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The Big Picture

Although international comparisons have not been made explicit, at many points in the previous chapters I have implied that the patterns and trends we see in the religious life of modern Britain are not unique. In this conclusion I want to draw the themes presented above into a comprehensive explanation of *secularization*, which I take to be a central characteristic of modern industrial societies.

There is very widespread agreement that Britain's religious life is not what it used to be. Although not regarded with any great hostility, our churches are unpopular, their teachings are ignored by the vast majority of the population, their leaders no longer have the ears of our rulers, their efforts to glorify God are barely noticed, and their beliefs no longer inform the presuppositions of the wider culture. Within the churches, much of the specific belief content of Christianity has been allowed to disappear from sight or has been radically rewritten to make it accord with rational and secular thought. Many of those who continue to attend to the supernatural are oriented, not to an external God and his writ over the world and all that it contains, but to the inner self. There are enclaves where religion remains potent—where it is closely associated with a threatened ethnic identity, where its adherents have isolated themselves from the mainstream, and where it aids ethnic minorities in coming to terms with their place in a new world—but they are only enclaves. In so far as the supernatural or the spiritual is still to be found in the mainstream, it is in almost homoeopathic concentrations: so watered down as to be a shadow of its former self, nearly undetectable to the untrained eye.

We must, of course, be careful that this general image of modern Britain as a secular society does not so colour our vision that we are blind to the presence of religion today or exaggerate how religious were our forebears. Not every ploughman who homeward plodded his weary way was a true believer and not every Essex stockbroker is an atheist. None the less, the general direction of change is unmistakable.

This does not mean that the secularization thesis, as it is about to be summarized, is universally accepted. If for no other reason, the need for scholars of every new generation to make their names by overturning the orthodoxies of their predecessors would ensure that my account would have its critics, and they are many, although it is worth noting that they are almost all sociologists of religion. Students of other disciplines and other areas of sociology clearly do not believe that religion is an important social fact to which they must attend. Alternatives to my account of religious change are cited in the Further Reading section for this chapter, and there is no scope here to address any but the most general or most wayward criticisms.

It is often asserted that the secularization approach assumes that religion has declined as, and because, people got smarter. Truth displaced falsehood. Certainly one finds committed atheists—the sort of people who join Rationalist and Humanist associations—and some very liberal Christians arguing that religion has lost its medieval dominance because modern people are too clever to believe in old superstitions. Some influential early social scientists held similar views. The nineteenth-century Frenchman Auguste Comte believed that the new science of sociology would replace the old myths. Sigmund Freud declared his hand when he called one of his books on religion *The Future of an Illusion*. Karl Marx expected socialism to make redundant what he regarded as the ‘opiate of the masses’. But no modern account of secularization assumes that we (or our culture) are superior to what went before or that religion has declined because it is false. The history of the human ability to believe very strongly in what turns out to be nonsense suggests that whether something is true or false and whether or not it becomes widely accepted are two very different questions. Whether religion or any particular religion is true is a theological, not a sociological, question. Fortunately we can avoid such unprofitable terrain by recognizing that all beliefs—true ones as much as false ones—need explaining. Hence we can ask what is it about our societies, other than the supposed greater maturity of modern people, that explains why religious beliefs are less plausible or credible than once they were.

A second common criticism is that the secularization approach assumes the decline in the social significance of religion to be uniform, regular, and irreversible, and hence that it is refuted by evidence of religious revivals or continued religiosity in modern society. Such criticism misunderstands the nature of explanation in the social sciences. Modern societies are not homogeneous, like jars of food for babies aged 3–7 months. They are lumpy, and in identifying general trends we are talking about probabilities and percentages, not making invariant and

universal claims. We also need to remember that, unlike the objects whose reactions are explained by the laws of natural science, we are dealing with conscious sentient beings who can respond to the trends the sociologist identifies by trying to subvert the predictions.

A third criticism of the claim that modernity undermines the plausibility of the supernatural is that it is refuted by such contemporary revivals of politicized religious fervour as we see in Iran or Pakistan or the Punjab. Again, this simply misunderstands what is being asserted. As will be clear, ‘modern’ here does not mean ‘extant in our time’; it means possessing most or all of the features listed below. The Kalahari bushmen are still about, but no one would cite their culture as relevant to arguments about the effects of modernization.

