

# **“A” Level Sociology**

## **A Resource-Based Learning Approach**

**Religion**

**Unit M2: Secularisation**

**Aims and Objectives**

These Teachers' Notes have been designed to provide you with a knowledge and understanding of the following syllabus area:

**"Consider competing definitions of secularisation and the changing place of religious institutions and beliefs in society".**

**The Aim of this Study Pack is provide an understanding of:**

1. The question of whether or not secularisation is taking place / has taken place in modern, industrialised, societies.

**The Objectives of this Study Pack are to provide an understanding of:**

1. The way in which the concept of secularisation can be operationalised through the use of three main indicators:
  - a. Religious practice.
  - b. Religious organisation.
  - c. Religious belief.
2. Problems of definition associated with the concept of secularisation.
3. The reliability and validity of statistics relating to religious practice in Britain.
4. The relative level of influence exercised by the Church in "secular" societies.

## Introduction

### Definitions and Problems...

The concept of **secularisation** is not, as we will see, a particularly easy one to come to terms with in relation to religious activity in any given society. To be sure it is a reasonably **simple** concept to **describe**, since it merely relates to the process whereby "**religious activity**" in any society progressively **declines** over time.

For example, as the arch proponent of the **secularisation thesis**, **Bryan Wilson**, **defines** it ("Religion in Secular Society", 1966), secularisation is:

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

To put this another way, **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."**

The concept of "**institutions**" in this respect relates to the way religion is socially-organised in any society, while the reference to "**symbols**" relates to particular religious beliefs and their presence or relative absence in any society.

The "**problem**" to which I've just referred is **not**, as I've noted, particularly one of **definition** (although, as with most sociological concepts, definitions do vary); rather, it relates to the way we can, as sociologists, **operationalise** such definitions.

The concept of **operationalization**, in this context, refers to the way we can put such definitions into practice; in effect, the extent to which it is possible to use such definitions in the **measurement** of ideas like "religious activity", "religious vitality and decline" and so forth.

Not only are we faced with **operational problems** relating to the concept of secularisation, we are also faced with problems that relate to how we can **define** "**religious activity**" in the first place, because if we are trying to measure whether or not it has **declined** (and if so, by how much) we clearly need to know what, if any, level it has **declined from**. As **Glasner** ("Sociology and Secularisation", 1977) puts it:

**"The assumption is that, since a common usage definition of Christianity, for example, is concerned with Church attendance, membership and the presence of rites of passage, these constitute significant elements of a definition of religion and that any move away from this institutional participation involves religious decline".**

The extent to which this assumption is justified / justifiable is something that we will need to explore in some detail in the following sections...

Like the concept of "religion", therefore, the concept of "secularisation" clearly poses **problems of definition**. Not only does it present such problems, however, but as **Berger** has noted, it also **creates problems**. For example:

1. **Secularisation** is an **ideological concept** - to define it is suspect that it is an occurring social process.
2. In turn, in order to evaluate the concept, we have to devise some means of measuring the extent of secularisation across and, most importantly, within different societies.
3. **Measurement** must, by definition, involve some form of **historical comparison** between levels of religious practice in the past and current levels of religious activity (since the concept of secularisation involves the question of whether or not present-day societies are more - or less - religious than in the past).
4. In order to do this, we must also be able to define what we mean by such terms as "religious practice", "religious organisation", "religious belief" and so forth - in short, we must come-up with an all-embracing definition of "religion".
5. As **Wilson** implies, there are at least **three distinctive levels of analysis** that it is important to address when we start to talk about both religion and secularisation:
  - a. **Religious practice** - the extent to which people involve themselves in Church membership, attendance and so forth.
  - b. **Religious organisation** - the extent to which the Church, for example, is involved in the day-to-day secular order in any society (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).
  - c. **Religious thought** - the extent to which people believe in concepts such as God, good and evil, sin, or whatever. This level 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 personal beliefs.

In these Notes we will be looking specifically at the **secularisation debate** in terms of the various ways it is possible to **test** the idea that secularisation either is occurring or has occurred. In this respect, we will necessarily refer to the kind of problems that **Berger** has outlined. However, before we start to examine this concept in more detail it would be useful to note the following:

1. On a **commonsense** level of understanding, the whole question of whether or not our society is "less religious" now than in the past might appear to be a foregone conclusion. It seems self-evidently obvious that religion has lost its grip on our society - the evidence of its decline is apparently all around us. A few examples taken at random would seem to confirm this on a number of different levels:

a. On an **institutional** level:

- Fewer and fewer people seem to attend Church services.
- Declining numbers of people willing to make religion their vocation.
- Churches are closed, sold-off or fall into terminal dereliction.

b. On a **personal** level:

- Fewer people get married now than in the past.
- Fewer people are baptised in to the Church of England and even less of these are confirmed into the Church.
- The great Christian festivals (Christmas and Easter, for example) seem to have only a residual religious meaning in British society. For most people such festivals are simply the excuse to have a welcome break from work or to indulge in an orgy of overeating and drinking...

However, it is important to remember that, whatever our personal feelings may be, **sociologically** we should be wary of **prejudging** the issue. As sociologists one of the tasks we set ourselves is the examination and interpretation of evidence, rather than the simple acceptance of "what everyone knows...".

2. When we looked at perspectives on religion it was clear that each contained a view about the extent to which religion was either:

- a. An essential part of the human condition (that is, it performed certain functions that could not be performed by any other institution) or,
- b. An institution, once powerful, whose time had passed and was now in decline under the twin onslaught of social modernisation and the development of increasingly rational interpretations of the social and natural worlds.

