

Copyright Notice

Staff and students of this University are reminded that copyright subsists in this extract and the work from which it was taken. This Digital Copy has been made under the terms of a CLA Licence which allows you to:

- Access and download a copy
- Print out a copy

This Digital Copy and any digital or printed copy supplied to or made by you under the terms of this Licence are for use in connection with this module or course of study. You may retain such copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

All copies (including electronic copies) shall include this Copyright Notice and shall be destroyed and/or deleted if and when required by the University.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by e-mail) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder.

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author.

Title of extract: **Secularisation and the Decline of Religion**

Name of Author: **Hunt, S.J.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Religion in Western Society. Hunt, S.J.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Palgrave**

Pages scanned: **14 - 31**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Religion, Spirituality and Secularisation TRDL7077**

Name of Designated Person
authorising scanning:

E. L. Harris

Date authorised: 19.05.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

2 Secularization and the 'Decline' of Religion

As a survey of the literature would suggest, the sociology of religion has been preoccupied with the debate surrounding the secularization thesis. In turn, this debate is hedged in by the problems of definition. The popular assumption is that it simply denotes the decline of religion. However, this is to oversimplify a complex area which needs to be addressed in more detail. This chapter and Chapter 3 consider the theme of secularization, overview the problems associated with it, and examine the evidence that points to a possible decline, resurgence or, alternatively, the increasing plurality of religiosity.

Secularization: myth or ideology?

As we shall see, some sociologists have argued the so-called decline of religion is something of a myth and cannot be substantiated by either historical or contemporary evidence. Others have argued that there are good reasons for arguing that sociological speculations related to secularization cannot themselves be divorced from their wider social context. Hence, the problem of objectivity discussed in the opening chapter is also encountered in the core debate regarding secularization. Indeed, Bellah (1971) suggests that the insistence of the decline of religion is itself a notion generated by modernity and, therefore, cannot be separated from its Western cultural roots. Stemming from the Enlightenment, the hope for a secular society began as an academic response to the dominance of the Christian Church and continued as a reaction to religious authority by those who are inclined towards atheism. In good tradition, many sociologists have since viewed religious belief as an

intellectual error, which the progress of science and rationality would ultimately weaken to the point of disappearance. In his early work, David Martin (1965), argued that the failure of sociology to be objective in this respect meant that the term secularization had strong ideological overtones. Moreover, secularization was so contentious a concept that it should be abandoned entirely.

Despite the controversies surrounding the term, secularization, conceptually speaking, can at least be recognized as an interpretive paradigm which allows us to describe and comprehend the inter-related themes of social and religious change in the West. Nor should the numerous contrasting theories of secularization distract from acknowledging their overlapping concerns. In this regard, a not untypical appraisal of theories of secularization is advanced by Olivier Tschannen (1991) who argues that, while many are not compatible at the abstract level, they nevertheless share a very broad set of assumptions of modernity and include:

First, *the advance of rationalization*. Here, perceptions of reality lose their sacred character to be replaced by a rational-causal explanation of the world whereby human knowledge, behaviour and institutions, once thought to be grounded in divine power, are recognized to be merely human creation.

Secondly, *differentiation*: the disengagement of society from religion. Religion draws into its marginalized enclave and becomes primarily of private concern. In doing so, religious symbols, doctrines and institutions lose their prestige and significance.

Thirdly, *increasing worldliness*, including a greater conformity to this world and attendance to worldly problems at the expense of belief in the supernatural, even by forms of traditional religiosity.

Around these core 'concepts' revolve a number of subordinate themes, most notably atomization, privatization, generalization and pluralization. These will form the background to our discussion of secularization.

Rationalism and the decline of religion

The idea that science and rationality would eclipse religion has been an enduring theme. The most influential work in this respect has proved to be that of Max Weber (1958), who stressed the growth of rationality as the primary mode of motivation, particularly in the

West, as a result of unique historical conditions including urbanization, technological advances, communication and the growth of the capitalist economy. Weber predicted that the world would no longer be charged with the mystery of the 'magical garden' that had infused the consciousness of pre-modern man. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, he foresaw social existence as increasingly dominated by rational motivation, meaning and action which involved a deliberate and precise calculation of means and goals orientated to this world. Religiously motivated behaviour, such as the search for other-worldly salvation, would be eclipsed. Ironically, Weber had identified this cognitive shift as partly attributable to certain internal factors related to Christianity, particularly Protestant varieties. Ascetic Protestantism largely provided the motivational spark responsible for the work ethic that was to herald the emergence of large-scale capitalism which, in turn, enhanced the march of rationalism through its calculated pursuit of profit. With a twist of irony, Weber predicted that rationalism would subsequently turn back and erode its Christian foundations and bring a 'disenchantment of the world'.