This clarification does raise another objection to using modernization as the ‘cause’ of secularization. There is always a danger in showing the close connections of the two processes that one might actually define them in such a way that they are the same. Then, instead of a causal claim along the lines of ‘vegetarian pasties make me sick’, we have only a tautology, a proposition that is true only because the second part is merely a restatement of the first: ‘all triangles have three sides’ is a good example. However, I hope that the way I have formulated the relationship between modernization and the decline of religion clearly distinguishes the two processes.

Enough of the preliminaries; what explains secularization? A cursory glance at countries and social groups within countries which are least religious suggests that it has something to do with modernization. By modernization I mean the whole package of economic, political, cultural, and social changes that come with increasing reliance on inanimate rather than animate sources of power. The Egyptians built the pyramids with men and beasts; we build with machines and carbon fuels. Clearly modernization, like secularization, is a multi-faceted process and we cannot expect that, in every example, every facet will be identical, but then life is complicated!

The Social Consequences of Modernization

One obvious feature of modernization is the division of single social institutions into smaller but more specialized units. The family was once a unit of economic production as well as the site for biological and cultural reproduction. George Eliott’s Silas Marner wove his cloth while looking after his foundling daughter, and he did both at home. Now

we go out to work. The family was once the site for all education and socialization. Now we have special places called schools to which people go to be educated by professional educators.

Ideas from the world of production and exchange—the need to increase efficiency, supply, and demand as the fixer of price, and so on—are so powerful in our culture that it is difficult to believe that the medieval church made a valiant attempt to control such matters. In the fourteenth century, lending money for profit was regarded as sinful and the Church's own courts claimed jurisdiction over usurers. A century before, craft guilds used church courts to enforce their restrictive practices and to try breaches of contract. Modernization sees the freeing of economic activity from religiously sanctioned controls and the development of the world of work as an autonomous sphere driven only by its own values. Gradually other aspects of life go the same way. Education, social welfare, health care, and social control have mostly passed out of church control, and where churches still run such activities they do so in ways that differ little from the secular provision.

At the same time, as life becomes divided into evermore specialized areas, so the people become divided into distinct classes and social groups. Economic growth leads to the emergence of an ever greater range of occupation and life-situation. Although there were considerable disparities of wealth in feudal societies, most people lived similar lives and they lived cheek-by-jowl. In medieval tower houses and castles, the gentry and their servants often slept in the same room, separated only by curtains. They ate at the same table, with the salt dish marking the gentry from the riff-raff. Because there was a strong hierarchical social structure which was quite open and clear about differences in status, superiors did not feel threatened by the presence of their minions and could inhabit the same physical and mental space. As classes developed, especially with the shift to the cities with the growth of big factories, people spent more and more of their time only with others in the same economic circumstances and less and less time with their superiors or subordinates.

This separating-out has been hastened by the rise of egalitarianism discussed briefly in Chapter One. Innovation and economic expansion have brought with them occupational mobility. People no longer do the job they have always done because their family has always done that job. Occupational change makes it hard for people to internalize visions of themselves that suppose permanent inferiority. They cannot be improving themselves and their class position while thinking that they have a fixed 'station' or 'degree' in a hierarchical world. Modern societies are thus inherently egalitarian.

Furthermore, economic expansion brings contact with strangers. Profound inequalities of status would only be tolerable and not lead to constant friction if the hierarchy was widely known and accepted. Soldiers can move from one regiment to another and still know their place because there is a uniform (in both senses) ranking system. In a complex and interacting mobile society, there is no way of ensuring that we know whether we are superior or subordinate to this new person. Once people have trouble knowing who should bow first, they give up bowing and basic equality becomes the normal presumption.

Thirdly, the separation of work and home, of the public and the private, makes for equality. One cannot be a serf from sunrise to sunset and then an autonomous individual for the evening and at weekends. A real serf has to be full time. A temporary work-role is not a full identity, and, though work-roles are usually part of a hierarchy, they can no longer structure the whole world-view. In the absence of a shared belief system which would sanction inequality and subjection (and the decline of religion usually removes that), egalitarianism becomes the default position.

