Max Weber saw religion as essentially providing theodicies of good and bad fortune. While this is in many respects more of a psychological than sociological approach, it integrates both intellectualist and emotionalist elements with an eminently sociological analysis of the interrelationships between beliefs and social groups. This makes him one of the forerunners of those who have attempted to synthesise the insights of previous theoretical approaches. Among these one of the most influential has been Peter Berger who, like Weber, finds in religion the main source from which people have through the ages sought to construct a sense of meaning in their existence. A slightly earlier and important contribution, however, which similarly emphasises meaning, is that of Clifford Geertz.

CLIFFORD GEERTZ

The main source of Geertz’s theoretical ideas on religion is his article ‘Religion as a cultural system’ (1966) where he approaches the subject from what he calls the cultural dimension of analysis. This means looking at religion as a part of a cultural system. By culture he means ‘an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms’ (ibid., p. 3). As part of culture, religion deals in sacred symbols; and what sacred symbols do, Geertz says, is


to synthesise a people’s ethos – the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world-view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer reality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order.

(ibid. p. 3)

Geertz distinguishes two basic elements – a people’s ethos and their world-view. Sacred symbols or, in other words religion, play an important role in creating a world picture and in relating it to the ethos. Sacred symbols make the ethos intellectually reasonable by showing it to be a way of life ideally adapted to the
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state of affairs that the world-view expresses. On the other hand, the world-view
is made convincing because it is constructed in such a way that it fits the actual
way of life.

Ethos and world-view are mutually supportive. ‘Religious symbols formulate
a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific metaphysics
and in doing so sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other’ (ibid., p. 4). From such considerations Geertz arrives at a definition of religion and this
definition is perhaps better seen as a condensed theory of religion. It was seen in
Chapter 1 that definitions often conceal theoretical predilections. In Geertz’s
case, the theoretical element is quite conscious and deliberate. Religion, he says,
is

a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-
lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a
general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an
aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.
(ibid., p. 4)

Geertz goes on to unpack this ‘definition’ and to explicate further its various
parts. In doing so he sets out in detail his theory of religion.

His first point is that religion is a set of symbols. A symbol can either stand
for something, represent or express something or it can act as a sort of blueprint
or instruction for what to do. This idea might be illustrated with an example
which Geertz does not use himself but which expresses the point quite well,
namely, that of a set of traffic lights. The red light tells us something about the
situation we are coming up to – that we are approaching potential danger from
traffic crossing our path. But it also predisposes us to act in a certain way; it
gives an instruction and indicates a course of action that should be adopted. It
both represents a situation and at the same time acts upon the world to bring
about certain behaviour. In the same way religious symbols express the world
and at the same time shape it. They shape the social world by inducing
dispositions to behave in certain ways by inducing certain moods. For example,
they may make worshippers solemn, reverential, and so on, or they may produce
exultation, joy or excitement.

According to Geertz, religion does this by formulating concepts of a general
order of existence. People need such concepts. They need to see the world as
meaningful and ordered. They cannot tolerate the view that it is fundamentally
chaotic, governed by chance and without meaning or significance for them. Three
types of experience threaten to reduce the world to a meaningless chaos. Geertz
calls them bafflement, suffering and evil.

Bafflement is the experience which comes about when unusual or dramatic
events occur, with which none of the normal means of explanation are competent
to deal. Religion provides an ultimate answer as it explains the otherwise
inexplicable. Geertz sees religious beliefs as attempts to bring anomalous events
and experiences within the sphere of the, at least potentially, explicable. In this
category of anomalous events and experiences he would include such things as death, dreams and natural disasters.

This sounds on the surface very intellectualist and somewhat Tyloean but Geertz sees this need for explanation as also an emotional need. He says, for example, ‘any chronic failure of one’s explanatory apparatus … to explain things which cry out for explanation tends to lead to a deep disquiet’ (ibid., p. 15).

Geertz focuses upon unusual or anomalous events and puzzling phenomena. Without denying the force that such events are particularly likely to have, one might also acknowledge that the very daily, mundane, humdrum routines of life might, for some people at least, also come to be questioned in respect of the meaning of such routine. The very ordinariness of much of daily existence may threaten at times to appear without significance precisely because of its ordinariness and routine character. Religion may thus be not just an attempt to deal with odd aspects of the world but also to make life significant in a broader context in the face of the sheer routineness of existence.

To return to the experiences which Geertz feels most threaten our view of the world as a meaningful order, the second he mentions is that of suffering. Geertz is opposed to the view that religion helps people to endure situations of emotional stress by helping them to alleviate it or escape from it. He specifically mentions Malinowski’s views in this respect as being inadequate. He describes Malinowski’s theory, in Nadel’s words, as the ‘theology of optimism’. The problem of religion, as Geertz sees it, is not how to avoid suffering but how to accept it, how to make it sufferable. Most of the world’s religious traditions affirm the proposition that life entails suffering and some even glorify it.

Whereas the religious response to bafflement is primarily an intellectual one, the religious response to suffering is largely an emotional or affective one. In its intellectual aspects religion affirms the ultimate explicability of experience. In its affective aspects it affirms the ultimate suffering of existence. It does this by providing symbolic means for expressing emotion. It attempts to cope with suffering by placing it in a meaningful context, by providing modes of action through which it can be expressed and thus understood. To be able to understand it is to be able to accept it and endure it.

The third type of meaning-threatening experience is that of evil. What is central here is the common feeling that there is a gap between things as they are and things as they ought to be. This feeling is important when it takes the form of an awareness of a discrepancy between moral behaviour and material rewards. The good often suffer and the wicked prosper. Geertz, of course, echoes Weber and many of the functionalists in this. As he puts it, ‘the enigmatic unaccountability of gross iniquity raises the uncomfortable suspicion that perhaps the world and man’s life in the world have no genuine order at all’ (ibid., p. 23).

Religion attempts to make moral sense of experience, of inequality and of injustice. It attempts to show that these things are only apparently the case and that if one takes a wider view, they do fit into a meaningful pattern. A very common way in which this is done is, of course, to claim that injustices in this life are compensated for in the next.
In short, religion tackles the problems of bafflement, suffering and evil by recognizing them and by denying that they are fundamentally characteristic of the world as a whole – by relating them to a wider sphere of reality within which they become meaningful.

But why do people accept such beliefs at all? How do they come to acquire convictions of this kind? It is to such questions that the part of Geertz’s definition which speaks about clothing conceptions of a general order of existence with an aura of factuality is addressed.