As should be evident, therefore, sociological theories tend to be **implicitly** bound-up with questions of religious **decline** or **vitality**. Before we look at some of the ways we can test the concept of secularisation, therefore, it would be useful to refresh your memory about some of the basic features of sociological perspectives on religion.

### **Sociological Perspectives on Religion: An Overview**

1. In the nineteenth century, **Auguste Comte** ("The Positive Philosophy") sought to explain social development by arguing that all human societies passed through three stages of development:

- a. The **theological**.
- b. The **metaphysical** and
- c. The **positive** (or "**scientific**").

Each stage was, **Comte** claimed, characterised by a **different** set of **ideological beliefs and explanations** about the world and Comte's basic argument was that people sought to explain their world as best they could, given their contemporary level of knowledge at each stage in the development of a society.

In the **theological** stage, therefore, the **dominant ideology** was **religion**.

The **metaphysical** stage was a kind of "**transition phase**", whereby traditional religious explanations of (many aspects of) the world were called into question by the emergence of a scientific ideology.

In the third (and final) "**positive**" stage, a **scientific ideology** based on **positivist principles and empirical evidence** would **replace** religion as the **dominant form of explanation** (since people would no-longer require religious explanations of the world once science could provide "more plausible" forms of explanation).

While, to a certain limited extent **Comte's** argument has a degree of validity (insofar as scientific forms of explanation have increasingly replaced religious explanations in the everyday world - which would broadly suggest that some form of secularisation has taken place), **two basic problems** exist here:

- a. Firstly, societies do not pass through "phases of development" in the way Comte suggested (one stage giving way to the next, for example).
- b. Secondly, science is **not** an all-encompassing form of explanation; that is, there remain questions (such as "what happens after death?") that science has not been able to answer. In this instance, since we desire answers to this mystery, religious explanations "fill the gap between our desires and our knowledge".

2. **Durkheim**, as we have seen, emphasised the **functional role of religion** (as did Comte, of course, albeit in a different way) as an **integrating mechanism** in any society. In this respect, the "**decline** of religion" was seen by Durkheim to be **probable**, but **not inevitable** - it would only decline in significance if other institutional mechanisms arose in society to take-over its basic functions.

To a certain extent this has happened in Britain, but we can see from various examples around the world (such as in Iran) that:

- a. Religious ideas may represent a (uniquely?) powerful source of integration and social solidarity.
- b. Religion may have "functions" other than that of integration.

3. **Marx**, on the other hand, theorised the **disappearance of religion** with the advent of a **communist society**. In terms of Marx's basic theoretical position, therefore, the **disappearance** of religion was as **inevitable** as the appearance of communism...

However, in **Capitalist** societies, Marx argued that **religious influence** was **linked** to the **material conditions** under which people existed (since religious belief provided both an **ideological legitimation** of Capitalist exploitation and a form of (illusory) relief from economic degradation). In this respect, the influence of religion would inevitably "wax and wane" (that is, grow stronger or weaker) as the material conditions of people's existence changed.

4. Finally, for theorists such as **Weber** and **Berger**, religious ideas were linked to the general **plausibility of religious / scientific ideologies**. In the long term, religion would **diminish** in terms of its **plausibility** as **science** increasingly produced **more plausible** forms of explanation. However, as I have noted, in some areas of social life **religious ideologies** prove **more plausible** - hence the disappearance of religion is possible but not inevitable.

## Testing Secularisation

As I have suggested, there are a number of **dimensions** to the sociological debate over secularisation and in the remainder of these Notes we are going to look at the way in which it is possible to test the theory, using evidence from a variety of sources.

As a means of organising the evidence for and against the existence of such a process, we can follow Wilson by defining three main levels of analysis in relation to the problem.

### 1. The level of society as a whole.

This relates to the way in which the **organisational power of religions** has or has not declined historically. In this sense we will be looking at the **macro** analysis of the relationship between religious institutions (such as Churches and Sects) and other social institutions.

### 2. The cultural level.

This involves an investigation of **religious practice** (levels of religious attendance, membership and so forth). In this sense we will again be looking at a macro level of analysis, although this involves looking specifically at the institution of religion itself.

### 3. The level of individual consciousness.

This involves an investigation of **religious beliefs** at the **personal level** (something that can be quite separate from attendance at religious meetings and so forth). In this sense, therefore, we will be looking at the micro level of individual belief.

Before we begin, however, one final (**methodological**) point needs to be stressed.

The three levels of analysis I have just outlined are **theoretically separate** (that is, I intend to isolate them from each other for the purposes of studying them academically), but in reality they are, of course, **empirically interconnected**. That is, in the real world we cannot separate the organisation of cultural institutions from people's individual beliefs, for two main reasons:

- a. People are born and socialised into an existing set of cultural arrangements which affect the way they see the world and behave in that world.
- b. The institutional relationships in a society will broadly condition the way people think about the nature of the world and their place in that world.

The following **example** will, I trust, make the above easier to understand.

In a society such as **Iran** where the Church and the State are one and the same (it is a religious dictatorship), cultural institutions demand that the individual practices the Muslim religion. In such a society it is difficult, if not impossible, to remain untouched by religion.

In a society such as **Britain**, the Church and the State are relatively separate and there are a wide variety of non-religious cultural institutions (such as the mass media, education and so forth). In this society it is relatively easy to remain culturally untouched by religion and religious belief seems to be more a matter of individual choice than cultural necessity.

