Religion and Secularisation

Is religion of declining social significance in modern industrial societies?
Definitions I

- Functional
  - belief system that offers solutions to “ultimate problems”
  - belief system that promotes social solidarity/ stabilises society
    - Durkheim and his followers on primitive classification systems

- Rules out the phenomena of secularisation by definition
Definitions II

- Substantive
  - A belief system that asserts the existence of “supernatural” entities
    - heaven, hell, God, the Devil, witchcraft
  - Usually accompanied by the existence of observable practices, sacred buildings etc
    - prayer, ritual, church attendance, baptism, special clothes, fasting etc

- Secularisation can occur straightforwardly if people stop believing/practising and substitute non-religious belief systems ie scientific rationalism
Diminution in the social significance of religion

- State confiscation of property/facilities
- Transfer to secular control of activities and functions
- Decline in the proportion of time, energy and resources that people devote to super-empirical concerns
- Decay of religious institutions
- Replacements of religious norms with technical criteria as guides to conduct
- Replacement of charms, rites, spells, prayers by empirical, rational, instrumental orientations
- Abandonment of mythical, poetic and artistic interpretations of nature and society in favour of matter-of-fact description
- Rigorous separation of evaluative and emotive dispositions from cognitive orientations

– Taken from Bryan Wilson, Secularization and its Discontents in his Religion in Sociological Perspective
Causes of Secularisation

• Social differentiation
  – roles previously played by religious institutions are taken over by other institutions ie the State
    • welfare, education, medicine

• Societalisation
  – Shift from local to national
    • disrupts transmission of traditional shared values
    • allows people space to “opt out”
    • religion less public performance more “private consolation”
  – Plausibility of a single “sacred-canopy” is challenged

• Rationalisation
  – increase in “technical” means-ends thinking relative to ultimate ends thinking
  – Judaeo-Christianity (partly) removed God from the world (in a sense creating the secular)
  – Protestantism went even further
Debate

• Bryan Wilson – *Religion in Secular a Society*
  – Western Europe behavioural indicators point in one direction
    • Decline
      – attendance, observance, membership, baptism

• David Martin – *A Sociology of English Religion*
  – Religion still important, but consumption more privatised
    • people still watch *Songs of Praise*, listen to *Thought for the Day* etc
Problems with establishing the facts

• Sources of data
  – Records of church attendance
  – Commitment to religious beliefs and attitudes as expressed in surveys
  – Membership
  – Adherence to rites of passage
    • Baptism, marriage, funerals
  – Number of buildings, clergy etc
Religious affiliation and monthly attendance

Religious affiliation by birth cohort

Church attendance at least monthly by birth cohort

Estimates of Christian church attendance as % of population

Source: Estimates by Peter Brierley from Religious Trends and other sources. 2015 figures projection.
Attendance numbers for the largest Christian denominations

Source: Estimates by Peter Brierley from Religious Trends and other sources. 2015 figures projection
Attendance numbers for the smaller Christian denominations

Source: Estimates by Peter Brierley from Religious Trends and other sources. 2015 figures projection
Percentage of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus in UK population
Belief in a Personal God

Belief in a Personal God or Life Force in Great Britain, 1947-2009. Percentage of respondents (%)

Belief in the divinity of Christ

Belief in astrology by sex

Percentage of respondents reporting belief in astrology by sex, Great Britain 1985-2008 (%)

Belief in Faith Healing

Belief in Faith Healing, 1968-2006
(% of respondents)

Patterns of Secularisation

- Dominant Catholicism
  - Supported by elites but opposed by strong secular anti-clericalism

- Biggest declines associated with existence of state Protestant churches
  - Nordic countries, UK

- Dual societies
  - Strong Catholic and Protestant blocs accommodated by “pillarization” with precondition that national sovereignty issues resolved
    - Netherlands, Switzerland

- Strongest survival associated with
  - Cultural defence
    - Poland, Greece, Ireland
  - Cultural transition
    - USA
How much piety was there in the past?

- Was there a past age of universal faith?
  - Almost certainly not
- Historical sources suggest considerable laxity, non-observance and gross ignorance of the basic tenets of faith
- Certainly there was a lot of heresy, folk-religion, superstition etc
Some Useful Sources

• British Religion in Numbers [http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/]