Democracy was slow to come, but the creation of a modern economy brought with it the general interactional presumption that we are 'much of a muchness'. It was ironic that this exaggerated rather than diminished social distance. The better off, now a little unsure about the legitimacy of their superiority, moved to safeguard their prerogatives by physically moving away from the poor. As towns and cities developed, they did so with clear class divisions. About 1775 the Edinburgh bourgeoisie began to abandon the old town, where judges and poor artisans had inhabited flats (of very different quality) in the same tenement building, for the social exclusiveness of the New Town. As the public world became more clearly separated from the private and came to be informed by egalitarianism, those rich enough used their privacy to divide themselves from the rest. Different social groups began to see the world in different ways. The idea of a single moral universe in which all manner and condition of persons have a place in some single grand design became less and less plausible.

Here, as at every stage of the process, the religious culture informs the social changes. Where (as in Catholic countries) religion is legitimated by a single authoritative source and people are faced with the stark choice between accepting or rejecting that authority, the fragmentation of the society creates a single fault line and the society splits between those who continue to support the Church and an anti-clerical bloc which seeks to destroy it. Hence it is in Catholic France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy that there are a powerful church and a

powerful Communist movement. The Protestant tradition which came to dominate British Christianity, by rejecting an external authority, made it possible for different groups to rework the gospel in ways suited to their changing circumstances. Instead of one great split, the religious culture fragments, like a car windscreen, into small pieces. Opposition to the privileges of the church that supports the privileged can be expressed in competing sects and need not produce aggressive anti-clericalism.

The general fragmentation of community and social life is accompanied by what Bryan Wilson has called 'societalization', the process by which 'life is increasingly enmeshed and organized, not locally but societally (that society being most evidently, but not uniquely, the nation state)'.¹ Close-knit, integrated, small-scale communities have disappeared, undermined and replaced by large-scale industrial and commercial enterprise; by the emergence of modern nation-states coordinated through massive, impersonal bureaucracies; and by the development of anonymous urban agglomerations as the typical residential setting. The decline of community damages religion in three ways. When every birth, marriage, and death in generation after generation was celebrated and marked with the same rituals in the same building, then the religion that legitimated those rituals was powerful and persuasive because it was woven into the life of the village. When the total, all-embracing community, working and playing together, gives way to the dormitory town or suburb, there is little held in common left to celebrate.

Secondly, when the shift from community to society (typically a nation-state) is accompanied by the fragmentation of the religious culture, churches are simply not able to retain a broad range of social functions. Both fairness and efficiency require that the priest, pastor, and minister be replaced by the secular professional, church-based provision by secular national services.

The decline of community not only deprives churches of things to do; it also fundamentally changes the way in which religious beliefs are held. Beliefs are strongest when they are unexamined and naïvely accepted as the way things are; when they form part of what phenomenologists call the 'taken-for-granted' world. And that condition is most easily achieved when the particular world-view is uncritically shared by the entire social group in which one lives and moves and is constantly reinforced by every little element of social interaction. Modern societies are culturally diverse places that no longer offer such constant background reaffirmation of any particular world-view. Especially when it is embodied in democratic political structures, basic egalitari-

anism prevents even a large and élite minority imposing its vision on the rest of society. What appears at first as a practical freedom—we can worship at any altar or none—has profound consequences for the way we can think about that worship. Religious belief is now obviously a matter of choice. We may still choose to believe, but we cannot easily hide from ourselves the knowledge that we choose God rather than God choosing us. God may still be respected and loved but that he no longer need be feared means that one major source of motivation for getting religion right and making sure that your children get it right has been removed.

As modernization brings cultural choice, so it also makes it less likely that we will choose to believe in God and less likely that such belief will bear much resemblance to the religious culture of pre-modern societies.

Rationalization

Modernization not only causes a fundamental change in the nature of social relationships; it also causes a major change in how we think about the world. In particular it brings rationality. Though many of us would find aspects of what is meant by that term laudable, it should not in the first instance be confused with virtue or goodness. We mean a concern with the systematic search for the most efficient means to a given end. We believe that the fairest and most efficient way of organizing anything on a large scale is to establish rules and procedures which constrain actions and decisions to the matter in hand, narrowly defined. Having created those procedures, we do not view them as sacred and immutable. If someone can suggest a more efficient means of achieving the same end, we change our methods.