### A. The Societal Level: Religious Organisation.

We can begin our testing of the secularisation thesis by looking at the most general area of religious activity, namely the involvement of religious institutions in the organisation and day-to-day running of society. As you might expect, this will involve an **historical comparison** of the relationship between religious institutions and the State (since the basic theme of secularisation is that religious institutions in the past were heavily involved in the governance of society, whereas in modern times this involvement becomes negligible). For the sake of convenience, we will use **Britain** as the basic model for our analysis, although you need to be aware that our society may not necessarily be representative of all societies.

In relation to **historical changes** in our society, therefore, there are two basic questions that we can use to guide our analysis:

1. Firstly, has there been a significant change in the historical role and influence of the Church?
2. Secondly, how can we interpret the evidence that we uncover in relation to the concept of secularisation. In basic terms, can we assume that evidence of a decline in influence of religion can be taken as evidence of secularisation?

We can begin this section, therefore, by presenting the **pro-secularisation** evidence as it relates to the organisational role of religious institutions to other institutions in society. In this respect, evidence of the withdrawal of the Church from secular affairs in Britain appears, on the face of things, to be relatively clear-cut: In **feudal Britain**, for example, the **Church**:

- a. **Monopolised knowledge.** That is, religious officials were able to define and control the way in which 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.
- b. Had a **close relationship** with the **State** and **secular powers**. In this respect, 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.
- c. Exercised powerful **social controls** over the individual (such as confession, excommunication and so forth).
- d. Generally appeared to **involve** itself in all **economic, political, military** and **cultural** (ideological) spheres of life...

When we look at **modern Britain**, the picture we get is somewhat different.

- a. The Church is **no-longer** as closely associated with the State and the political machinery of government. 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, professional politicians responsible to an electorate and so forth.
- b. The growth of scientific ideologies has meant that the Church **no-longer** has a **monopoly of knowledge**. In this sense, the Church is no-longer able to propagate and sustain a unique, unified and, above all, plausible, ideology.

By having to confront and come to terms with the growth of highly-plausible scientific theories, religious organisations have been forced to change in ways that have (fatally) weakened one of their greatest strengths, namely the ability to control how people see and think about the world.

c. In relation to the above, the Church is **no-longer a monolithic organisation**, able to control the way people see and think about the social and natural world. On the contrary, one of the apparent defining features of modern religion is its fragmentation into a number of much smaller, less politically influential, organisations.

d. Although its specialist insights into “religious questions” (the great questions surrounding things like the meaning of life) may afford religion some influence in society, especially in terms of morality, 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.

In this respect, we might analyse the Church’s involvement in secular societies by looking at this “loss of functions” argument as evidence of secularisation...

In a similar way to the idea of the family losing many of its functions in modern, industrialised, societies, religion is also held to gradually lose many of the functions (such as education and social welfare) that it performed in pre-industrial societies. In this respect, the Church, for example, becomes an increasingly marginalized social institution.

If this is the case, this idea might explain such things as falling religious membership and church attendance, in the sense that people no-longer use the Church to satisfy (non-religious) needs (such as status considerations, for example). We will look at this in more detail when we look at the cultural level of analysis.

The **anti-secularisation response** to the kinds of evidence we have just noted can be summarised as taking one of two main forms.

1. Firstly, those who argue that the structural decline of religion has been overstated, mainly because the historical evidence has itself been overstated. That is, they question two main things:

a. The idea that, in the past, religious organisations were able to maintain a strong grip (a stranglehold?) on the lives of all individuals in the society in which these religious organisations existed.

b. The idea that, in modern society, organised religion does not have a role to play in the organisation of apparently secular affairs.

2. Secondly, and this follows from the above, those who argue that while evidence for a disengagement of the Church from secular affairs is apparent (unlike in Feudal society, the Church really isn't involved in all aspects of government), the important factor here is how you interpret this evidence.

Such writers tend not to question the claim of a "religious disengagement from secular affairs". Rather, they 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. The main argument here is that the role of the Church could quite happily be transformed without it necessarily losing its influence in relation to religious behaviour / beliefs.

We can briefly look at both arguments, starting with the idea that the evidence of the Church's involvement in the affairs of government in the past is not very strong.

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

1. Firstly, did religious institutions dominate society in the past in the way secularisation theorists claim?
2. Secondly, are religious institutions in modern societies devoid of cultural significance?

In terms of the first question, it is difficult to actually identify specific times when the Church could be said to have wholly dominated the affairs of a society.

For **example**, Medieval Britain (and Europe) was characterised by a monolithic Catholic Church that tried to dominate all aspects of the world (both spiritual and secular), yet there is little evidence that its impact on the day-to-day life of the ordinary peasant was very great (on the contrary, it would seem, Catholicism had most impact upon the aristocracy since it provided a clear-cut ideological justification 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...).

**Victorian Britain** also tends to be seen (at least from a modern-day politically Conservative viewpoint), as a candidate for a religious "golden age" whereby 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 and the like).

In terms of the second question, 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, highly-dependent on its ability to impress and influence mainstream political parties for example) in modern society.

We could point here, 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).

Finally, perhaps, we could point to the fact that Church leaders are invariably consulted (at least by the mass media if not always by governments) on questions of faith and morality that directly affect many of our secular institutions. In recent years, for example, the government has been persuaded to make a predominantly Christian act of worship mandatory (that is, compulsory or required) as part of a child's education.

Religious leaders have been consulted on the Constitutional question of whether or not Prince Charles, if he divorces, could become King. 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.