Geertz is opposed to psychological explanations of why people accept religious conceptions. Although bafflement, suffering and evil drive people towards belief in gods, spirits, and demons, this is not the real basis upon which the beliefs actually rest. The real basis of particular beliefs lies either in authority or tradition. Religion is only one perspective on the world among others. The problem thus boils down to, first, what is distinctive about the religious perspective in contrast to others and, second, how do people come to adopt it?

What is distinctive about the religious perspective, Geertz claims, is that it is characterised by faith. The scientific perspective is essentially sceptical; it is always putting its ideas to the test. The religious perspective does the opposite; it tries to establish its ideas as being true beyond doubt or beyond evidence.

The mechanism which generates faith and conviction is, according to Geertz, ritual. For example, he says ‘the acceptance of authority that underlies the religious perspective that the ritual embodies flows from the ritual itself (ibid., p. 34). Ritual is both the formulation of a general religious conception and the authoritative experience which justifies and even compels its acceptance.

One point of criticism might be made here. If religious conviction arises from participation in rituals, then why do people participate in rituals in the first place? This is the same problem that plagues all theories which see ritual as primary and belief as secondary, including those of Robertson Smith, Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown.

In the last part of his definition Geertz refers to the moods and motivations created by religion being made uniquely realistic. The operative word here is ‘uniquely’. Geertz is saying that religious perspectives are each unique ways of approaching the world – ones which seem uniquely realistic to those who espouse them and eminently practical and sensible. It is this imperviousness of religion to doubt that religious perspectives seem to acquire that gives them their power to affect society so profoundly. The fact that believers within each religious perspective regard their own perspective as obviously and self-evidently the most sensible and realistic one gives such perspectives great potency.

Since each perspective is unique, any attempt to assess the social value or function of religion per se becomes impossible. Questions about whether religion in general is functional or dysfunctional cannot be answered, Geertz argues. They can only be addressed to particular religions. We can only sensibly ask whether this or that particular instance is functional in its circumstances and it may well be that any given religion or religious movement is not functional or integrative for the society in which it occurs.
Despite his definition of religion being cast in functional-sounding terms, Geertz departs from the functionalism of many theories that appear on the surface to be similar to his own. We might ask on this point whether the definition is inclusive to the extent of covering systems of ideas such as nationalism, communism, and so on. It would, like many functionalist definitions, seem to do so. And although his analysis admits of the possibility of dysfunctions, it retains a lingering functionalism in many respects and lacks a dynamic aspect which would allow us to understand the role that religion plays in social change and social conflict. To put it another way, it overlooks the issue of power and authority in relation to religion (Asad, 1983). There is no analysis in Geertz’s essay of the processes by which symbols induce the moods and motivations they are alleged to. Here we must attend, Asad argues, to the social process involving authoritative practices, disciplines and discourses which give force to religious ideas and symbols. Geertz’s account relies upon an assumed efficacy implied to lie inherently in the symbols themselves and in culture and upon mental states produced by such symbols and by rituals.

Clearly, Geertz’s approach is one which is influenced by and attempts to synthesise many of the insights of previous approaches including intellectualism and emotionalism. Similar in this respect is the approach of Peter Berger.

**PETER BERGER**

In his major theoretical contribution to the sociology of religion Berger (1973) argues that society is a dialectical phenomenon in that it is at one and the same time a human product and an external reality that acts back upon its human creators. The process by which we create our own social world through mental and physical activity, experience this social world as an external and independent reality and find ourselves shaped by it, is one in which a meaningful order is imposed upon experience. Such a meaningful order Berger terms a nomos. ‘Men are congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality’ (ibid., p. 31).

The nomos is a social product; it is socially constructed. Isolation from society undermines a sense of order and those who become so isolated tend to lose their footing in reality. Their experience becomes disordered; it becomes anomic. The nomos, then, is a shield against the terror that ensues when the world threatens to appear to be without order and meaning. Experiences such as death are a severe threat to the sense of order. Death is not simply a disruption of the continuity of relationships, it threatens the basic assumptions upon which the social order rests.

The nomos is usually seen as being ‘in the nature of things’, a taken-for-granted, obviously true picture of reality as it actually is. Although humanly constructed, it is seen as a natural phenomenon and part of a world beyond and transcending human will, capacities and history. It is religion which upholds this sense of the sheer reality and naturalness of the humanly constructed nomos. The nomos is, through religion, given a sacred character and becomes a sacred cosmos. It is sacred because it is seen as mysterious and vastly powerful. ‘Religion
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is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established’ (ibid., p. 34); ‘it is the audacious attempt to conceive the entire universe as humanly significant’ (ibid., p. 37).

Berger goes on to show how religion brings human society into relation with this sacred cosmos, how it locates human society in a wider cosmic picture and in the process legitimates the social order. Such legitimation may take a variety of forms but always the precarious and transitory constructions of human activity are given the semblance of ultimate security and permanence.

The relationship between religion and society is important in another way. Religious conceptions of the world are underpinned and maintained as credible by a specific set of social processes which constitute what Berger calls a ‘plausibility structure’. These are the social processes by which religious views are promoted, disseminated, defended, or assumed. If this plausibility structure is undermined or weakened, religious convictions can easily lose their hold on the mind.

Because human social arrangements, roles, obligations and institutions are so precarious we need to be constantly reminded of what we must do and of the meanings embodied in our culture and institutions. It is ritual that does this reminding. In ritual the continuity between the present and the societal tradition is ensured; the experience of the individual is placed in the context of a history.

Religion does not simply legitimate and make sense of the social order. It makes sense of experiences which might otherwise be disruptive and disordered. It legitimates marginal situations and experiences – those which are at the limits of everyday ordinary experience. Included here are such things as sleep and dreams, death, catastrophes, war, social upheaval, the taking of life, suffering and evil. Religious explanations of such things Berger calls, following Weber, theodicies. It is the role of theodicy to combat anomie. Religion ‘has been one of the most effective bulwarks against anomie throughout human history’ (ibid., p. 94).

Because of its very power to overcome anomie, however, it is also one of the most powerful forces of alienation in human life. That view which sees the world as external to the individual and which determines human beings and which forgets that they also change and determine their world, in short, an alienated world-view, is precisely the view which serves to maintain an ordered and meaningful view of reality and which prevents anomie. It is the alienating power of religion which gives it its power to ensure stability and continuity of the tenuous formations of social reality:

The humanly made world is explained in terms that deny its human production. … Whatever may be the ‘ultimate’ merits of religious explanations of the universe at large, their empirical tendency has been to falsify man’s consciousness of that part of the universe shaped by his own activity, namely the sociocultural world.