A crucial component of the rational attitude is the assumption of regularity in the world. The sun rises and the sun sets. What worked yesterday will work today, all things being equal, and if it does not, we set about trying to discover what has changed. We live in a world of timetables and calendars that allow us to record appointments for next year. Very few of us expect a sudden invasion of the supernatural. Very conservative Protestant churches still have on their notice boards 'Meeting 11 a.m. (DV)' but that *Deo volente* or 'God willing' is a residue. In practice almost no one expects that God will intervene to prevent the next service taking place.

We can readily see how a world of rationality is less conducive to

religion than a traditional society. Everything is seen as potentially improvable. Everything can be made more efficient. We find it very easy to talk about means and procedures but very difficult to discuss transcendental ends. *The Shorter Catechism*, that seventeenth-century distillation of the key points that was used to teach Scottish Presbyterians their faith, has as its first question: 'What is the chief end of man?' In our societies such a question is rarely asked because we know that we cannot agree an answer.

Thus far I have not mentioned science and technology, and that delay has been deliberate. When asked to explain the decline of religion, a lot of people mention the rise of Western science and the competition between scientific explanations and religious ones. They point out that many of the beliefs of the early Christians have been shown to be wrong. The earth is round and not flat. The earth moves round the sun and not the sun around the earth. The earth and human life are vastly older than the ages traditionally taken from biblical accounts. While scientists recognize that there are still huge gaps in our knowledge, there is a consensus that an evolutionary model along the lines of Darwinism offers a better explanation of the origins of species than does the account of divine creation in seven days given in the Old Testament book of Genesis.

For all that, I do not actually think that science has *directly* contributed much to secularization. There are all sorts of ways in which we can insulate our beliefs from apparently contradicting evidence if we want to. We can easily avoid hearing the troublesome evidence. We can dismiss it by blackening the character of those who bring the bad news. However, and this is important for understanding what circumstances allow minority views to be sustained, such strategies must be widely shared. Though the centralizing tendencies of modern nation-states and their mass media tend to erode distinctive visions, a deviant world-view held by enough people is a legitimate cultural preference. The idiosyncratic vision of the single individual is lunacy.

The greatest damage done by science and technology to religious world-views is not in displacing religiously sanctioned ideas about the world (though they have done that) but in subtly altering the way we think about the world so as to make religious beliefs and rituals ever more irrelevant. Again one can talk not of social change having an impact on religious culture but of the two things interacting to hasten both in the same direction. Though there is not space to elaborate the argument, a good case can be made for saying that the monotheistic religion of first Judaism and then Christianity encouraged the development of natural science by removing the all-pervasive and unpre-

dictable deities of a pantheistic world. Jews and Christians believed that God created the earth, but, having done so, he then went into semi-retirement and stayed out of its day-to-day operations. Space was thus created for studying the mechanics of that world. The removal in Protestant cultures of the oppressive authority of the Vatican gave a further encouragement to natural scientists. The Puritan natural philosophers may have intended their studies of the glory of God's creation to increase our appreciation for his handiwork, but the outcome was that we were able to understand how the world worked without any reference to its creator.

Science and technology have given us a notion of cause and effect that makes us look first for the natural causal explanation of an event. When an aeroplane crashes with the loss of many lives, we ask not what moral purpose the event had but what was its natural cause. And, in so far as we keep finding those causes (a loose engine nut, a terrorist bomb), we are subtly discouraged from seeking the moral significance. Our attention is further concentrated on the natural world by the success of technology in delivering the goods. Technically efficient machinery and procedures reduce uncertainty and our need for the supernatural. There is no need for religious rites or spells to protect cattle against ringworm when you can buy a drench which has proved over and over to be an excellent cure for the condition. When people had no idea what caused plague and no way of preventing it, shared rituals of repentance were a popular response. Our knowledge of hygiene and our possession of tetracycline remove a whole series of occasions for a revival of religious commitment.

In modern worlds, religion is most used for those dark recessive areas of human life over which control has not been established by technology: unhappiness, extreme stress, and the like. When we have tried every cure for cancer, we pray. When we have revised for our examinations, we pray. We do not pray instead of studying, and even committed believers suppose that a research programme is more likely than a mass prayer meeting to produce a cure for AIDS. Our notion of the scope of the divine, then, is much smaller than that of pre-industrial man.