The second strand of **anti-secularisation** thought I noted earlier (namely, an acceptance of the idea there has been a disengagement of the Church from secular affairs in modern societies) needs to now be assessed since, if anything, this represents a more theoretically coherent and consistent rebuttal of the secularisation thesis.

As I have noted, the main claim amongst such writers is that the role of religion (and the organisations that propagate it) has been transformed in modern societies, rather than necessarily diminished.

For example, in Britain, the Church may have become progressively isolated from the State in political terms, as its former (explicitly) political role is performed by political parties. However, as we have seen, in totalitarian societies - where political expression is not reflected in the organisation of political parties - the Church may (re)assume a political role. For example:

The role of the Church in the development of the Solidarity movement in Poland,

The role of Liberation Theology in Brazil.

In this respect, the transformation of the Church's role, in Britain, may lead to it taking on the form of a pressure group - an organisation that is relatively selective in its concerns, but perhaps still influential.

### **Compared with Victorian Britain, what functions you think the modern Church has lost?**

A refinement of this type of argument suggests that, while the Church has clearly lost some functions, this actually **strengthens** the place of religion in people's lives because the Church has been forced to become more concerned with religious matters than at any time in the past.

**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, moral guidelines for behaviour and so forth).

Thus, in the past, because the Church was so intimately involved in political life, it tended to neglect its overtly religious role. **Aldous Huxley** ("The Devils of Loudun", 1952) for example, argues that, on an institutional level, the Church does not seem to have been well-respected (mainly because of their corruption, greed, cruelty and sexual misconduct). Huxley also suggests that the relationship between the Church and the State in France was one that reflected an uneasy power balance. That is, the

government actually encouraged religious corruption, greed and sexual misconduct as a means of limiting the power of the Church.

**Parsons** argues that modern religious institutions, having been stripped of their political function, are forced to address themselves to a far greater extent to spiritual matters.

In "Social Structure and Personality", **Parsons'** basic argument involves a similar form of reasoning about the role of religion as he applied to the family in industrial societies. Thus:

As societies **industrialise**, they become **increasingly differentiated** - that is, different institutions arise to cater for changing structural needs (the education of the masses, for example, is so essential to modern industrial production that it can no longer be left in the hands of the Church, voluntary organisations and worthy individuals). In this respect, the **Church** as an **institution** becomes more **specialised** in its functions.

An important aspect of this increasing specialisation is that the Church's role becomes less overtly political and more ideological in form - 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.

Just as **Parsons** has been **criticised** for taking an "**ethnocentric**" view of **family life**, (Ann **Oakley**, for example, argues that Parsons has looked at white, middle class, American family life and assumed it to be some kind of "ideal" model of family life applicable across all societies / cultures) he could be accused of underestimating the extent to which many religious institutions, in modern societies, play a political role.

**Using the Library as a resource, can you find contemporary examples (in newspaper cuttings, for example) of the way in which, in some modern societies, the Church plays an overtly political role?**

From a different perspective, writers such as **Berger** have 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.

Thus, if we see religious institutions in terms of the ideological role of the Church as an organiser of knowledge about the world, it is evident that this role must be eroded by the development of scientific / rationalist ideological frameworks ("paradigms").

In effect, in **pre-industrial societies**, the Church is viewed as being pre-eminent in terms of its ability to organise and control knowledge - not only in relation to such ideas as socialisation and education, but also in terms of the idea that it is unchallenged in its ability to provide a coherent, "rational", ideological interpretation of the natural / social worlds.

In Berger's terms, in pre-industrial societies, people's desire for understanding is fed by the only form of plausible explanation that exists - namely, religion.

However, once scientific ideologies begin to develop (for example, the Theory of Evolution), the Church's role as **sole interpreter** of the world will necessarily decline

- and with this will come political decline. Religious frameworks lose their relevance, their plausibility and hence their influence...

**Berger** sees this process **not** as evidence for **secularisation**, but merely evidence of a **changing role** for religious institutions. While **scientific rationalism** has clearly 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.

In this respect, in the process outlined above, we may simply be witnessing a **“reversal of ideological dominance”** rather than a replacement of one by the other, insofar as religious and scientific ideas may always have coexisted - the difference, in modern societies, is that scientific frameworks are more plausible in some areas of life than in the past.

The implication, here, is that the role of religion may have shifted from a focus upon the explanation of everyday meanings (something that is taken-over by scientific ideologies) to an explanation of “deeper” meanings - life, death, the universe and so forth...

We can **conclude** this section by noting that, in terms of the **societal level of religious organisation**, the **evidence** presented both for and against the concept of secularisation is **inconclusive**.

On the one hand, although it seems clear that the Church in Feudal Britain or Europe, for example, was a powerful social institution that sought, at various times, to dominate the whole of society, it is debatable as to the extent to which this was ever achieved. How you interpret the significance of this is probably more a matter of personal predisposition...

On the other hand, anti-secularisation theorists who have conceded that the role of the Church in the past was more powerful than in the present avoid the conclusion that this is evidence of secularisation by arguing that a lessening of the Church's involvement in secular matters is actually evidence of its renewed vitality. Rather than being in decline, the removing of many of the Church's peripheral functions has led it to concentrate on only the functions that this cultural institution can perform (its primary or core functions).

Having reached this **inclusive conclusion**, therefore, we need to investigate the second level of possible secularisation, namely the cultural level of religious practice.