( ibid., p. 96)
Berger, however, warns against a one-sided approach on this point. Because of the dialectical relationship between man and society it is possible that religion can be not just a force which alienates but also a force which may de-alienate and which can legitimate de-alienation; ‘religious perspectives may withdraw the status of sanctity from institutions that were previously assigned this status by means of religious legitimation. … One may say therefore, that religion appears in history both as a world-maintaining and as a world-shaking force’ (ibid., pp. 105, 106).

Berger’s approach is clearly an ingenious synthesis of Durkheimian, Weberian and Marxist insights. There are two main criticisms that might be made of it. First, it does not confront the possibility that the need for meaning might be the product of a specific type of social situation or relationship to nature as a Marxist approach would maintain. In other words it assumes this is an inherent and universal human need which is independent of specific social or other conditions. It does not, therefore, tell us much about why a religious outlook occurs in some situations and in some individuals but not in others. It also means that Berger’s approach retains a lingering functionalism in its emphasis upon the order-promoting role which, despite the qualifications, remains predominant in the approach.

Second, it does not address the question of whether modern society can continue effectively while an alienated world-view prevails. One might argue that a modern society can only progress and can only prevent anomie by overcoming an alienated world-view.

THOMAS LUCKMANN

The approach of Luckmann, a close associate of Berger, to religion also emphasises meaning. Religion, for Luckmann, is coextensive with social life itself. The modern Western trend towards secularisation is interpreted by him as merely a decline in traditional religious forms and institutions not in religion per se. Certain fundamental questions and problems still confront and always will confront human beings. These questions and problems relate to what he calls the dominant, overarching values, their social-structural basis and the functioning of these values in the life of the individual.

Luckmann sets out in The Invisible Religion (1967) to determine the ‘anthropological conditions’ of religion by which he means those conditions which underlie all religion, conditions which are universal aspects of human beings and of human life. These underlying conditions give rise to a whole variety of specific religious manifestations, that is to say particular religions and religious institutions, the specificity of which is related to prevailing circumstances in each case. Luckmann is concerned, however, with the religious impulse before it assumes its varied historical forms, each of which is just one way in which a fundamental process in human life becomes institutionalised into a concrete form.
Each is just one institutionalisation of the general process by which a ‘symbolic universe’ is socially constructed and related to the world of everyday life.

Symbolic universes are systems of meaning by which everyday life is brought into relation with a transcendent reality. They are meaningful systems because they are socially constructed and supported. The process by which this comes about is possible only for beings which transcend their biological nature; in other words, it is possible only for human beings because they are self-aware and capable of reflecting on their experience. They can do this because they are social creatures who must interact with others in ways which require that they take the part of the other in order to anticipate the other’s reactions to their own actions, and thereby shape their own actions accordingly. This allows them to see themselves as others see them and in the process they acquire a sense of self.

Luckmann sees this process of the acquisition of a sense of self as essentially a religious process. It is coextensive with socialisation of the child. In the process of socialisation the child is also presented with a picture of reality, a world-view, which embodies the symbolic universe that gives meaning to reality and to the existence of the individual, locating the self within this symbolic universe. In short, in past societies this has generally been accomplished through a religious system in the traditional understanding of the term. In present society it is achieved through ideas such as self-realisation, self-expression, and individual autonomy which are not generally thought of as constituting religious values but which are religious in a wider and fundamental sense.

The central problem with Luckmann’s approach is that it is not clear why we should accept that the transcendence of biological nature is fundamentally a religious process. What is religious about it? Religion and socialisation are, of course, closely interwoven in most traditional societies but it does not follow that socialisation is inherently religious in character. Religion need not enter into the process. Even if Luckmann is right that what is distinctively human is the transcendence of biological nature and of self, and that this is what makes it possible for human beings to be moral creatures and to develop universalistic values, it does not follow that this makes human life inherently religious except by simply calling all this ‘religion’.
INTRODUCTION

For meaning theorists the process of secularisation in modern industrial societies is problematic, as it is for all theories that locate the source of religion in the human condition. In Berger’s case, if religion provides the bulwark against alienation, how is secularisation possible? Many theorists including Luckmann have simply attempted to deny that secularisation is taking place at all. It is an illusion generated by the decline of traditional forms of religion. In place of these forms, however, new forms are growing up continuously, these theorists argue. Although he has changed his view more recently, for most of his career, Berger, however, has never denied the facts of secularisation and was for many years one of the leading theorists of this phenomenon. Before examining his views, however, some background discussion is necessary. In this chapter, also, other views on the process of secularisation will be contrasted with those of meaning theorists such as Berger.

The demise of religion in modern society has been predicted by many theorists, especially those writing in the nineteenth century. Tylor, Frazer, Marx, and later Freud, all expected religion to fade away as science came to dominate the way of thinking of contemporary society. Others, who thought of religion in more functional terms, foresaw the disappearance of religion in the familiar and traditional forms to be replaced by something based upon non-supernaturalistic and non-transcendental foundations. Comte invented a new religion based upon the rational and scientific foundations of the new science of sociology to fill the vacuum. Durkheim saw the beginnings of a new functional equivalent to religion emerging in the values of the French Revolution.

Many more recent theorists have rejected such ideas, holding that religion is as much a part of modern society as it has been of any society in the past, while often acknowledging that its specific forms may indeed change. Bellah (1971), for example, has argued that the notion of secularisation forms part of a theory of modern society stemming originally from the Enlightenment reaction to the Christian religious tradition characterised by a strong cognitive bias and emphasis on orthodox belief. The theory of progressive secularisation functions to some extent, Bellah argues, as a myth which creates an emotionally coherent picture
of reality. In this sense it is itself a religious doctrine rather than a scientific one. Since religion performs essential social functions, it will again move into the centre of our cultural preoccupations, Bellah believes. Many other theorists, particularly in recent years, have, in the face of the rise of many new religious movements and of fundamentalism, come to similar conclusions (Crippen, 1988; Davie, 1994; Douglas, 1983; Glasner, 1977; Glock and Bellah, 1976; Greeley, 1973, 1989; Hadden, 1987; Luckmann, 1967, 1990; Martin, 1965b, 1991; Stark, 1999; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, 1987; Warner, 1993; Wuthnow, 1976a, 1976b). For some theorists of this persuasion, also, religion will not lose its transcendental character, despite the rationalism and scientific and technological basis of modern society.