A similar theme has been developed by Peter Berger (1973). His view is that, along with a number of other social and economic factors, Protestant Christianity contained within it the seeds of secularity. The key factor for Berger, as with Weber, is the increasing disenchantment of the world in the West as a result of distinct historical developments. Some of these explicitly 'religious' causes could be traced back to ancient Judaism with its rejection of magic and mysticism in favour of an ethical rationalism that, within centuries of its emergence, was adopted by Christianity. Bursting through during the Reformation, this inner-worldly ethic was to influence Western civilization or at least its Protestant expression. Disposing of the mystical, sacramental and ritual aspects of Catholicism, Protestantism radically separated the sacred and profane spheres – undermining the sacred relationship between God and man. Secularization, as defined by the eclipse of a supernatural view of the world, was therefore inadvertently advanced. At the same time, according to Berger, the Church-type organization with its specialized religious functions, particularly discernible in Protestantism, pointed in the direction of secularization. This form of organization carried an inherent potential institutional specialism of religion that was rare in the

history of religion. The major implication was that the other areas of social life were gradually reduced to the profane realm and subject to the impact of rationalization, knowledge and science.

The Wilsonian perspective

Other sociologists such as Bryan Wilson (1966) have focused on the significance of rationality as central to secularizing impulses but have identified it as an external factor to religion, rather than uniquely internal to Protestantism. The key variables are primarily associated with the growth and development of modes of thought and worldviews which are not supernaturalistic in outlook. Wilson's argument is that the autonomous growth of scientific knowledge and method has undermined the credibility of religious interpretations of the world. Of particular importance is the application of scientific approaches to man's endeavours. Increasingly, Western consciousness has come to understand that human destiny is in human rather than divine hands, and that human problems have human solutions. Wilson argues that this is a tendency which was enhanced in the last half of the twentieth century. Much was typified by the victory of the Allies in the Second World War, especially with the development of atomic weapons, which showed man as master of his own world and destiny.

For Wilson, rationality alone would not hasten secularization. A process of institutional differentiation was taking place which meant that the various institutional domains in society became separated from each other because they performed specialized functions. The implication for religion is that specialized religious institutions have merely religious functions. The contrast here is with religion in simpler, non-industrial societies where beliefs, values and practices of religion directly influence behaviour in all spheres of human life. In modern society, suggests Wilson, religion is reduced to marginalized areas with the minimum of significance and authority in any given realm of social existence.

Another consideration advanced by Wilson (1976) is the decline of community from which religion ultimately stems (a theme earlier developed by Durkheim). The decline of community in modern industrial society results from high levels of social and geographical mobility and consequent changes in the nature of social control. In well-integrated communities authority has a

moral and religious basis. By contrast, in the modern, rational and bureaucratic world control is impersonal and removed from its former religious and ethical foundation. Religion loses its significance in such a setting, as do communal values which traditionally receive expression in the form of collective rituals. The Western world of today is, therefore, in marked contrast with the Middle Ages when the Church was at the height of ecclesiastical and political power in Europe and largely responsible for identifying and punishing perceived deviant social and religious behaviour by excommunication and the threat of hell, together with the sanctioning of physical punishment on behalf of the community.

Religious pluralism

A contrasting approach to the theme of secularization has focused on the pluralist dimensions of Western society. Here, Peter Berger's work (1970) has been particularly influential and, until relatively recently, appeared to be the prevailing paradigm in sociological accounts of secularization. Berger concurs with Wilson in accepting that rationalizing tendencies erode a supernaturalistic worldview. However, there is more to the equation, and of overriding significance is the pluralistic nature of the modern world. Modernization and industrialization aid the social fragmentation of society which creates a plurality of cultural and religious groups. Berger, writing with Luckmann (1967), points out that instead of one religious tradition with a single, unchallenged worldview of the supernatural, there are now many divergent views. No longer is a single universe of meaning, passed on from one generation to the next, provided for all members of society. In some respects this is close to Wilson's view in that it assumes that religion can no longer express and reinforce the values of society or sanctify its social institutions, and in which the state is unable to support a single religion without causing conflict with different social groups.

