the relationship between **religious institutions** and the **State**.



In basic terms, the question here is whether or not **religious institutions** in the **past** were more involved in the **political** and **economic governance** of society than they are **now**?



In this respect, there are **two basic questions** we can use to guide our analysis:

**Firstly**, has there been a significant **change** in the **historical role** and **influence** of religion?

**Secondly**, how can we **interpret** the evidence we uncover, in relation to the concept of secularisation?

Can we **assume**, for example, that **evidence** of a **decline** in the organisational **influence** of religion can be taken as **evidence for secularisation**?

Hmmmm...

Now's probably a good time to have a look at the evidence provided by those who are on the "**pro-secularisation**" side of the argument.

And, for the sake of balance (not to mention **evaluation** – so I won't), we can follow this with the "**anti-secularisation**" interpretation.

Am I good to you, or what?



In **Feudal Britain** (roughly pre-17<sup>th</sup> century) the **Church**:

1. **Monopolised knowledge**. That is, religious officials were able to define and control the way people viewed the **social** and **natural** world. In a society that **lacked mass education and mass communications**, the Church was able to propagate a clear, tightly-controlled, interpretation of social reality.

2. Had a **close relationship** with the **State** and **secular powers**. Church leaders were **actively involved** in all aspects of government. In this respect, Feudal Britain can be characterised as a **political dictatorship** organised around **religious principles**.



3. Exercised powerful **social controls** over the individual (such as **confession**, **excommunication** and so forth).

4. Generally involved itself in all **economic, political, military** and **cultural** (ideological) spheres of life...

By contrast, when we look at **modern Britain**, the picture we get is very different...

1. The Church is **no-longer** closely associated with the State and government. With the growth of political democracy in the 20th century, the role of the Church has changed; its power has been eroded by the development of political parties, professional politicians responsible to an electorate and so forth.

2. The growth of **scientific ideologies** means the Church **no-longer** has a **monopoly of knowledge**. It's **no-longer** able to propagate and sustain a unique, unified and, above all, plausible, ideology.



3. "The Church" is **no-longer** a **monolithic organisation**, able to control how people see and think about the social and natural world. One of the defining features of **modern religion** is its **fragmentation** into a number of much smaller, **less politically influential**, organisations.

4. Although its **specialist insights** into "religious questions" (like "the meaning of life") gives religion some **moral influence** in society, , religious institutions appear to have progressively lost many of their former social functions. The Church, for example, **no-longer** has an **educational function**, just as it long-ago **lost its judicial function** (the ability to judge and punish deviants, for example). **Politically**, the Church has been relegated to the role of a **pressure group** - occasionally consulted by governments in relation to matters that are seen to be strictly religious, but no-longer at the heart of government.





The **anti-secularisation response** to the above can be summarised in a couple of ways.

The first response argues that the **structural decline** of religion has been **overstated**, mainly because the **historical evidence** for such decline has itself been **overstated**. For example:

Were religious organisations in the **past** really able to maintain a strong grip (stranglehold?) on the lives of **all** individuals in a society?

Religious organisations, in modern society, **do** have a role to play in the organisation of apparently secular affairs. However, the **crucial point** here is that it is very **different** to their role in the past.

Basically, the anti-secularisation argument doesn't dispute the fact that the relationship between religious organisations, government and society may be very different in present-day society to the relationship that existed in the past. There clearly has, for example, been a "**religious disengagement from secular affairs**" over the past few hundred years...

However, the anti-secularisation argument does question the extent to which this is evidence of **secularisation**, as opposed to evidence of a **transformation in the role** played by the Church in modern societies



Is it possible, for example, for the **role** of the Church to **change** (be **transformed**) without it **necessarily** losing its influence in relation to **religious behaviour / beliefs**?

The **main theme** here is whether or not it's possible to identify a "**golden age**" of religious practice and belief that can be contrasted with a modern day lack of practice and belief. This argument begs two questions:



1. Did religious institutions dominate society in the past in the way secularisation theorists claim?

2. Are religious institutions in modern societies devoid of cultural significance?



It's difficult to actually identify specific times when the Church could be said to have **wholly dominated** the affairs of a society.