On the other hand, the secularisation thesis continues to receive just as much support and the arguments of its opponents have been equally subjected to criticism even if some of this acknowledges that secularisation may not be an inevitable or uniform process (Berger, 1973; Bruce, 1992a, 1995a, 1996a, 1996b; Dobbelaere, 1981, 1987, 1999; Lechner, 1991; Wilson, 1966, 1982, 1985, 1992, 1998). Others see the process as complex, identifying both secularising and resistant or even anti-secularising forces (Beyer, 1997, 1999; Brown, 1992; Campbell, 1972, 1982; Casanova, 1994; Chavez, 1994; Demerath and Williams, 1992; Duke and Johnson, 1992; Fenn, 1972, 1978, 1981; Hellemans, 1998; Lambert, 1999; Martin, 1978; Sharot, 1989; Sommerville, 1998; Voyé, 1999; Yamane, 1997).

The debate over secularisation thus presents us with a decidedly odd situation. What is alleged to have been a fundamental change characterising modern society is alleged by others not to have taken place at all. It is rather as if economic historians were in deep dispute as to whether the industrial revolution ever actually occurred. It is as if a very large and indisputably solid object has been spirited away as if by magic – first you see it, now you don’t. Clearly, as the citations above indicate, a very extensive literature has been generated by this debate which has revealed a remarkable intensity. There has been a tendency for each side to charge the other with ideological bias or wishful thinking. It is probably true that those who support the secularisation thesis are not themselves much attracted by religion while those who oppose it are more religiously oriented. Some have argued for the abandonment of the term or the concept (Martin, 1965b; Hadden, 1987; Stark, 1999; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994), sometimes on the grounds that it is a weapon used by those opposed to religion to undermine it. This is no more necessarily true than it would be to say that an extraordinarily broad concept of religion has been the weapon of those who find the very idea of the secularisation of contemporary society an uncongenial one.

THE MEANING OF ‘SECULARISATION’

It is this question of how religion is conceptualised that lies to a considerable extent at the heart of the debate. Whether modern society is secularised or undergoing a process of secularisation depends very much on what one means
by religion and, therefore, by secularisation. Much of the debate over the question of secularisation stems from the fact that there are radically different conceptions of what religion is. Wilson (1982) points out that those who use functionalist definitions tend to reject the secularisation thesis while those using substantive definitions are more likely to support it. Some have defined religion in such inclusive terms that there would always be something which would count as religion. For such writers secularisation is an impossibility as it is ruled out almost by definition. Such inclusive definitions, however, are, as we have seen, highly problematic.

Even when one defines religion in a more restrictive way, disagreement remains on the question of the meaning of secularisation. The term has been used in a number of different ways. A useful survey is provided by Shiner (1966). Shiner distinguishes six meanings or uses of the term. The first refers to the decline of religion whereby previously accepted religious symbols, doctrines and institutions lose their prestige and significance, culminating in a society without religion. The second refers to greater conformity with ‘this world’ in which attention is turned away from the supernatural and towards the exigencies of this life and its problems. Religious concerns and groups become indistinguishable from social concerns and non-religious groups. Third, secularisation may mean the disengagement of society from religion. Here religion withdraws to its own separate sphere and becomes a matter for private life, acquires a wholly inward character and ceases to influence any aspect of social life outside of religion itself. Fourth, religion may undergo a transposition of religious beliefs and institutions into non-religious forms. This involves the transformation of knowledge, behaviour and institutions that were once thought to be grounded in divine power into phenomena of purely human creation and responsibility – a kind of anthropologised religion. The fifth meaning is that of desacralisation of the world. The world loses its sacred character as man and nature become the object of rational–causal explanation and manipulation in which the supernatural plays no part. Finally, secularisation may mean simply movement from a ‘sacred’ to a ‘secular’ society in the sense of an abandonment of any commitment to traditional values and practices, the acceptance of change and the founding of all decisions and actions on a rational and utilitarian basis. Clearly this usage is far wider than any which refer only to an altered position of religion in society.

These meanings are, of course, by no means mutually exclusive. The diversity, however, is linked to the diversity of meanings of religion and leads Shiner, echoing Martin (1965b), to say that the appropriate conclusion to come to is that the term should be dropped entirely. While a diversity of meanings of the term causes considerable confusion in the ongoing debate on the question of secularisation, it seems somewhat premature to abandon the concept altogether. Certainly, as Hanson (1997) points out, such definitional diversity leads to much misunderstanding and talking past one another. One theorist will often criticise the arguments of another on the basis of a quite different understanding of what is meant by secularisation and with scant regard to the fact that the target of
criticism holds an entirely different conception of it. However, a core meaning of the term in the usages of the main theorists of secularisation can be discerned.

From an extensive review of theories of secularisation Tschannen (1991) concludes that three core elements can be discerned which he terms differentiation, rationalisation and worldliness. Associated with these are a number of related processes, namely, autonomisation, privatisation, generalisation, pluralisation and collapse of the world-view. Differentiation is, according to Tschannen’s analysis, fundamental, explicitly or implicitly, to all secularisation theories. The other elements are common but not entirely universal.

Taking the most important, differentiation, first, this means the process by which religion and religious institutions become differentiated from other spheres. An obvious example is the separation of Church and state. Rationalisation refers to the process by which, once separated from religion, other social institutions operate upon principles rationally related to their specific social functions and independently of religious values and criteria. Economic life, for example, increasingly in the modern world came to be dominated by the logic of the market and by rational calculation. Finally, such processes impact back upon religion itself which becomes less concerned with transcendental matters and more worldly in its outlook. It seeks less to save souls and more to provide psychological comfort.

Differentiation leads to religion losing its social influence over many aspects of society. It no longer dominates the educational system, for example. Autonomisation refers to this process by which social institutions become autonomous and free of the influence of religion. The result is an increasing privatisation of religion which becomes a matter of individual choice and conscience rather than of publicly upheld duty and obligation. On the other hand, religion may take on a more general and diffuse role (generalisation) as, for example, in sacralising the institutions of the state and government in what has been called civil religion. However, religious institutions lose the monopoly or near monopoly position they once held and religious pluralism comes to prevail. Finally, religious affiliation and practice decline.

Rationalisation is associated with an increasingly scientific outlook, a weakening plausibility of religious beliefs and progressive rejection of them. As a result, a more worldly ethos prevails.