Berger, like Wilson, therefore argues that religion ceases to perform its traditional function of promoting social solidarity. However, Berger's emphasis is on the decline of religion in the sense of offering a shared comprehensive explanation of the world and at the level of human significance and meaning.

The plurality of religion, Berger also suggests, reminds individuals

that their beliefs are a personal preference, a matter of choice, and no longer part and parcel of their membership of society. It follows that the condition where one can choose between one religious interpretation and another, and where rival interpretations and organizations compete in the 'marketplace' of religions, is likely to result in a devaluation or loss of authority for the religious worldview generally. In short, the pluralist situation relativizes competing religious worldviews and their matter-of-fact acceptance. Moreover, the pluralistic situation where one can choose one's religion is also a situation where one can choose to disbelieve. (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 151).

Evidence of religious decline

Such approaches as those considered so far remain compelling and influential. However, the notion of an inevitable decline of religion in the wake of modernization was always an unconvincing assumption for some commentators. One plank of the argument that is critiqued is the assumption by advocates of the secularization thesis that there was once some Golden Age that has somehow been lost. Shiner (1966), who refutes the secularization thesis, argues that the problem is 'of determining when and where we are able to find the supposedly "religious" age from which decline has commenced'. Certainly the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1973) does not see religion as always integral to the life of small-scale, pre-industrial societies. Even in tribal communities, she maintains, alongside spiritual fervour there are frequently many of the expressions of scepticism and materialism that are familiar aspects of contemporary Western societies. It is, therefore, wrong to draw a sharp distinction between the past and the present. There is no simple parallel between the supposedly 'religious' pre-industrial society and the Western world typified by secularity.

According to Bruce (1997a), who actually supports the secularization thesis, the 'Golden Age of Faith' is something of a caricature. However, he maintains that there is nothing in the secularization thesis that requires that such an age existed. All that the argument requires is that previous generations were more religious than people are today. Bruce argues that much depends on what is meant by 'religion'. In the choice between functional definitions (what

religion does) and substantive ones (what religion is in terms of beliefs related to the existence of supernatural powers and beings), he opts for the latter in adopting a historical perspective. In countries where Christianity was strong, ordinary people saw religion in terms of a set of beliefs and practices related to the supernatural. This being so, the evidence shows that the history of the Church, as an institution deeply embedded in social, economic and political life over the centuries in Europe, experienced periods of popularity and decline. For example, it lost popular support during the upheaval of the Reformation. In some parts of Western Europe it soon recovered, in others it did not. Nonetheless, the general trend is that of the decline of an all-pervasive religious worldview whether that was predominantly Christian or the magic and superstition that frequently gained greater popularity when the faith experienced periods of decline.

What then is the historical evidence for some Golden Age of religion in the West? Some believe that the testimony often advanced is unreliable. For instance, the historian K.V. Thomas (1974) points out that, in the case of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, little is known of the religious practices and belief which prevailed at the time – certainly insufficient to draw conclusions. Indeed, what evidence does exist of religiosity in Europe over the centuries tends to be limited to the more visible and better documented religion of the ruling social elites rather than that of ordinary people (Douglas, 1983).

It may well be that religion was not that significant for much of the population of Western societies in previous centuries. Even Marxists, such as Bryan Turner (1983), have sometimes taken a revisionist stance by suggesting that at the so-called height of religiosity and ecclesiastical power of medieval Catholic Europe, peasant communities were largely untouched and indifferent to the faith in their daily struggle for survival. Thus, the significance of religion may have been merely a concern for the nobility where it was, above all, an ideological prop for the dominant system of property rights and inheritance. This kind of assessment has, in turn, been contested. For instance, evidence suggests that the cult of the Virgin Mary and the saints does appear to have had great popular significance for the masses in terms of belief and practice in medieval Europe (Hamilton, 1995, p. 168).