Anti-secularisation theorists have **questioned** the extent to which religion plays a **periphery role** (that is, one that exists on the **political margins** of secular society - the role of a **pressure group**) in modern society.

For **example, Medieval Britain** (and Europe) had a **Catholic Church** that tried to dominate all aspects of the world (both spiritual and secular), yet there's little evidence that its impact on the daily life of the ordinary **peasant** was very great. Catholicism had most impact on the **aristocracy** since it provided ideological justifications for their moral worth and superiority - things that to the average peasant were probably less important than where the next meal was going to come from...).

We could point, for example, to the role of the Church of England as the Established Church, with the monarch as both Head of State and Head of the Church. Additionally, the Church is well-represented in the House of Lords (with places in that assembly reserved for the highest members of the Protestant Church).

**Victorian Britain** is also sometimes seen as a candidate for a religious "**golden age**" when society was suffused with a **religious morality**. Once again, however, **historical analysis** tends to reveal a society that paid lip-service to religious moralities while tolerating many of the things that, from our modern vantage point, appear to be grossly "unchristian" (**child prostitution, lack of political representation, the exploitation of child-labour, slavery, military adventurism and Imperialism...**).

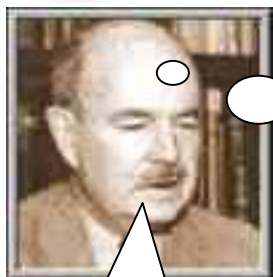


We can also note that Church leaders are consulted (at least by the media) on questions of **faith** and **morality** that directly affect many of our secular institutions. In recent years, for example, government has been persuaded to make a predominantly Christian act of worship a compulsory part of a child's education. **Princess Anne**, when she chose to remarry following her divorce from her first husband chose to do so in Scotland, rather than England, in order, one presumes, to prevent a religious and Constitutional controversy in the Church of England.

**Sociologically**, there are broad levels of **agreement** that **modern religious organisations** have **disengaged** in some way from their **overtly political role** in the **past**. However, as you might expect, such broad agreement rapidly gives way to specific **disagreement** about the **meaning** and **significance** of this disengagement...



**Talcott Parsons** ("Social Structure and Personality", 1970), for example, has argued that, while **religious institutions no-longer** have a **direct influence** over things like education and politics, their **indirect influence** is still **relatively strong** (in terms of such things as **norms, values** and **moral guidelines**).



Although the Church has lost some functions, this actually **strengthens** the place of religion in people's lives because it has had to become more concerned with religious matters than at any time in the past.

Because the Church was so intimately involved in political life, it neglected its religious role. **Parsons** argues that modern religious institutions, having been stripped of their political function, are forced to address themselves to spiritual matters.

The **Church** as an **institution** becomes more **specialised** in its functions; its role becomes **less political** and more **ideological** - rather than through direct involvement in the affairs of the State, religious institutions exert influence through the norms and values they put forward.

Thus, for Parsons the role of the Church is **transformed** in modern society; it performs a **different role**, but one that is no less important.



**Aldous Huxley** ("The Devils of Loudun", 1952) argues that the Medieval Church does not seem to have been well-respected amongst "ordinary people", mainly because of its **corruption, greed, cruelty** and **sexual misconduct**...

## On the other hand...

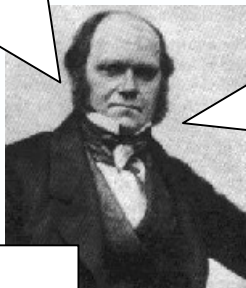


If the **ideological role** of the Church is one of “**organising knowledge**” about the world, it’s evident this role must be **eroded** by the development of **scientific ideas** that **challenge** religious explanations of the natural and social worlds...