## **B. The Cultural level: Religious Practice.**

At a cultural level, we can consider secularisation by focusing on **religious institutions** themselves, rather than their relationship to other institutions in society. In this respect, this level of analysis involves testing levels of **religious attachment**; that is, 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, but for our purposes here we will restrict ourselves to looking at some of the most **common indicators** of religious practice. These include:

- **Membership of a religious organisation,**
- **Attendance at religious services,**
- **Marriage,**
- **Baptisms and Confirmations.**

In the main, we are going to concentrate on the first two of these possible 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).

Thus, although marriage might be a useful indicator of religious attachment it is evident that it may not be particularly valid as a way of measuring secularisation for a couple of reasons:

1. Marriage rates may be influenced by social customs and conventions (for example, people may see it as "the done thing" to get married in a Church rather than because they have deep religious attachments.

2. The Church of England does not allow divorcees to marry in Church. This may mean that substantial number of people who consider themselves to be religious in their behaviour and beliefs are effectively barred from the statistics.

Similarly, the number of children being baptised in our society may also be subject to cultural conventions rather than being symbolic of deeply-held religious views and commitments.

### **Measuring Religious Practice.**

The main way in which we are going to measure religious practice for the purpose of these Notes is through the use of **statistics** on the **membership** of religious organisations and **attendance** at religious services. As with the previous section, we can organise this section by presenting the **pro-secularisation** interpretation followed by the **anti-secularisation** interpretation and, finally, an overall conclusion.

Before we analyse both the substance and implications of these statistics in relation to secularisation theory, it is important to keep in mind the concepts of **reliability** and **validity**. These concepts are always important when analysing any form of sociological data (and especially social statistics) because we need to be reasonably certain that the statistical evidence we are using is:

- As **reliable** as possible: That is:

Collected in a systematic fashion,  
Employs common concepts and definitions,  
Is not open to distortion and bias.

- As **valid** as possible. That is:

Paints an accurate picture of reality,  
Measures what it is intended to measure.

We can begin by looking at membership levels of **Christian** organisations in Britain, since this is probably one of the strongest indicators of religious commitment. However, a couple of **methodological** points need to be made:

1. Christian denominations (Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists and so forth) maintain an electoral roll of their members eligible to vote on policy decisions relating to the Church (you may recall that recently, for example, the members of the Church of England (Anglicans) voted to allow women to become vicars).

2. The Roman Catholic Church counts its members differently by simply including all those who attend mass as "members".

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 the **Christian religions**, for example:

There has been a 50% decline in membership this century.

The percentage of the adult population as members of Churches has declined from 30% - 12%.

The Church of England has seen its membership decline from 13.5% of the adult population to 4% of that population.

The slight **increase** in **Roman Catholic membership** may be due to two things:

- a. The unreliable way in which membership is measured.
- b. The fact that the Catholic Church tends to exercise tighter controls over its members than the non-Catholic Christian Churches.

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).
2. Church membership has declined significantly in the period covered by the figures.

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 possible reason for this being that as older members die they are not being successfully replaced...).

Having looked briefly at membership of religious organisations we can look at another **indicator** of **religious participation**, namely **attendance** at religious services. This may well give us a stronger 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** and, in this respect, **Brierley** argues that 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 note that there has been a steady **decline** in church attendance's in general.

Finally, we need to note that 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. Amongst smaller **denominations** the picture is more patchy, with some showing a decline but others showing an increase. The main problem with accepting these figures at face value is two-fold:

1. Most denominations are so numerically small that any slight changes tend to translate into large percentage fluctuations.
2. The methods of counting attendance at these denominations is highly unreliable (frequently little more than "guesstimates").

From a pro-secularisation viewpoint, these tables show, once again, a consistent and remorseless decline in active religious participation in our society.

Approximately 1 in 10 of the adult population attend some form of religious service each week (and if we make allowances for the unreliable way these statistics are collected, it is probable that the figure is significantly lower...).

Finally in this section on religious practice in our society we can look at the figures for:

- a. Non-Christian religions and
- b. A variety of sects and cults.

Brierley's argues that the statistics indicate that amongst **non-Christian** denominations in our society over the past 25 years there has been a general **increase** in religious participation, as measured by raw numbers of those attending services. However, once again we should not simply assume that:

a. This necessarily represents an increase in participation This follows for a couple of reasons:

1. Immigrants into Britain, bringing with them their own religious practices, tend to have higher levels of religious practice that reflect feelings of persecution, common cultural identity and so forth. In this respect, one of the functions for religion amongst 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.
2. 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 meaning that there are more people in the religious participation age-bracket, rather than an increase in religious practice.

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

Finally, an interesting point to note is that 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). Again, a couple of points need to be noted:

1. These sects and cults are, **proportionately, very small** in number - most number a few hundred members.
2. Patterns of participation tend to quite different to the patterns established amongst the major denominations. Scientology, for example, does not demand a church-type attendance (members are simply required to buy courses as and when required).
3. 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 rather 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 tends to be interpreted as evidence of secularisation, precisely because of the **fragmentation** of religious practice. Sects arise and decline with great regularity and this type of religious participation tends to be interpreted as a general institutional weakening of the role of religion precisely because people seem to have little overall commitment.

In this respect, the available evidence (given the **problems of reliability and validity** involved) does seem to indicate that 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 continued over the past 25 years. Thus, in general terms:

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

In the light of such observations:

**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, except when a clergyman commits a moral misdemeanour."**

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

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

In the first place, as has been noted, the concept of secularisation means a decline in the **influence** of the religious in everyday life. One strand of anti-secularisation

thought is that this is **unproven** by secularisation theorists, mainly because the religious participation of people in the past has been grossly overestimated.

**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. Thus, he notes the following:

1. 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.

2. 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).