While the evidence of the impact of Christianity is inconclusive,

there remains the problem of putting too much emphasis on the evidence of a Golden Age of Christianity and its subsequent demise. As Wilson (1982) argues, in his decline-of-religion thesis, we should not place overdue stress on the dissolution of Christianity in the West. Secularization is not the same as de-Christianization. A whole range of pagan beliefs and practices, superstition and 'folk' religion permeated Christian Europe and even influenced the Christian faith. Nonetheless, according to Wilson, it is these expressions of religiosity, as well as the more pronounced Christian aspects, which have also discernibly diminished.

Measuring decline

Belief

Even today the attempt to measure religious decline by so-called hard empirical evidence is a notoriously hazardous enterprise. Two of the usual indices advanced are those of religious belief and belonging. We may take the matter of belief first by exploring a few examples through the findings of opinion polls which probably supply the simplest type of data related to religious belief.

Several European Values surveys conducted from the 1980s to the year 2000 (Harding, Phillips and Fogarty, 1985; Cook, 2000) have found that under 60 per cent of Europeans regularly define themselves as 'a religious person', some 50 per cent claim that God was significant in their life and around 50 per cent believe in an existence after death. At the same time, however, only some 20 per cent admit to a religious experience sometime during their life. In addition, evidence from Britain suggests that the number of people who would describe themselves as atheists or agnostics remained fairly constant at just under 27 per cent (Brierley, 2000).

Clearly, these statistics are very much open to interpretation. It might be suggested that a sizeable majority of the population of Britain retains religious belief and, therefore, could be used as evidence against secularization even if only a minority attend religious institutions and perform religious ceremonies with any regularity. This kind of approach has been endorsed by Davie (1994), who argues that, at least in the case of Britain, there has occurred a separation of belief and belonging. Widespread belief remains but it is not expressed by institutional allegiance. Nonetheless, it

may be argued that the data produced by the European Systems Study also supports the secularization theory since only half those sampled purported that God was significant in their lives.

Belonging

Belonging to a religious institution or collective is perhaps the most obvious and visible way of measuring the extent of religiosity. Leading secularization theorists such as Wilson are influenced by what may appear to be the popular view that a religious individual is one who regularly attends church and displays other discernible outward expressions of religiosity. However, the empirical evidence of a decline of such outward commitment is difficult to substantiate and is tied up with the problem of measuring the extent of the personal and private religiosity of those who practice religion. Even those measurements of personal faith that have been carefully constructed, such as that of Glock and Stark (1969) which include knowledge of one's faith, claims to a religious experience and regularity of ritual observance, are impossible to apply in any meaningful way to the measurement of religious decline in large-scale nation states.

Certainly, a good deal of statistical evidence concerning religious practice does seem to point towards religious decline, despite the problems of validity and reliability. Church membership and attendance figures are often provided as a measurement, as are the rates of the performance of special Christian ceremonies such as baptisms and marriages. In England there were 428 per 1000 baptisms per live births in 1976 compared to 554 in 1960. The basis on which baptism figures are calculated changed after 1976 but the decline has continued up until today. There has similarly been a noticeable drop in the number of marriages conducted in church. In 1929, 56 per cent of marriages in England and Wales were carried out in the Church of England compared with 37 per cent in 1973. Church membership has also diminished. In 1990, only 14.6 per cent of the population were members of a church – a fall of 4 per cent over the previous five years. In 2000, the figure was closer to 7 per cent with the projected figure for 2020 a mere 1 per cent (Brierley, 2000, p. 12).

A prevailing point of view is that such statistics are unreliable. Nineteenth-century church attendance figures, to which today's data is often compared, arguably pose special problems because the

methods of data collection do not match present standards of reliability. More recent figures can also be hard to verify. Attendance and membership data may be distorted by the concealed designs of those who produce them. Roman Catholic churches tend to underestimate the size of their congregations in order to reduce the capitation fees they have to pay to central church authorities. Others may overestimate statistics to generate impressive totals, particularly where there may be a chance of a church with a small congregation being closed down.

This approach which doubts the validity of statistics can, however, be countered. While there are undoubtedly difficulties of interpretation, these are probably no greater for religious data than for any other subject area that the historically minded sociologist has to contend with. Areas of apparent unreliability can also be checked. The Catholic Church, for example, also issues annual attendance rates which can be set against total community size.

The complexities of secularization

If we accept that there is a general decline of religion, it is clear that the process is extraordinarily complex. First, there is evidence of considerable variation of its demise in different Western societies. Secondly, even within individual societies the alleged decline appears to be occurring to different degrees in different spheres of social life. Thirdly, there is the debate as to whether decline is a global phenomenon, or merely a distinct characteristic of the West.