Many of these elements of the notion of secularisation are close to some of Shiner’s different meanings of the term. What the core elements of the notion do not necessarily imply, though, according to Tschannen, is the disappearance of religion. This is something that has been emphasised by most leading theorists of secularisation. What is implied, and this seems to encapsulate what is central to the notion in most usages, as Chavez (1994) and Yamane (1997) argue, is the declining authority of religion. This echoes very closely the definition proposed by Wilson many years ago, namely, that secularisation refers to ‘the process by which religious institutions, actions and consciousness lose their social significance’ (1966, p. 14). It is also reminiscent of Berger’s equally long-standing conception of secularisation as the process by which sectors of society and
culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols (Berger, 1973).

This is not, of course, to say that the notion is a simple or straightforward one or that for more precise consideration of its various aspects, other concepts or terms are not required. The difference between Wilson’s and Berger’s definitions is largely the inclusion of culture as opposed to social institutions by the latter. Berger is quite explicit that secularisation goes beyond merely the relegation of religion to the private sphere to include the decline of personal religious belief and perspectives whereas Wilson has tended to be somewhat ambiguous on this point. Secularisation, in any case, may thus be seen to affect various spheres of social life and dimensions of society and behaviour and perhaps differentially. Particularly fruitful in this respect have been Dobbelaere’s contributions to the debate (1981, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1999). He distinguishes three dimensions of secularisation corresponding to three levels of social analysis, that of the whole society, that of religious institutions and organisations and that of the individual. He uses the term ‘laicisation’ to refer to secularisation at the societal level which involves differentiation of religion and religious institutions from other sectors of society. The term ‘religious change’ refers to secularisation at the level of religious institutions whereby they lose some of their specifically religious character to become more worldly Chavez (1994) calls this ‘internal secularisation’. For the individual level the term ‘religious involvement’ is used and secularisation at this level involves the decline of personal religious belief and individual activity such as membership of and participation in churches and denominations. Secularisation at any of these levels can vary independently. In Dobbelaere’s view it is primarily secularisation at the societal level that is identified with the secularisation thesis, clearly implying no necessary disappearance of religion or decline in personal religiosity though these processes may well accompany the removal of religion from the centre of society.

AN IMPIOUS PAST?

Disagreement about whether or not secularisation is occurring is not only a matter of terms and concepts. Clearly, to claim religion is in decline entails comparisons with the past. There is much dispute about whether contemporary society is less religious than past societies, whatever one understands by religion. It is argued by some that we have a false view of the religious nature of past societies and that there was as much irreligion then as there is today. The notion of an ‘age of faith’ is an illusion created partly as a result of concentrating on the religious beliefs and attitudes of the elite, of which we have more abundant information, and failing to look at those of the ordinary people (Goodridge, 1975; Douglas, 1983; Stark, 1999; Stark et al., 1995; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994, 1995). Against this, writers like Wilson (1982, 1992, 1998), Bruce (1995b, 1995c, 1997) and Hanson (1997) have replied that such a view tends to be founded on the assumption that secularisation is the same thing as de-Christianisation. The
claim that the past was just as secular as the present, and therefore the present
just as religious as the past, actually amounts to the claim that the past was no
more Christian than the present and the present, therefore, no less Christian
than the past. But the survival of paganism and ‘folk religion’ in ostensibly
Christian societies testifies to their more religious character than contemporary
society. On the basis of not very sound evidence that the medieval peasantry
were not very Christian, it is assumed by the ‘impious past’ theorists that they
were not involved in religion at all. If this were so, we would have to conclude
that prior to the Christianisation of Europe there was a total absence of any
participation in religion. It will hardly do, either, to dismiss the paganism, folk
religion and magical beliefs and practices of the past as not being true religion as
Turner (1991b) does. To do so would, by implication, exclude the belief systems
of most tribal societies from the category of ‘religion’ and unduly restrict it solely
to the world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. Even then,
there would be serious problems in dealing with folk and popular interpretations
of these.

Turner, however, does not take a straightforward anti-secularisation stance.
Both the secularisation and anti-secularisation theorists are right up to a point,
he argues. In the feudal era Catholic Christianity was very much the ethos of
the upper class or nobility but remained weak among the peasants. There was
and was not a golden age of religiosity against which one can contrast the
present situation. This was the golden age of elite religiosity which functioned
largely to provide an ideological prop for the system of property rights and
inheritance. It aided the land-owning class in controlling sexuality, especially
of women, in such a way as to bolster the property distribution system based
upon primogeniture designed to maintain the concentration of land ownership
in the hands of the nobility. The landless peasantry found little to attract them
in Catholicism and remained often indifferent or even hostile to it and wedded
to pagan or folk practices of a superstitious or magical kind (see also
Abercrombie _et al._, 1980).

While acknowledging very probable differences between elite and peasant
belief and practice, one can hardly consider this a very strong argument against
the secularisation thesis for the reason already stated. It is, in any case, somewhat
dubious to argue that the influence of Catholic Christianity in the feudal era was
based primarily on considerations of property transference. While it may have
been put to this use by the land-owning class and while this may have entailed a
certain interpretation of Christian teaching, it is misleading and a one-sided analysis
to claim that this is the essential role of medieval Christianity. We have only to
think of the cult of the Virgin Mary and of the saints to see that it had great
significance as a popular form of belief and practice which addressed the concerns
of ordinary peasants as it continues to do in many rural peasant communities
today, especially in the Third World and developing countries. And just as it
may often flourish alongside indigenous pagan and folk beliefs and practices in
these regions, so it probably coexisted similarly with pagan and folk religion in
the feudal era in Europe.
A second line of criticism of the impious past position concerns the use of historical data by those who advocate this view. Bruce (1995b, 1997) and Hanson (1997) accuse them of rather partial, exaggerated and methodologically unsound readings of historical work on the religiosity of the past and of ignoring a wealth of evidence that does not fit their thesis. Such disputes are difficult to resolve, partly due to scarcity of reliable data but partly also due to the pervasive problem of what exactly is meant by secularisation and the corollary of that – how to measure it. Stark et al. base their views upon a rational choice approach to the study of religion. In understanding variations in the strength of religion in society, they apply a supply-side analysis (see Chapter 16) by which religious participation is increased by religious pluralism and decreased by religious monopoly. Religiosity is thus measured by participation in religious organisations. The pagan, private and unorganised religious proclivities of the masses are thus discounted since this is not actual participation but merely latent religiosity not realised in organised form since there are no attractive products available in an open religious market (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994, 1995). As Beyer (1998) points out, when rational choice theory speaks of religion it means organised religion. The rational choice approach is not easily applied outside contexts of relatively complex, voluntaristic, pluralistic societies in which the notion of individual choice between alternative organisations has some meaning and is a reality. For Bruce, on the other hand (1995b), it is any kind of religiosity whether organised or not and regardless of the form of organisation that counts. Stark and Iannaccone’s view also illegitimately discounts and underestimates the capacity of ordinary people to provide or organise for themselves their own forms and versions of religion outside more institutionalised officially sanctioned frameworks. They are able, in other words, to supply religious services for themselves regardless of the state of the religious market.