3. The figures for "total attendance" do not 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 it is clear that people tended to attend Church services two or three times a day, rather than the single attendance that is the most common form of participation in our society.

4. Finally - and perhaps most significantly for our purposes - if people do not go the Church regularly, the pro-secularisation interpretation tends to be that 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 convictions in different ways (a point that we will investigate further in the final section of this Study Pack).

To illustrate this idea, **Martin** argues:

**"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..."**

Or, as **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.

**Make a brief list of some of the "social reasons" for Church attendance that may be "unrelated" to strong religious beliefs:**

**Thinking back to the work you did on Durkheim and religion, how might these "social reasons" serve an integrating function for society that is reasonably separate from the religious content of Church attendance?**

In the above respect, it is evident that we need to understand religion **not** just as a system of belief (an **ideology**) but also as a **social process** that may be bound-up with other, more secular, affairs. For **example** the **integrating** effects of religion, to which I referred above, should not be overlooked:

In Britain, for example, Muslims and Jews have higher levels of religious practice which may reflect feelings of persecution, common cultural identity in a "hostile" world and so forth

A further aspect to this idea relates to the Church as a focus for **political dissent** in societies that do not allow freedom of political expression and assembly.

In recent times, both **Iran** and the **Soviet Union** (as was) illustrate this idea, insofar as the Church served as a means of organising and expressing political dissatisfaction with the secular order.

If we develop this idea in the light of **Marx's** notion that religion is the "sigh of the oppressed creature", we can outline one way in which apparently religious beliefs (as expressed in the institutional nature of religious practice) may be more concerned, in some societies, with secular problems than religious beliefs per se ("in themselves").

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. Political / economic dissatisfaction in such societies cannot find its expression in "normal" political activity. The role of the Church, in such societies, 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. Such dissatisfaction -while having an overtly religious character - may also represent a form of political dissent.

People in such countries may use the organisational structure of the Church as a form of **opposition** to the values and beliefs elaborated through the totalitarian state structure - given that the Church represents a powerful, international, force that cannot be easily (or forcibly) suppressed. Thus, while Church membership and attendance will be high, the extent to which we can regard this as a primarily religious phenomenon is open to doubt. Rather than

being indicative of religious belief, as such, it may be indicative of a response to political oppression. When - and if - the political oppression is removed - and political institutions develop democratically - one would expect to see a relative decline in overt Church membership...

**Outline some of the possible consequences for social order that a "decline in religion" might involve.**

**Outline some of the possible arguments against the idea that a "decline in religion" might have serious consequences for social order and equilibrium (you might like to consider the concept of anomie here).**

To **conclude** this section, a number of points can be made:

1. The general **problems** involved in the **comparisons** between historical data and present day data make it difficult to draw reliable conclusions about secularisation.
2. The statistical evidence does show that only a **small proportion** of people in our society actively practice religion (as measured in terms of membership, attendance and so forth), but there is also little evidence to suggest that religious practice in the past was significantly greater (if we exclude some of the social factors that appear to have contributed to the apparently large number of people practising religion in the past). However, what we have to remember is that we are concerned to test the secularisation thesis, not participation rates in themselves, and the evidence for secularisation appears somewhat **inconclusive**.
3. There are areas of apparent **religious vitality** (as measured through religious practice) amongst the "newer religions". However, we should note that these tend to be more aggressively marketed than the established religions (religious sects, for example, tend to actively seek to recruit new members, whereas established religions do not).

In addition, the **newer religious forms** tend to emphasise the idea of "God in here" (that is, we are all spiritual beings who need help and instruction to release our inner spirituality), rather than "God out there" ("God" seen as a supernatural being existing outside of the individual) of the older religions. This is significant for two reasons:

- a. When we compare these different types of religion we may not be comparing like with like.
- b. More importantly, the newer religious movements (NRM's) tend to involve the individual with a much-reduced practical commitment than religions such as Christianity. Such religions may consequently be easier to practice in modern societies where all kinds of social activities compete with religion for a share of the individual's time.

In the discussion of religious practice, the conclusion we might reach is that although there is evidence to suggest that religious practice has declined (at least in Britain - other societies, at different stages of their development may not exhibit the same form of decline), such evidence is:

- a. Not particularly conclusive, given the problems involved in the empirical measurement of "decline".
- b. Not very conclusive in relation to the extent to which it represents evidence of secularisation - even if, for the sake of argument, we assume the statistical evidence to be reliable.

### C. The Level of Individual Consciousness: Religious Beliefs

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:

1. **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).
2. The anti-secularisation camp can, therefore, be divided into two basic positions:
  - a. Those who claim that 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.
  - b. Those who argue that 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.

As I have argued in the previous sections, the case for secularisation would seem, at best, to be "**not proven**". 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.

As I have further suggested, it is perhaps not very useful, sociologically, to see the secularisation debate in "either / or" terms - either it has occurred or it hasn't.

A more-fruitful way of looking at it might be to consider the ways religious **practice** and **organisation** have been **transformed** in modern societies. It is this idea that I want to develop in this final section, through an examination of the influence of **religious beliefs** in our society.

As you will be aware, there are huge problems involved in the measurement of religious beliefs. By and large, religious beliefs are measured simply by **asking** people about their beliefs and there are few, if any, ways of **objectively verifying** the subjective responses to such questions.

You should also be aware that 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.

In addition, 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...

What we can do, therefore, is to present selected evidence of religious beliefs drawn from opinion polling over the past few years and then attempt to interpret the evidence in relation to the pro-and-anti secularisation positions...