Variations in the West

The institutional decline of religion seems to be an unequal one in advanced industrial societies. In terms of church attendance, decline appears more marked in the Protestant countries of Northern Europe than in the Catholic countries of the Mediterranean region. Church attendance is minimal in Scandinavia with countries such as Sweden displaying attendances as low as 5 per cent. In the Benelux countries, declining attendance is somewhat less obvious, while in Northern Ireland, for distinct historical reasons, church membership remains high at over 50 per cent.

Also complicating the picture are developments in the USA – arguably the most advanced industrial nation on earth. The *Yearbook of American Churches* states that from 1940 to 1957, church membership increased from 49 per cent of the population to 61 per cent, while average weekly attendance rose from 37 per cent to 40 per cent. Though there was a minor decline in attendance during the 1960s and early 1970s, according to survey statistics published in 1987 by Roof and McKinney, 46 per cent of the American population attended church at least once a week, while a further 21 per cent were occasional attenders. Their data also showed that only just under 7 per cent of Americans claimed no religious preference. However, more recently, the findings of Hadaway Marler and Chaves (1993) suggest that such statistics are misleading. This is not because of the way they are calculated but the way they are collected. The attendance figures among Roman Catholic and Protestant churches may be only 50 per cent of what they are commonly held to be. This is because of the way people exaggerate their frequency of church-going with statistics noticeably higher than those recorded by church bodies.

Even if we acknowledge that church attendance in the USA is far higher than in most European countries, this could be due to unique cultural variables and may not necessarily be bound up with impressive levels of religiosity. This was possibly also the case with the relatively high nineteenth-century attendances in Victorian Britain which may have been influenced by non-religious factors – a sign of middle-class respectability rather than deep religious conviction. In line with this conjecture, the influential work of Herberg (1956) suggested that in the USA church affiliation was very much historically tied up to membership of Protestant, Catholic or Jewish communities, and was also a badge for adhering to the broad values of American society and nation. For Herberg, this represented a thorough-going secularization and a largely superficial form of religiosity. A similar conclusion is also advanced by Luckmann (1967, p. 36) who argues that in the USA many mainline churches and denominations have been subject to an 'internal secularization'. In short, they have become this-worldly in their orientation, and accept the mainstream values of secular American society, rather than focusing on the fundamentals of the faith with its emphasis on directing belief and practice towards the next life.

Levels of secularity within societies

Even the most vehement supporters of the decline-of-religion thesis have not viewed it as a uniform or inevitable process, while others have identified both forces of secularization and resistance or even counter-secularizing forces. There have been attempts to grapple with this complexity and in this respect one of the more impressive works is that of Dobbelaere (1981). Dobbelaere uses the term 'laicization' to refer to the complementary social process of differentiation, de-sacrilization and transposition. They may be understood as follows:

- *Differentiation*: the disengagement of society from religion. Religion becomes merely another (rather marginalized) social institution.
- *Transposition*: a reference to religious change or changes in the structure of religious organizations and their beliefs. Frequently, it denotes an increasing adaptation to, or growing conformity with, the contemporary world.
- *De-sacrilization*: the level of religious involvement on the part of the individual – measured in terms of declining religious activity.

There is no reason, Dobbelaere argues, to suggest that secularization may not occur at these different levels at one and the same time. Hence, religion may simultaneously be confined to the private sphere, may lose social significance, or itself become worldly orientated. Secularization in various social contexts must be carefully examined at each of these levels:

Richter (1994) has attempted to do just this by applying Dobbelaere's framework of laicization in his analysis of the liberalization of Sunday trading in Britain and the public debate surrounding it. Developments can be appreciated at the social, private, and specifically religious level.

1. *Social level* (differentiation): social change in most Western societies is primarily intimately connected to technological and commercial advances. Those advocating Sunday trading are capitalist companies motivated by worldly commercial interests. Arguments to support it are advanced in rational terms; for example, that Sunday shopping is a matter of consumer choice and optimizes economic growth.