From a different perspective, **Peter Berger** has argued that, as levels of **knowledge** and **understanding** develop in any society, a “natural” or “expected” consequence will be a **decline** in the **organisational role** of religious institutions.



In the **past**, people’s desire for understanding is fed by the only form of **plausible explanation** that exists - **religion**.



However, once scientific ideas develop (for example, **Darwin’s Theory of Evolution**), the Church’s role as **sole interpreter** of the world **declines** - and with this will come **political decline**. Religious explanations lose their **relevance**, their **plausibility** and their **influence**...

**Berger** sees this process **not** as evidence for **secularisation**, but merely evidence of a **changing role** for religious institutions. While **scientific ideas** have triumphed over religion in some areas, religious values, ideas, norms and so forth still provide people with moral guidelines by which to live their lives.



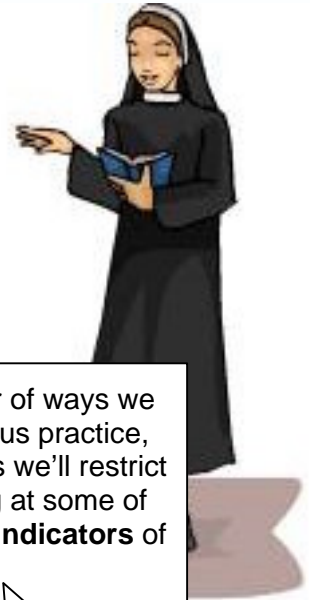
We may simply be witnessing a “**reversal of ideological dominance**” rather than a replacement of one by the other. Religious and scientific ideas may always have **coexisted** - the difference, in **modern societies**, is that **scientific ideas** are more **plausible** in **some areas** of life than in the past.

Thus, the **role of religion** may have **shifted** from a focus on the explanation of everyday meanings (something that is taken over by scientific explanations) to an **explanation** of “**deeper**” meanings – such as those of **life** and, most importantly, **death**...

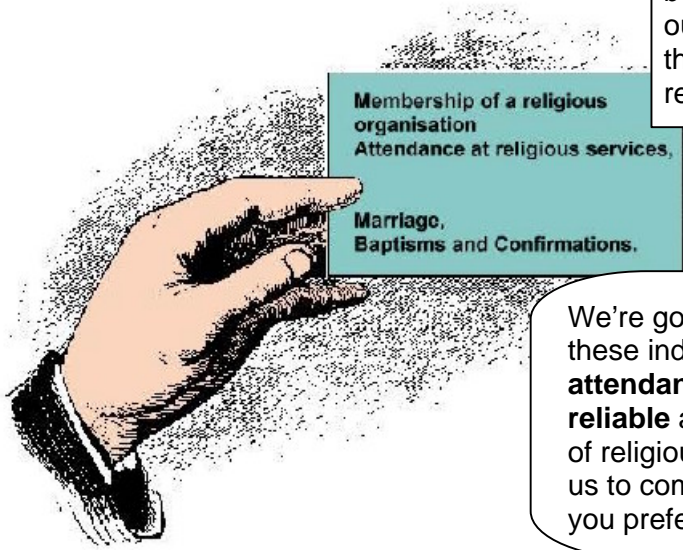


Religious Practice...

In this section we can consider secularisation by focusing on **religious institutions** themselves, rather than their relationship to other institutions in society. This involves testing levels of **religious attachment** - the extent to which people **practice** their **religious beliefs**.



There are a number of ways we can measure religious practice, but for our purposes we'll restrict ourselves to looking at some of the most **common indicators** of religious practice.



We're going to concentrate on the first two of these indicators (**membership** and **attendance**) since this should give us a more **reliable** and **valid** picture of both current levels of religious practice in our society and enable us to compare these levels historically (or, if you prefer, longitudinally).



From a **pro-secularisation** perspective, the most notable features of **statistics** on Christian Church membership this century is the **remorseless decline** in religious **participation**.

In terms of **Christian religions** in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

A **50% decline** in membership...

