

# THE SECULARISATION DEBATE : Exam Theme # 12.1



Detailed analysis.

The term Secularization basically refers to the process whereby religious practices, thinking and institutions lose their social significance, this is mostly because of science which makes people rational (the ability to use reason and logic to make decisions and achieve goals).

Thus, Brian Wilson a British sociologist defined secularization as a process whereby religion loses its influence over the various spheres of social life. Secularization is said to be a result of social changes brought about by modern, urban and industrial society.

Perhaps the real question arises, **has religion lost its social significance or not?** Therefore, 'The Secularisation Debate' is a very longstanding issue within sociology, sparking intense discussion and disagreement amongst the sociologists. While some sociologists argue in the favor of the secularization thesis, others vehemently oppose it, resulting in a heated and ongoing debate.

## ADVOCATES OF THE SECULARISATION THEORY'

### 1) Peter Brierley.

A prominent sociologist employs statistical analysis to demonstrate a decline in the social significance of religion through a comparative examination of historical and contemporary trends. According to Brierley, a notable decrease in religious observance is evident in the UK,

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- Church attendance: Sunday church attendance in the UK declined from **30% of the population in 1900** to around **10% in 2000**. Moreover, in **1851**, a substantial **75%** of the adults attended church weekly, whereas in **2005**, only **6.8%** maintained this habit. This drop-in church attendance illustrates a profound shift in societal values.
  - Marriage ceremonies: The percentage of marriages conducted in churches in the UK declined from **75% in 1970** to around **40% in 2000**.
  - Funeral ceremonies: The percentage of funerals conducted in churches in the UK declined from **70% in 1970** to around **40% in 2000**.
  - Decline in religious affiliation: The percentage of people in the UK identifying as Christian declined from **72% in 2001** to around **59% in 2011**.
  - Increase in non-religious population: The percentage of people in the UK identifying as non-religious increased from **15% in 2001** to around **25% in 2011**.
  - Baptism Rates: The percentage of children baptized (a ceremony where a child is immersed into water before the church to publicly symbolize their belief in Christ) in churches dropped dramatically from **73% in the 1900's** to a mere **35% in the 2000's**, suggesting a substantial decline in the religious engagement.
- These statistics illustrate a significant decline in religious engagement in the UK over the 20th century, as documented by Peter Brierley.

### CA → Hadaway challenges Brierley's findings:

Hadaway criticizes Peter Brierley's methodology, arguing that his reliance on church attendance and baptism rates as measures of religiosity oversimplifies the complex nature of religious affiliation and practice. Hadaway contends that Brierley's approach neglects the rise of alternative forms of spirituality and religious expression, such as non-denominational churches and new age movements, which may not be captured by traditional measures of religiosity. By focusing solely on declining church attendance and baptism rates, Brierley's analysis may provide an incomplete and misleading picture of the state of religiosity in modern society. Moreover, Hadaway counters Brierley's arguments, suggesting that empirical data

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on religiosity is inherently flawed. He posits that statistics on church attendance and religious participation only capture outward expressions of faith, rather than genuine beliefs and values. To support his claim, Hadaway cites a 2002 British Social Survey, which revealed a significant disconnect between professed religiosity and actual participation. Specifically, while 72% of respondents identified as Christian, only 40% attended church monthly. This discrepancy underscores Hadaway's assertion that religious affiliation and practice do not necessarily align, and that empirical data may not accurately reflect the complexities of individual religiosity.

## 2) Steve Bruce

- Structural Differentiation.
- Social Differentiation
- Individualism
- Societalisation
- Cultural Transition theory
- Religious Pluralism

A Scottish sociologist has developed a comprehensive secularization paradigm that explains the decline of religion in the modern industrial societies. Bruce paradigm is based on the idea that secularization is a multifaceted process (having many aspects or side) that involves various social, cultural and economic factors.

According to Bruce changes within the religion were accompanied by important changes in the society and together these changes created the conditions for secularisation.

As per Bruce, the transformation of the modern societies was marked by **structural differentiation**, where institutions, including churches became specializes and

separate entities. This led to a decline in their central role in social life. Simultaneously, **social differentiation** (recognition of diverse social groups within a community) occurred, fragmenting social groups and therefore eroding the sense of shared moral universe. As social mobility increased, individuals moved between roles, making it more challenging to accept a single moral order. The rise of **Individualism** (self-reliant) further weakened the ties to collective institutions like churches. The priesthood's special status was undermined as societal ranking systems became more complex and flexible.

These processes were intertwined with **Societalisation**, Bruce defines societalisation as the process by which social bonds within a society are diminished. He argues that the rise of globalization and individualism has led people to prioritize their own interests over communal involvement. As a result, the role of church and religion as a unifying force and center for community engagement has been eroded.

Historically, churches served as a hub for social activities, fostering a sense of community and belonging. However, with the shift towards individualism, people no longer seek to participate in communal activities, leading to a decline in church attendance and religious affiliation.