To summarize, I am suggesting that the effect of science and technology on the plausibility of religious belief is often misunderstood. The clash of ideas between science and religion is far less significant than the more subtle impact of naturalistic ways of thinking about the world. Science and technology have not made us atheists. Rather the fundamental assumptions that underlie them which we can summarily describe as 'rationality' have made the religious approach to life less relevant. We view the material world as an amoral series of invariant

relationships of cause and effect. We treat many objects as readily replaceable components: the radiator from any 1.8 litre Vauxhall Cavalier will fit any other Vauxhall Cavalier. We expect our actions to be infinitely reproducible in specified circumstances: if pressing the key combination 'Alt' and 'F4' closes a Windows computer programme today, it will do so tomorrow. We solve new problems by rationally auditing our present state of knowledge and pursuing research programmes to fill the gaps. People who think like that are not incapable of believing in the supernatural and the divine, but they are, in Max Weber's telling phrase, increasingly 'religiously unmusical'.

Whole books have been devoted to the nature and consequences of modernization, and the brief summary above cannot hope to do justice to the complexity of the topic. In particular, it has had to skate over the difficult issue of which consequences of modernization are accidental and which are inevitable. With that admission, the strongest claim that I can make here is that the history of the Western world suggests that rationalization in its many forms is a necessary consequence of industrial production and poses a series of problems for supernatural religions.

To return to the thread that runs through this book, I believe that the essence of the changes in religious cultures which have accompanied modernization can be neatly expressed in terms of the forms of religion best suited to various types of society. With modernization, the church form which dominated the pre-industrial world became untenable and was challenged first by sects and then by general social pressures which saw both church and sect transform into denominations. If we have to pick one single element of modernization that is central to understanding the nature of modern religion, it would be that which explains the rise of the sect, the tolerance at the heart of the denomination, and the amorphous nature of the cult: individualism.

Like the hominid creature drawn on charts of human evolution, who starts on the left-hand side as a small hunched hairy beast and gradually grows and sheds hair until he turns into the sleek human on the right, modernization has seen the individual grow and stand erect. From a stunted and ill-formed beast, subordinate to his Gods as he was subordinate to his political masters, the individual has risen in confidence, claiming first the right to make choices in ever-expanding spheres of behaviour and now insisting, as we saw in Chapter Four, on the right to define reality and then, because the definitions clash, asserting relativism as the practical attitude. Although at first sight worlds apart, the thinking of the denomination and the cult shares the common feature of relativism.

Here I move from historical analysis to speculation, but it seems clear already that the sovereign consumer of capitalism, if he or she insists not only on the right to choose shoe styles and life-styles but also on the right to determine what counts as authoritative knowledge, poses a fundamental threat to the knowledge base and rationality of modern society. Moral relativism, now to be found as much within as outside Christian denominations, is problem enough. Where shared values no longer ensure that we can rub along together, then the need to co-ordinate action will lead to demands for ever greater external technical control. But of possibly greater moment is the epistemological relativism that lies at the heart of the New Age. We should realize its novelty. The religious deviants of previous ages, though they departed from the consensus in specific claims, none the less contended for what they believed to be *the* truth. Our New Age seekers deny the possibility of any authority beyond the preferences of the individual.

If the progression from church, sect, and denomination to cult is, as I have argued, intimately bound up with wider social processes, then those last two forms perhaps carry a vital message for the future. The clear benefits of individualism—the civility, tolerance, and open-mindedness—may soon be outweighed by its costs. The relativist's claim that we choose our lives, free from social constraint, just as we now choose our Gods, is patently false, but the frequently expressed preference for untutored personal choice over hard-won and tested professional expertise may be more than the fashionable dilettantism of a small coterie. It may be part of a wider cultural shift that challenges the rationality on which the modern world is built.

Further Reading

The secularization thesis is actually less of a thesis and more of a general orientation. More detailed versions of the arguments of this chapter can be found in Steve Bruce, *From Cathedrals to Cults: Religion in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce, 'Secularization: Trends, Data and Theory', *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, 3 (1991), 1–31; and Steve Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). The general approach draws heavily on the work of Max Weber, Peter Berger, Bryan Wilson, and David Martin. There are many collections of Weber's writings available. The best short compilation is Max

Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, translated by Ephraim Fischhoff (London: Methuen, 1965). For the others, see Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969; published in the United States as *The Sacred Canopy*); Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), and *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); and David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976).

One of the most trenchant critics of the secularization approach in recent years is Rodney Stark. For his alternative, see Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularisation, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), and *A Theory of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); and Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992). For other criticisms, see the various contributions to Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization*.