PRIVATE SPIRITUALITY?

It is precisely this popular ‘DIY’ form of religious activity in the contemporary world that forms the other arm of the criticism of the secularisation thesis that those opposed to it tend to stress. They emphasise the prevalence of many private and individual practices in modern society outside the context of organised religion – private prayer, superstition, listening to religious broadcasts on the radio, an interest in astrology and reading one’s horoscope in magazines, alternative holistic therapies and personal growth regimes, conceptions of the spirituality of nature and the sacredness of the planetary ecosystem, and so on. The umbrella term ‘New Age’ is often used to encompass much of this diversity. Again, the question of the definition of religion arises here. The tendency to favour extremely broad definitions on the part of some of those who deny that secularisation is a particular feature of contemporary society allows inclusion of these forms of activity.
A problem with this argument, as Wilson (1976) has pointed out, is that if the alleged religiosity underlying such private activities does not find expression in any institutionalised or collective form, that in itself testifies to the precarious position of religion in contemporary society. Wilson acknowledges that many individuals may, in fact, retain some form of private religious belief or practice in a largely secularised society. Secularisation is the process by which religious institutions, actions and consciousness lose their social significance. Loss of social significance, however, may or may not be associated with the demise of private religiosity. Whether all of the diverse array of activities mentioned in the previous paragraph count as religion or not, even private religion, is highly debatable. Some argue that they are the new religious phenomena of our age which are replacing traditional forms. Klass, for example, (1995) sees the emergence of what he calls the post-rationalist movement as a product of the clash between religion which accepts all the tenets of modern science, scientistic religion, on the one hand, and fundamentalist religion, on the other. Post-rationalism rejects the dogmatism of both sides, seeking a middle way between the authority of established science and reliance on the binding authority of a traditional teaching and body of scripture. Our disinclination to see much of what is included in New Age or in post-rationalism, or whatever term is used, as religion is simply due to its unfamiliarity and our deeply rooted rather Western tendency to equate religion with the traditional mainline churches. Wilson (1976) and Bruce (1996a, 1996b), on the other hand, consider that whether religious or not, and often they are not, these practices are largely ephemeral and have little social significance.

The extent to which religion has lost or is losing its social significance is, of course, an empirical question but it is very difficult to find reliable means of measuring this. It is even more difficult to measure the extent of personal and private religiosity. Figures for church attendance and affiliation are notoriously unreliable as indicators of religious convictions or of the significance of religion in the lives of those who attend. In the United States, for example, church attendance is far higher than in Britain and most European countries but this may be so because in the United States attendance at church indicates membership of the community, adherence to the values of the society and nation, and respectability, much more so than it does in Britain (Herberg, 1956; Wilson, 1966, 1982). To some extent certain American churches and denominations have been internally secularised (Luckmann, 1967, p. 36), even the more conservative and fundamentalist churches and denominations (Bruce, 1996b). The meaning of church attendance varies across different religious traditions and churches and in different places so that comparisons of rates of attendance may be very deceptive indicators (Wilson, 1992, 1998). In so far as church attendance indicates anything, then, a decline does not necessarily or in itself indicate a decline of religion per se. Davie (1994), for example, characterises the situation in contemporary Britain as one of ‘believing without belonging’. However, attempts to ascertain beliefs through surveys can yield
equally misleading results. Replies to questions about belief in God, for example, may indicate as much about the way the respondent thinks it appropriate to reply or how he or she has learnt to respond to such questions as it does about inner personal convictions.

MEASURING SECULARISATION

Bearing in mind such problems, the indicators that have been used would appear to show that religion, in general terms, is in decline in most Western industrial societies, at least in so far as they are Christian. The decline is, however, far from uniform, there are fluctuations over time and notable apparent exceptions to the trend, in particular in the United States. Acquaviva (1979) concludes from a survey of the data relating to Latin America as well as the United States and Europe, in short, the whole Christian world, that ‘everywhere and in all departments, the dynamic of religious practice reveals a weakening of ecclesial religiosity and, within certain limits, of every type of religious belief, including the belief in God’ (ibid., p. 83). A statistically sophisticated cohort analysis of data relating to Holland, the United States and Japan (Sasaki and Suzuki, 1987), which controlled for age and periodic fluctuation, found that membership and attendance of religious organisations had declined over the previous seven decades very significantly in Holland, to a considerable extent for the younger cohorts in the United States but not for the older cohorts in the United States and not at all in Japan. Hout and Greeley (1987) found a relatively stable pattern of church attendance in the United States over the past fifty years confirming what numerous surveys had shown, namely that US rates were very much higher than those for Europe – around 40 per cent for Protestants and above 50 per cent for Catholics. A decline during the late 1960s and the early 1970s was largely due to a decline in attendance of Catholics which they attribute to disaffection as a result of Humanae Vitae, the encyclical which reiterated the ban on artificial birth control. By 1975 the decline had ceased. A number of subsequent studies confirmed Hout and Greeley’s findings.2

Studies such as these rely upon self-reported attendance. Hadaway et al. (1993) question the reliability of this data for the United States. They set out to ascertain how self-reported attendance relates to actual attendance, measuring the latter by direct observation. They conclude that actual attendance is close to half that of reported attendance, grossly inflating the figures for church attendance that most studies have relied upon. While this tells us nothing about change over time, it is possible that actual attendance has declined but reported attendance has not for reasons of social respectability. This would be consistent with a general weakening of the major mainstream denominations and a slowing down in the growth of the more conservative groups. Criticism of this study focused largely upon methodological questions relating to the sample used, the reliability of the data and so on (Caplow, 1998; Hout and Greeley, 1998; Woodbery, 1998). This elicited fresh evidence from Hadaway et al. (1998) supporting their position.
While not definitive, these studies cast very serious doubt on the previously accepted picture of level of church attendance in the United States but leave the question of how it has changed over time very much open.