2. *Religious change* (transposition): Britain, like other Western societies, is now essentially pluralistic with public opinion and even some expressions of Christianity ignoring the Third Commandment of keeping the sabbath holy. There are vociferous opponents to Sunday trading from conservative Christians. However, the prevailing consensus is in favour.
3. *The private sphere* (de-sacrilization): religious involvement is now a voluntary activity and is itself unlikely to be affected by Sunday shopping. People may choose church or Sunday shopping. Nevertheless, as evidence from the USA suggests, both practices are not exclusive of each other. For example, some of the larger churches actually have their own shopping malls.

Universal trends

There have been attempts by some sociologists to show that religious decline is not only associated with Western countries, but that a global trend is observable. For example, Acquaviva (1979) concluded from a survey of data in North America, Europe and Latin America that in the industrialized and industrializing Christian world at least, there was a widespread weakening of ecclesiastical religiosity and belief. A conviction that religion is declining in the nominally Christian countries is not however to suggest a broad global or inevitable decline. Others such as Wilson (1966, 1982), by contrast, see secularization as a long-term process occurring in all human societies, although the precise pattern of decline might be culturally and historically specific to each context.

Alternatively, some, including David Martin, see the nature and extent of the changes in the role of religion varying to such a degree globally that it is misleading to see secularization as anything like a single process. Comparing Europe, North America and the Middle East, Martin (1991) concludes that secularization is largely a European phenomenon and relates this to the struggle between the churches and secular forces in the history of Europe and the early modern era which discredits religion to an extent not experienced elsewhere.

Martin has also drawn attention to the contrasting fate of religion in different countries in the developing world. For

example, in Latin America there are plenty of examples where the Roman Catholic monopoly has been broken by new waves of Protestantism in the form of Pentecostalism – a dynamic form of Christianity with an emphasis on primal spirituality and expressive worship. Evidence in Islamic societies suggests that religious change also varies from country to country. As far as Tunisia and Egypt is concerned, the state has become somewhat secular. In other countries, Islamic fundamentalism has taken hold. Given the global evidence, Martin concludes that 'There is no inevitable tilt to history down which every society is sociologically fated to fall' (Martin, 1991, p. 87). Secularization then, is not a universal or inevitable process.

The debate nonetheless continues with those such as Steve Bruce (1992) reinforcing the more traditional interpretation of secularization. While he accepts that the pattern of religious change varies from society to society, Bruce concludes that 'The modern Western world is not a religious place.' Technological advances reduce religious perceptions of the world. This has given individuals a greater sense of control over the natural environment and less need to resort to supernatural explanations or remedies. Moreover, low church attendance rates, the increasing worldliness of the churches, decline in the political significance of religion and the complexities of pluralism all point to religion becoming little more than a leisure pursuit and lifestyle preference, and of no great social significance.

Bruce argues that in parts of the world where religion still appears strong, it does so largely because it constitutes a form of cultural defence. Perhaps, above all, it is used by ethnic or national groups to protect their identity from external threats. This has proved to be the case in Northern Ireland, in Poland where it aided resistance to Communism and in Yugoslavia where it has enhanced the cultural distinctiveness of conflicting ethnic factions. Bruce also argues that in other circumstances religion remains resilient since it provides a means of coping with cultural transition. It is, in short, a way of dealing with social change. For example, for new immigrant groups and their descendants it provides a reassertion of identity often denied them in their new surroundings. However, the overall long-term, global trend is clearly towards secularity.

Religious transformation

There has always been a contrasting set of theories which has stressed the endurance of religion in Western societies. For example, Durkheim anticipated that religion in its traditional form would be of declining social significance. However, he insisted that there was 'something eternal in religion'. One of the ways that he believed this would be expressed was in the emergence of secular forms of religiosity, including 'religious' status being given to the principles of modern society and an allegiance to the overarching values of liberal democracy, social justice and the free market. At the same time, Durkheim surmised, there would develop the 'cult of man' – an almost 'divine' recognition of human progress and what man was capable of (Durkheim, 1915, p. 336) – a prediction which Westley (1978) believes has come true and is encapsulated in the contemporary human potential movement. It is clear that in such conjectures a more functional definition of religion is preferred which necessarily gives an account of contemporary religion a far broader scope.