All Church membership declined from 30% to 12% of the adult population...

Church of England membership declined from 13.5% to 4% of the adult population...



From a **pro-secularisation** viewpoint, **Church statistics** show two things:

1. The **percentage of Christian Church members** (Church of England and Roman Catholic - The Trinitarian Churches) is **relatively small** in terms of the population as a whole (15% in 1992).

Although these figures need to be treated with care, it does seem safe to conclude that the **membership** of religious organisations is not only in general **decline**, but that this decline is **progressive** (one reason for this may be that as older members die they are not being replaced...).

2. Church **membership declined** significantly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century...



Having looked briefly at **membership of religious organisations** we can look at another **indicator of religious participation**, namely **attendance at religious services**. This may give us a clearer impression of the extent to which religious participation is or is not in decline.



**Historically**, we can use the **English Church Census** to track Church attendance's over the past **150 years**. **Brierley** argues 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**.

In the past 20 years there's been a steady **decline** in church attendance's generally.

Finally, the overall **decline** in religious practice is most **noticeable** in the larger **Churches** (Anglican and Roman Catholic), where attendance has declined consistently. Among smaller **denominations** the picture is more patchy, with some showing a decline but others showing an increase.

1. Most **denominations** are so numerically **small** that any slight changes tend to translate into large percentage fluctuations.

However, the main **problem** with accepting the latter figures at face value is two-fold:

2. The methods of **counting** attendance at these denominations is highly **unreliable** (frequently little more than "guesstimates").



Among among **non-Christian denominations** in our society over the past 25 years, **Brierley** notes there has been a general **increase in religious participation**, as measured by **raw numbers** of those attending services.

However, we **shouldn't simply assume** this represents:



A **change in the pattern of religious affiliation** (from **Christian to non-Christian** religious affiliation and practice). Most evidence suggests that **non-Christian religious practice is limited** to particular cultural groups (Hindus, Jews, etc.) rather than conversions from Christianity.

An **increase in participation** because:

**Immigrants** to Britain, bringing with them their own religious practices, tend to have **higher levels of religious practice** (reflecting feelings of persecution, common cultural identity etc. One of the functions of religion among such groups might be as a focus for the retention of some form of common identity and values, rather than it being an indication of greater religiosity.



As **first generation immigrants** settle and start families, their numbers **increase**. Thus, what we may be seeing is simply an increase in the numbers of former immigrant groups ; this means there are **more people in the religious participation age-bracket**, rather than an **increase in religious practice...**



For example. the cultural group that has shown the **greatest decline** in religious participation over the past 25 years (**Jews**) is also the group that has been resident in our society the longest.

Amongst **sects and cults**, it does seem evident that there has been **growth** in participation over the past 25 years and this may well reflect a growing interest in these types of religions (**Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, the Moonies** and so forth).

These sects and cults are, **proportionately, very small** in number - most number a few hundred members.

It is notoriously **difficult** to establish **membership numbers** and **participation rates** because, firstly, these are **difficult to measure** and, secondly, the sects themselves tend to **inflate their membership** numbers to present themselves as more established religious forms than their size would normally warrant...

From a **pro-secularisation** point-of-view, the **growth** in the number of different **sects** and **cults** is interpreted as evidence of **secularisation**, because of the **fragmentation** of religious practice. Sects and cults appear and disappear with great regularity and this type of **religious participation** is interpreted as a general **institutional weakening** of the role of religion because people seem to have little overall commitment to these types of religious organisation.



In this respect, the available evidence (given the **problems** of **reliability** and **validity** involved) indicates there has been a **general decline** in religious **participation** on Britain over the past 150 years. This decline also seems to be **cumulative** - it has, for example, continued over the past 25 years.

Both **Protestant** and **Catholic** Church **attendance** has fallen.

**Church of England membership** (measured in terms of **baptisms**, **confirmations** and so forth) has shown a **consistent decline**.