Attendance figures for Europe are generally much lower. World Values Survey data ranges from 2 to 3 per cent for Iceland up to 81 per cent for Ireland. Generally, Protestant Scandinavia shows the lowest rates, Catholic countries the highest with the rest of Protestant Europe somewhere between. In Britain attendance was above 30 per cent in 1850 declining to about 10 per cent today (Bruce, 1996a, 1996b).

As for membership of religious bodies, Finke and Stark (Finke, 1992; Finke and Stark, 1992) claim that for the United States at the time of the American Revolution relatively few of the population were churched but that since then the figure has grown steadily to around 60 per cent. Again, this is a much higher figure than for most European countries which have generally experienced a marked decline in church membership. For Britain the figure has declined from around 27 per cent in 1850 to around 12 per cent today (Bruce, 1996a, 1996b).

Religious beliefs and assent to religious doctrines are generally higher than those for attendance and also membership and remain relatively high for most countries. There is evidence of decline, however. Gill et al. (1998) analysed a very large number of surveys dating back to the 1920s, concluding that considerable erosion of traditional religious beliefs has occurred, most particularly belief in God and especially a personal God, life after death, the devil and the authority of the Bible. A range of other, non-Christian, beliefs such as superstitions, astrology, etc. have, however, shown remarkable stability or, in some cases, for example, reincarnation, even growth. In America the proportion of the population believing in God has remained steadily well above 90 per cent as has assent to most traditional religious beliefs (Finke, 1992).

What most indicators show, then, is a marked decline of religious affiliation and traditional belief in Europe with much less decline, if any, in the United States, Japan and, to the extent that data exist, many non-Christian parts of the world.

THEORIES OF SECULARISATION

Introduction

Turning to theories and explanations, first, of the overall trend towards secularity, the process has generally been linked to modernity and the degree of industrialisation. This relationship is, however, far from simple. The correlation between industrialisation and secularisation is by no means perfect. The United States, for example, is one of the most industrialised nations but, as we have seen, is far from being the most secularised. Much the same could be said of Japan. To the extent that secularisation is a consequence of the complex social change associated with, or, indeed, which has contributed to, the process of
Explanations of the process will naturally depend upon the type of theory of the role of religion in society one favours. The explanation for the weakening or disappearance of religion depends upon one’s account of why it was present in the first place. If religion is explained as the result of or reaction to deprivation and oppression, then the explanation of secularisation will refer to the growth of affluence and democracy. If it is the result of lack of understanding, then secularisation is the consequence of the growth of science. If it is the product of fear and uncertainty, secularisation is the result of our growing ability to explain and control the natural world. If it is a neurotic response to life’s circumstances on a collective scale, then secularisation is the consequence of the fact that we have as a species reached a mature stage of development. If it is what holds society together, then secularisation is the result of the fact that some more appropriate set of values is required in modern circumstances. If religion was the way in which men and women gave meaning to their existence, then secularisation may be the consequence of a crisis of meaning or the process by which new ways of providing such meaning, more appropriate to prevailing conditions, are sought. It follows, finally, that if we do not have an entirely satisfactory theory of religion, then we shall not have a fully satisfactory theory of secularisation either.

On the other hand, if we could understand what it is about contemporary society that tends to weaken religion, we may gain a better understanding of the presence and strength of religion in past and other societies. The question of secularisation is, then, of crucial theoretical significance. Secularisation, although linked to industrialisation and urbanisation, must be seen in terms of the more fundamental and broad social change that has both promoted and resulted from these developments. Perhaps the dominant view, stemming from Weber, is that it is the growth of rationality in the West which is the key to the process of secularisation. This would explain the fact that it is Protestant countries that have been the most affected. There are two aspects to this approach, each of which is somewhat differently emphasised by various theorists. First, there are those factors which are internal to Christianity which, in Weber’s view, culminated in Protestantism and especially Calvinistic Protestantism. Second, there are those factors external to Christianity and which are associated with the growth and development of modes of thought and ways of viewing the world which are an alternative to Christianity or indeed religion in general.

Peter Berger

The set of factors internal to the Christian tradition is stressed by Berger in his influential analysis (1973). Berger is concerned with ‘the question of the extent to which the Western religious tradition may have carried the seeds of secularisation within it’ (ibid., p. 116). This does not mean that he thinks that Christianity has an automatic inherent tendency to develop in the direction of secularisation. He
Secularisation acknowledges that there must be many relevant factors involved which are external to the religious tradition, that is, social and economic factors. In his view, however, such factors have their effect not so much upon religion in general but upon Christianity in particular. They bring about and promote tendencies already inherent within the Christian tradition. In a particular kind of social environment Christianity manifests tendencies towards secularisation whereas in the case of other religions such tendencies are absent and these religions are not therefore subject to the secularisation process, even when development, modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation take hold in those societies. In this sense, Christianity can be said to be its own gravedigger.

According to Berger, these tendencies within Christianity go back to its very roots which were, of course, in Judaism. They were ‘contained’ by Catholicism but unleashed by the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was associated with a changing class structure and the replacement of feudalism. In its turn it released the forces of secularisation within Christianity.

This thesis is, of course, strongly reminiscent of Max Weber and Berger follows him very closely in his analysis. All one has to do is to substitute ‘rationality’ for ‘secularising forces’ and one has Weber’s essential thesis on the development of Christianity and of European society.

Berger, then, emphasises the tendency associated with increased rationality which Weber termed the ‘disenchantment of the world’. Judaism had rejected magic, mysticism and so on and this was taken over by Christianity as was the ethical rationality of Judaism. The early Christian Church, in Berger’s view, took a retrogressive step. It watered down the monotheism of Judaism. It re-established a degree of mysticism and re-introduced sacramental and magical elements but the forces promoting rationality were too strong to be wholly eliminated. The inner-worldly ethic was retained and preserved in the tradition. Also, the radical nature of Christianity, its tendency to seek to transform the world, was preserved through the Middle Ages by those groups who found in it inspiration, hope and justification for rebellion. The ethical nature of early Christianity, and its concern for justice, were never forgotten.

The rationalising tendencies of Christianity were to culminate in Protestantism and in particular Calvinism, the most rational form of religion to emerge in human history, according to Weber – at least in terms of formal rationality. It is this very rationalism of Protestantism that lies behind secularisation in Berger’s view. Protestantism was, therefore, the prelude to secularisation. ‘Protestantism may be described in terms of an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality, as compared with its Catholic adversary’ (ibid., p. 117).