Opinion Polling evidence from 1991 seems to suggest 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 that:

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

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 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 addition, 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.

In relation to beliefs about the supernatural, the evidence is once again mixed. There is no decisive majority one way or the other in relation to the influence of the supernatural on our lives...

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 99.5 during the revival period of the 1950's (according to Gallop polls)"**

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, to complete this set of Notes we can note that the data I've presented can be useful if we look at it from the viewpoint that it is indicative of the way in which religious beliefs:

- a. Persist in some way in modern social systems.
- b. Have become embedded in what, to paraphrase Parsons, we might term the "overall moral framework" of our society.

In effect, values that were originally created through an **overtly religious moral framework** (for whatever reason) have come to serve as a "design for living" not because of their religious origins or content but simply because they provide a **general moral framework** for our behaviour.

Moral values (“**mores**”) 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”.

In this respect, we can easily adopt the moral values originally developed through religious institutions and organisation without necessarily having to buy-into the institutions themselves.

Thus, there is no particular inconsistency in believing that it is morally wrong to kill, steal or commit adultery and atheism.

However, in terms of the secularisation debate it is important to separate these types of moral guide-lines from the overtly “supernatural” content of religions (a belief in “god” / “gods”, the after-life and so forth).

In this respect I’ve tried to focus your attention on the idea of religion as ideology (a set of moral and practical beliefs that explain the nature of something like the social world in which the individual lives). In this respect, religious ideologies are not methodologically different to any other form of ideology (such as “science” for example). Their content is clearly different, but the organising principles involved are the same.

In this sense, it is clear that in a situation in which ideologies coexist and compete (a kind of **pluralist universe of meaning**), we should not be surprised to find a **fragmentation** of beliefs and behaviours, whereby no single ideology necessarily dominates in society. In past societies, religious ideologies dominated for two main reasons:

- a. Scientific ideologies / knowledge had not developed sufficiently to challenge the power of existing orthodoxy’s (for example, the earth as the centre of the universe).
- b. They explained everything about the world, both natural and social.

In this sense, as science develops it starts to present a **challenge** to some forms of explanation and, in many respects it triumphs over religious explanations (for example, astronomers proved that the earth was not the centre of the universe).

However, some things **remain inexplicable by science** (for example, what happens after death, do human beings have a soul and the like). since these are questions that need to be answered, the most “**plausible**” explanations we have are provided by religious ideologies. Thus:

Scientific ideologies become powerful in some areas, while religious ideologies remain powerful in other areas - the two coexist in frequently uneasy competition.

Science is powerful because it has clear rules of procedure, evidence and explanation; scientists can demonstrate that things are “true” through the use of repeated evidence.

Religion is powerful for the opposite reason. **Faith** allows the religious to provide any form of explanation (rational, mythical, magical or whatever) that suits a particular purpose or problem; its rules of procedure, evidence and explanation are infinitely elastic - they can be stretched to accommodate any situation in a way that scientific rules cannot.

This helps to explain two things:

- a. The persistence of religious ideologies in modern industrial societies.
- b. The coexistence of both religious and scientific ideologies.

Where religious ideologies are touched by scientific ideologies they are not necessarily overthrown or replaced since they are able to adapt to take account of the challenge. Thus, amongst many modern Churches (such as Islam in Iran) and sects (such as “Natural Law”) science itself can be **rationalised** (and hence neutralised) by claiming that since God created a natural, ordered, universe, He created science to help us understand the world.

This is not, of course, simply a quality of religion, however, since scientific ideologies are able to adapt and change (albeit for different reasons) as our knowledge develops .

As should be apparent, we have started to drift inexorably into the area of **methodology** that attempts to evaluate and explain the relationship between different ideologies in terms of what they can - and cannot - explain about the social world (in effect, their respective “uses and limitations”). We can develop these ideas a little more clearly by looking at a couple of Interactionist perspectives on religion.

**Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann** have explored religion as a form of ideology both individually, (“The Sacred Canopy”, 1967, “The Social Reality of Religion”, 1983 (both Berger), “Life-World and Social Realities”, 1969 (Luckmann)) and together, “The Sociology of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge”, 1963.

One of their main contentions is that not only have **religious ideological frameworks** come under **attack** from **scientific frameworks**, but also religions have **multiplied** to the extent that there is no-longer, in modern societies, a monopoly of religious ideas held by any one, dominant, Church.

**Modern societies** are characterised by a large number of **different Churches, sects and religious ideas**, so that a form of “**religious pluralism**” is now apparent.

Thus, religious institutions not only have to compete with other ideologies for believers, they have also to compete with each other. As **Berger** argues (“The Social Reality of Religion”):

**“Religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities”.**

As **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”.**

As we have seen, the type of religious organisations that have become most adept at marketing themselves (sects and cults) have been the religious organisations that have experienced **growth** rather than the steady decline experienced by most denominations. While this growth has to be seen in the context of the relatively **small** numbers of people involved, compared to the major world religions, it is perhaps significant nonetheless.

The implications for this state of affairs, according to **Berger and Luckmann**, are that as denominations have become more bureaucratic and more “business-like”, those who seek a “truly religious form of experience” are attracted to sects which attempt to isolate themselves from secular society.

**Wilson**, amongst others, interprets this as a retreat from religion - as evidence of the fragmentation, isolation and neutralisation of religious beliefs (secularisation),

**Greely** (“The Persistence of Religion”, 1973), on the other hand, sees this as evidence of what can be termed “**resacralization**”. That is, the growth and diversity of new religious movements as evidence of the renewal, vitality and so forth of religious beliefs in modern societies.