**Church attendance's** have generally **fallen** (although some smaller churches have shown an increase in membership).

**Acquavita** ("The Decline of the Sacred in Industrial Society", 1979) has claimed that Britain is not alone (although the claim is made that Britain has become "the most secular nation in Europe") - the influence of Christianity has declined over a wide range of societies.

**Wilson** ("How Religious Are We?") has further suggested that the influence of religious institutions has declined to such an extent in Britain that:

"Religion is no-longer news, expect when a clergyman commits a moral misdemeanour."



In short, the **pro-secularisation argument**, based on the analysis of **religious participation**, is that secularisation is indeed taking place.





However, from an **anti-secularisation** viewpoint, **different interpretations** have been placed upon the same figures.

**David Martin** ("Sociology of English Religion", 1967), for example, points out that questions relating to the **reliability** and **validity** of **religious statistics** are of fundamental importance in relation to the secularisation thesis.

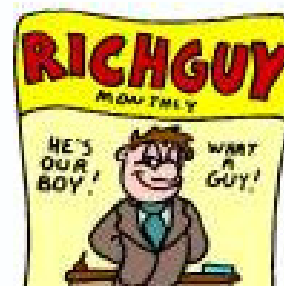
If the concept of secularisation means a decline in the **influence** of the religious in everyday life, **anti-secularisation** theorists argue this is **unproven** by secularisation theorists. This is mainly because the **religious participation** of people in the **past** has been grossly **overestimated**.



The **demographic content** of such statistics may not be valid.. For example, religious practice is related to such demographic factors as age and class (different age groups and social classes have different levels of religious practice). Therefore, when looking at such statistics we need to be sure that demographic changes in society do not account for apparent rises and falls in religious practice.

The statistics are collected by the **organisations themselves**. We have little knowledge about the accuracy of such figures - whether they are systematically collected or simply based upon "educated guesses", whether they include everyone who attends a religious service, for example, or only those who attend a particular service (such as at Easter or Christmas).

The figures for "total attendance" don't distinguish between those who attend Church services 50 times a year and those who attend only once (the former, for example, may be counted as 50 different people). This is particularly important when looking at statistics of **19th century attendance**, since some people attended Church services two or three times a day, rather than the single attendance that is the most common form of participation in our society.



If people don't go to Church regularly, the **pro-secularisation interpretation** tends to be **religious belief** has **declined** (that is, people are simply less religious). However, a **different interpretation** might be that people simply do not attend Church regularly. **Martin's** point here is that we cannot **reliably infer** the extent of people's **religious belief** from statistics about **religious practice**. People may still be religious. they may simply choose to **express their beliefs in different ways**

As **Martin** notes:

“In Victorian Britain, the emergent middle classes tended to use Church attendance as a means of ‘creating and maintaining’ a sense of **respectability**. regular Church attendance, for this class, was more a means of being seen, by others as ‘pious’, devout’ and ‘respectable’ than as necessarily being indicative of strong religious beliefs...”

**Demaroth and Hammond** (“Religion in Social Context”, 1969) note:

“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’s** observations also raise the interesting point that, if it is true that Church **attendance’s** in the **past** may have been **inflated** by people using their attendance for **social** - rather than religious - reasons, then it is questionable as to whether or not it is **valid** to interpret declining attendance’s as evidence of a progressive loss of religious faith in our society (we are, of course, assuming that people nowadays attend Church for purely religious reasons - which may not be a valid assumption).

We should not neglect the idea that, for an unknown number of people, Church attendance serves a **social function**, at various times in their life. People may practice religion because it provides a source of **warmth, friendship** and **belonging**, rather than because they hold stronger religious beliefs than non-attenders.



The Church as a focus for **political dissent** in societies that do not allow freedom of political expression and assembly.



In **totalitarian** societies (for example, Eastern Europe under communism, some South American countries) where the **State** has a **monopoly of political organisation and expression**, the channels for political dissent that are open in democratic societies are closed. Dissatisfaction can’t find its expression in “normal” political activity and the role of the Church may be one of a “focus of dissent”, in that the Church may be the only “legitimate” way through which people can express their economic and political dissatisfaction...