Interestingly, Bruce's own **Cultural transition theory** appears to contradict his societalization argument. According to this theory, ethnic minorities who migrate to new countries often rely on religion as a means of bonding and preserving their cultural heritage. This suggests that, in certain contexts, religion can still serve as a powerful force for community building and social cohesion.

Bruce's second argument for secularization is rooted in the concept of **Religious pluralism**. He contends that the presence of multiple religions in a society leads to a decline in religious affiliation. With the freedom to choose from various faiths, people are more likely to opt out of organized religion altogether.

In the past, religion played a crucial role in integrating individuals into society. Those who did not adhere to a particular faith were often rejected. However, in today's

pluralistic societies, the absence of a single dominant religion means that individuals are no longer pressured to conform to a specific faith. This shift has contributed to a decline in the perceived importance of religion, as individuals are no longer compelled to participate in organized religion to feel part of society.

In summary, Bruce's arguments suggest that secularization has occurred due to a combination of societalization, which has diminished the importance of community and communal involvement, and religious pluralism, which has led to a decline in religious affiliation as individuals are no longer compelled to participate in organized religion.



### CA → Stark and Finke challenges Bruce finding:

Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, two prominent sociologists of religion criticize Bruce for overstating the extent of secularisation in modern societies. They argue that many people continue to hold strong religious beliefs and practices, even in the supposedly secular societies (individuals free to practice their religions).

Furthermore, Stark and Finke's 'economy of religion' theory can challenge Bruce's argument of secularisation. In this context, individuals approach religion as consumers, making informed choices about which faith to adopt based on their personal preferences and needs. This particular shift towards the consumeristic approach to religion has led to a change in religious conduct, rather than a decline in religious importance. Like for instance, some man may be drawn to Islam due to its perceived patriarchal nature, which they believe offers them greater authority and control within their families and communities. Similarly, others may choose to join religion that emphasize personal spiritual growth or social justice.

The expansion of religious options in this pluralistic society has not led to a decline in religious interest but rather a more dynamic religious landscape. Therefore, pluralism as stated by Bruce, has not eroded religious significance but rather transformed the way people engage with and express their faith.

### 3) Will Herberg,

According to Herberg, secularisation is more complicated than we think, and therefore it is not just about decline in religious participation, but rather a shift away from the core values and fundamental teachings of religious traditions. According to Herberg, many religions have undergone a transformation, abandoning their traditional tenets and adapting to the prevailing cultural and societal norms. For instance, Herberg cites the example of Catholicism in the United States, where the church's stance on divorce has become more permissive. Similarly, the Pope's recent pronouncements on homosexuality, which seem to indicate a more accepting attitude towards same-sex unions within Catholicism, demonstrate how religious institutions are reevaluating their core values in response to changing societal attitudes.

Herberg's argument suggests that this shift away from traditional religious values constitutes a form of secularization. By compromising on their fundamental teachings, religious institutions are, in effect, surrendering to the secular forces (not connected with religious or spiritual matters) that shape modern society. This phenomenon is not necessarily reflected in declining church attendance or religious affiliation, but rather in the erosion of religious authority and the diminishing role of religion in shaping moral and ethical values.

He emphasized the trend where religion became increasingly private moving away from the public sphere. In modern industrial societies religion often became something practiced within the confines of home or in small communities rather than influencing broader societal norms or policies. He therefore noted that in secular societies people began to interpret and practice religion in more individualistic ways rather than adhering to communal or institutional forms of belief.



Thus, particular individualized approach to faith was often more subjective and less structured.

In this sense, Herberg's perspective on secularization highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of the phenomenon. Secularization is not simply a matter of religious decline or irrelevance, but rather a transformation of the role of religion in modern society, where religious institutions must navigate the challenges of adapting to changing cultural and societal norms while maintaining their core values and identity.

### → Wade Clark Roof and John McKinney challenges Herberg's findings

Critics, such as Wade Clark Roof and John McKinney, have challenged Herberg's perspective on secularization. They argue that Herberg's assertion that religions have moved away from their core values does not hold true for all cases, particularly fundamentalist movements.

For instance, the New Right Christian movement in the United States has demonstrated a strong adherence to traditional, core beliefs. This movement's unwavering commitment to conservative values is evident in their vocal opposition to abortion. Many New Right Christians actively protest outside abortion clinics, seeking to shame individuals seeking reproductive healthcare services.

This example illustrates that, contrary to Herberg's claims, some religious groups have not abandoned their core values in response to secularizing forces. Instead, they have maintained, and even intensified, their commitment to traditional beliefs and practices.

Roof and McKinney's critique highlights the importance of considering the diversity of religious experiences and expressions. While some religious groups may have adapted to secularizing trends, others have resisted these changes, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of traditional core values in contemporary society.

Furthermore, Herberg's focus was primarily on Western, especially Dutch society in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Critics there argue that this model of secularisation does not