Whatever one’s **interpretation** of such evidence, it appears evident that religious beliefs seem to **persist** in modern societies in one form or another - and whether or not you consider it evidence of religious transformation or secularisation tends, as always, to depend upon the way in which you define both religion and secularisation...

To complete this section, it might be useful to firstly, outline **Berger’s** conclusion about the nature of religious beliefs and to follow this with a reading from Thompson in which he neatly summarises the secularisation debate...

**Berger** argues that the evidence for **secularisation** is **inconclusive** because religion has **changed** in form. In modern societies religion has become **pluralistic** (involving a number of different, competing, religious organisations) and **privatised** (a matter of individual choice). Because religion is seen, by Berger, as ideology (a meaning system for the interpretation of the world), he argues that religion is, by definition, “alive and well” because it represents, as far as we can tell, an indispensable element of human social life / existence.

In this respect, in order to explore the idea of secularisation methodologically, we have to take account of the idea that forms of religious belief and experience are dynamic. That is, they are part of a continuing social process that can only be effectively studied interpretively (in terms of the meaning that religion has for people).

While attempts to analyse religion in quantitative terms may produce evidence relating to religious practice, organisation and belief, this form of evidence is insufficient as a basis for answering the question of whether or not secularisation is occurring, for two main reasons:

**Firstly**, the form of measurement adopted (quantification) is inadequate as a means of capturing the essence of a phenomenon that is dynamic and constantly evolving into new forms.

**Secondly**, evidence for or against secularisation is highly dependent upon the way in which one initially defines both religion and secularisation. In this respect - depending upon your starting point - it is possible to interpret the evidence either way (both for the process occurring and against it occurring).

In the above respect, it is perhaps more useful, sociologically, to conclude that religious practice, organisation and belief has undergone a transformation in modern, industrialised, societies, but whether or not this is evidence of a process of secularisation is - and is likely to remain - inconclusive...

**Conclusion.**

As I have suggested, the question of whether or not modern, industrialised, societies (in particular, the "mature democracies" of Europe and America) have been / are becoming increasingly secularised is not one that has an easy, conclusive, answer - even in terms of the three main indicators of secularisation we have variously examined here.

Considered in terms of "established Churches", there seems little reason to doubt that religious practice has declined over the past 100 years (although, as we have seen, the reliability of statistical evidence in this area is questionable). For many sociologists, this is evidence of secularisation in that a "religious society" is one in which the power of religious institutions is measured by their ability to influence both the values of individuals and the general value-orientation of a society considered as a whole.

**Parsons** in particular has forcefully argued that established Churches have undergone a process of "structural differentiation" (a relatively common and important theme in Parsons general sociological view of social development), whereby such institutions have disengaged from former "secular" activities (such as political activity / leadership) in favour of a concentration upon their fundamental "core" (spiritual) activities. In terms of Parsons' argument, the social role of religious institutions has changed, but it has not necessarily become less important or significant.

Other sociologists, however, have pointed to the fact that "**New Religious Movements**" (in particular, various sects and cults) have **flourished** in the 20th century (particularly, but not exclusively, in America and, to a lesser extent, Europe). In terms of religious organisation and influence their power is not particularly significant, but in terms of religious practice and belief it seems reasonable to conclude that, on a non-institutional level of analysis at least, New Religious Movements (NRM's) represent a form of religious vitality.

**Contrary** to this view, perhaps, both **Berger** (to some extent) and **Wilson** (very forcefully) have interpreted the increasing **fragmentation** of religion and religious ideas as evidence of **secularisation**. In terms of the fact that New Religious Movements tend to be insular (inward-looking), close-knit (exclusive) and unable to influence wider forms of social organisation (politically, economically or ideologically), this is interpreted as evidence of the relative decline in the long-term influence of religion and religious institutions.

**Wilson**, in particular, dismisses the "religious" aspects of New Religious Movements as almost an irrelevance for the majority of people in any society. Sects, he argues, can only exist by offering "exotic novelty" to a "self-selected, self-obsessed and self-indulgent" few (mainly young and mainly middle class).

The fact that such New Religious Movement's cannot make the transition from their (undoubted) appeal to the "disaffected few" to the majority in any society is, argues Wilson, evidence of the increasing levels of secularisation in Western societies.

Finally in this respect, even in America where many of the New Religious Movements have arisen (considered in terms of the actual numbers of people involved), such sects have tended to be what Wallis has called the "world-affirming" type. That is, their members are members not because of any profoundly-held religious beliefs, but simply because they offer the chance for the powerless, the dispossessed and the

disenchanted to "improve themselves" (either economically or spiritually) in this world.

The religious content of such sects is seen to be fairly marginal, in that they represent a means towards the achievement of some form of "success" that has variously been denied to the sects' adherents. In this respect, such sects are not driven by fundamental religious values, as such, but by materialistic (that is, secular) values...

To sum-up, therefore, the secularisation debate is an important one because it relates to questions concerning the significance of religion as an ideology in both modern and pre-modern societies. As a concept, it touches upon a wide range of questions that, in some shape or form, are sociologically important.

However, it is debatable as to whether the concept of secularisation is, in itself, sociologically significant or useful. For a variety of reasons (not the least of these being methodological), it does not appear that the theory can be adequately tested. The questions raised through the use of the concept, however, are important. These include such things as:

The significance of religion as a belief system.

The relationship between beliefs and behaviour.

The relationship between different types of religious organisation.

The origin and social significance of New religious Movements.