## Religious Thought...

If the evidence we have looked at so far (both for or against secularisation) is not particularly conclusive, we can look finally at a third possible **measure** of secularisation, that of **individual beliefs**. As we do this, it is important to keep the following in mind:



**Anti-secularisation** theorists are **not** necessary "**pro-religion**" (that is, such theorists do not necessarily set out to argue that religion is "alive and well" in our society).

The anti-secularisation camp can, therefore, be divided into two basic positions:

1. Those who claim religion has **always** been important in our society and that it continues to be so up to and including the present day. This position is probably most closely identified with **Functionalist sociology**.

2. Those who argue religion has only ever been important to a relatively **small number** of people in our society. In this respect, **religious activity** and **belief** has stayed fairly **constant** and there is little evidence to support either the secularisation thesis or the claim that religion is a fundamental human need.



Although there are huge **problems** involved in the **measurement** of religious beliefs, in general they are measured simply by **asking** people about their beliefs...

There are few, if any, ways of **objectively verifying** the subjective responses to such questions...

The **hypothetical** nature of the questions (to **profess** a belief in something is not necessarily to **act** on that belief at all times) tends to make the answers less **reliable** and **valid**.

Also, in terms of the secularisation debate, there is **no comparable data** for religious **belief** in the recent **past**, let alone individual beliefs held one or two centuries ago...

Probably the best we can do is present evidence of religious beliefs drawn from **opinion polling** over the past few years and then interpret the evidence in relation to the pro-and-anti secularisation positions...



**Opinion Polling** evidence from 1991 suggests that a high proportion of people (approximately 75%) profess some kind of **belief** in a "god" or **supernatural power**.

However, when we look at the **strength** of these beliefs, only 23% of the population have "no doubts" about the existence of God.

When we look at various beliefs associated with religion and the supernatural (1957 – 1991) we find:



Substantial numbers of people have little or no belief in such things (less than 50% of the population believe in Heaven and less than 25% believe in Hell, for example).

In terms of the **morality** surrounding religious beliefs, considered in terms, for example, of people's belief in the **10 Commandments**, the extent to which people believe selected Commandments apply to themselves and whether or not they think others believe it, the evidence is again **mixed**.

The number of people who do profess a belief in these ideas has progressively declined over the last 20 - 40 years.

Many people feel that Commandments apply to themselves, but are not obeyed by others – which suggests that people are less certain when judging other people's beliefs than when assessing their own.



The overtly religious Commandments (1, 2 and 3) command considerably less support than the overtly moral Commandments (the Commandments that an individual could happily hold without necessarily having any religious belief).

In America, however, the picture seems to be significantly different.

**Hadden** ("Challenging Secularisation Theory", 1987), for example, notes:

"The overwhelming proportion of Americans report they believe in God and that proportion has fluctuated very little over the forty years for which we have data. The proportion professing a belief in God has never dipped below 94% and has moved as high as 99% during the revival period of the 1950's (according to Gallop polls)"



**Overall...**



In terms of **religious beliefs** and **secularisation**, the evidence for or against is frustratingly **incomplete**. This is especially true when we consider that in order to **test** the **secularisation** thesis we need to use **comparative historical data** - data we do not have in sufficient quantity to make comparisons **valid**.

**However...**

Simply because **evidence is difficult to find** – and what evidence there is seems to be constantly open to a variety of different (and inconclusive) **interpretations** – doesn't necessarily mean that the effort to understand religious organisation, practice and belief is a wasted one...

**Maybe...**

**How and why religious behaviour persists** in modern social systems.

The "secularisation" exercise is a case of looking at religious activity in the wrong way – **rather** than attempting to **measure** something that's not easily definable or measurable, perhaps we should **change the focus** and think in different terms.

**How religious ideas** have become **embedded** in what, to paraphrase **Parsons**, we might term the "**overall moral framework**" of our society.