One other popular theme among commentators developing Durkheimian arguments is that, rather ironically, science has itself become a form of religion. This notion is not entirely new. Comte, in the eighteenth century, fervently argued that science would emerge as the new religion, while a belief in the supernatural declined. More recently, Ellul (1976) has maintained that religious conviction has been replaced by a faith in science and technology. In short, the latter has become a form of religion and can be understood 'as a power both as usable and incomprehensible, terrifying and redeeming, liberating and dominating' but, above all, it provides a new order of meaning. In turn, this kind of speculation, which obviously includes a very broad definition of religion, has been challenged. For Boudin, Dain-Cricq and Hirschhorn (1982), the advance of such a faith in science must primarily be seen as a clear indication of the retreat of supernaturalistic forms of religion in Western societies.

The individualization of religion

Another concern of those commentators who would stress the endurance of religion is the increasingly individualistic nature of

religious faith, which is invariably linked to the wider processes of social differentiation in Western societies. Many of those opposed to the decline-of-religion thesis tend to accentuate the alleged prevalence of numerous private and individual practices in contemporary society outside of organized, traditional religious institutions. Bellah (1964), for instance, denies that Western man should be seen as essentially secular, materialistic, dehumanized and fundamentally areligious. Void of institutional and social pressures, individuals are now free to follow a personal quest for meaning rather than embrace a collective act of religious involvement. In this sense religion has undergone a process of individuation whereby people work out their own salvation and follow their own path to 'ultimate meaning'. The key point is that the importance of religion has not declined. Rather, its form of expression has changed and this may be a truer expression of religiosity since it is not enforced by established religious institutions or social pressures. From this point of view, religion will not lose out in the face of rationalism, and the scientific and technical basis of modern society. Indeed, the endurance of religion results from 'the limits of rationalism'. In short, rationalism fails to provide for all human emotional and intellectual needs and, above all, the search for meaning. Religion therefore continues many of its erstwhile functions.

A similar view has been adopted by Luckmann (1967) who denies that secularization is taking place at all. It is simply that traditional forms of religion have been transformed into new expressions. Luckmann has characterized contemporary societies as having no need for an overarching system of values framed in religious terms. Subsequently, religion becomes an aspect of private life, of individual choice from a variety of alternatives which can be constructed into a personally satisfying system of beliefs. This leads Luckmann to conclude, however, that modern societies are witnessing a profound change in the location of religion, away from the 'great transcendences' concerned with other-worldly matters, of issues of life and death, and towards new forms expressing 'little transcendences' of earthly life which involve self-realization, self-expression and personal freedoms (Luckmann, 1990).

For Luckmann, the important point is that a great deal of hidden religiosity exists and is not expressed in institutional form. This 'invisible religion' that he observes, particularly to be found

among the middle classes, obviously stretches definitions of religiosity far more than other sociologists would accept.

The kind of approaches advanced by Bellah and Luckmann have been criticized on several grounds. First, that their arguments are based in part on a broad view of religion as defined by a search for ultimate meaning and that is synonymous with new forms of religiosity. However, these seem to be lacking in all the vital ingredients of religion including a supernatural reference, strict codes of morality and focus upon what they can do for believers in this world rather than preparing them for salvation in the next (Bruce 1992). Secondly, there is no proof that this search for meaning is a widespread sentiment. Thirdly, the alleged religiosity underlying such private activities as personal prayer and meditation, does not find expression in any institutionalized or collective form and in itself testifies to the precarious position of religion. This loss of an institutional basis may be a stage in the ultimate demise of even private religiosity. Moreover, Wilson (1976) sees no real endurance of religion in the emergence of new forms. He argues that these tend to be short-lived, faddish and rather superficial forms of religiosity.

Summary

So far we have approached the theme of the decline or otherwise of religion through a discussion of the definition of secularity, the ideological significance of the term and its relevance in the context of Western society. The brief survey above also shows that speculations regarding religious decline in Western societies to a great degree depend upon how religion is defined. As Shiner (1966, p. 211) has stated; 'It is evident that part of the difficulty in measuring the decline of religion is the definition of religion itself.' It is fairly evident that those who adopt a functional approach are inclined to deny the secularization thesis, whereas those who take a substantive approach are likely to support it.

In some regards all of the themes related to secularity so far discussed have been rather oversimplified. Nonetheless, many of these themes will be elaborated in the substantive topics that constitute subsequent chapters. For instance, the link between ethnicity and the endurance of religion will be considered in

Chapter 10. More, however, needs to be said about contrasting theories and developing paradigms which allow us at least to consider the secularization debate in sometimes radically different ways. This is the subject matter of the next chapter.