Protestantism disposed of the sacramental and ritual aspects of Catholicism to a large extent. It divested itself of mystery, miracle and magic. Its conception of God was of an absolutely transcendent being who, although he had created the world, remained wholly separate from it. Berger argues that this radical separation of the sacred and profane spheres in Protestantism was of great significance. Protestantism reduced the relationship and contact between God and man to such an extent that it did not take very much to sever the tenuous link entirely. This tendency goes
right back to the very earliest developments in the Judeo-Christian tradition: ‘the roots of secularisation are to be found in the earliest available sources for the religion of ancient Israel’ (ibid., p. 119). Paradoxically, however, it was the great religious revival and intensification of religion which we know as the Reformation which sowed the seeds for the demise of religion.

Another crucial factor central to the Christian tradition is the type of religious organisation that it developed, namely, the Church. If Berger is right about this, it is somewhat ironic since it was this aspect of Christianity which Kautsky (1925) emphasised as accounting for the tremendous success of Christianity in spreading throughout and surviving in the Roman world. The church type of organisation eventually led in the direction of secularisation, according to Berger, because this type of organisation entailed an inherent potential institutional specialisation of religion. This has not been a common characteristic in the history of religions. Its implications were that other spheres of life could be and were progressively relegated to a separate and profane realm and thereby removed from the jurisdiction of the sacred. This meant that these other spheres could more readily become subject to the process of rationalisation and the application of new ideas, knowledge and science. The Church became less and less significant for the conduct of life and less and less convincing as an interpretation of the world.

The loss of the monopoly of religious matters by one organisation, the process of denominationalisation associated again with Protestantism, has also played an important part in promoting secularisation. Wilson (1966) agrees with Berger on this point but considers this not simply to have played an important causal role in promoting secularisation but also as being a consequence of it. In Wilson’s view, Methodism was of considerable significance in Britain from the point of view of rationalisation because it attracted the working classes. It promoted, consequently, everything associated with ascetic Protestantism among a whole new social stratum. It facilitated the acquisition of an inner discipline in the new social order among this stratum in place of the external discipline of the regulated life of the community that was disappearing as a result of the Industrial Revolution.

Religious pluralism has not only aided the spread of the rationalising tendency, it has also had a more direct effect in leading many away from religion. The situation where one can choose between one religious interpretation and another, where rival interpretations and organisations compete in the ‘market place’ of religions, as Berger puts it, is likely to result in a devaluation or loss of authority for the religious view generally. The pluralistic situation where one can choose one’s religion is also a situation where one can choose no religion at all. When a single religious doctrine and organisation come to dominate to the exclusion of all others, it rarely tolerates the emergence of a non-religious view on the part of whole groups, and often even of individuals, within the society.

Berger’s theory of secularisation has been very persuasive and would fit the fact that it is the Christian world and particularly the Protestant world that has undergone the greatest degree of secularisation. On the other hand, he does perhaps over-emphasise the factors internal to Christianity. The importance of the church type of organisation and of religious pluralism might be acknowledged,
but to say that secularisation is the outcome of inherent tendencies only unleashed by certain social changes after more than 1500 years of containment by Catholicism is very difficult to accept. It would seem equally true to say that it is these social changes which are fundamental but that they affect, however, Christian countries and societies much more than others. On the other hand, it may well be that Christianity has itself contributed to or in some way facilitated, perhaps failed to inhibit, these very social developments. In short, the relationship is much more complex than Berger’s theory supposes.

Also, we should not forget that religious pluralism may have impeded, to some extent, the process of secularisation in providing a non-establishment religious outlet for the disaffected and the working class. Methodism not only promoted rationality, Wilson (1966) acknowledges, but constituted an important religious revival. Nevertheless, in the long run, according to this view, pluralism has promoted secularisation rather than religion. The secularisation process has passed through a phase of religious pluralism and the latter must be seen as an important aspect of the process.

The point has been reinforced by Bruce (1990, 1996b) who also tackles the obvious question that is raised, namely why the United States, noted for its pluralism, shows such vitality in its religious life. Bruce argues that while the United States is pluralist in a very general and abstract sense, that is, at the level of the whole society, it is not at all pluralistic at the local level. The conservative and Protestant south, for example, cannot be said to be pluralist as far as religion is concerned; far less so than much of Europe. In the United States it has been possible for various groups to create their own, relatively insulated sub-cultures, aided in the modern context by the openness of broadcasting which allows great localism.

**Pluralism and piety**

In recent years the idea that pluralism promotes secularisation has come under serious challenge from several theorists of the rational choice persuasion. Stark, Finke and Iannaconne have argued strenuously quite the opposite position to that of Berger, namely, that pluralism promotes religious involvement and it is religious monopoly that undermines it. *Contra* Bruce they argue that the United States demonstrates high religious involvement and vitality precisely because it is pluralist. They favour a supply-side approach to this. They assume that the demand for religion is on the whole very stable. People always seek and need religious answers to the eternal problems of life. That is to say they are always latently if not actively religious. Whether they are religiously active or not will depend upon whether their latent religiosity is mobilised by providers of religious products. If the religious market is so structured as to offer a wide variety of choice of religious products and services in competition with one another, potential consumers become actual consumers. Competition between suppliers ensures that the products on offer appeal to consumers and that
religious ‘firms’ cater to distinct groups of clientele, thus collectively meeting the whole range of religious preferences. Competition means they must actively seek to recruit members, adopting a range of strategies to attract them. Monopolistic supply and regulation of the religious market promote neglect of and indifference to such preferences and to recruitment. Monopolistic organisations are unable to cater to the diversity of religious and spiritual needs in the community which leads to withdrawal from or non-participation in them. It is not just that there is much on offer in a pluralist situation but that it is zealously promoted and marketed. These propositions have been tested using statistical data in a number of contexts (Finke, 1990, 1992, 1997; Finke and Stark, 1988, 1989, 1999; Iannaccone, 1991; Chavez and Cann, 1992; Stark et al., 1995; Stark and Iannaccone, 1994; Hamberg and Pettersson, 1994). This work has stimulated much criticism and debate and a number of empirical studies which have either not supported the findings of the rational choice theorists; have found them to hold only in some circumstances; and in some cases have found instead in favour of the traditional hypothesis that pluralism does undermine religious participation (Breault, 1989; Land, Deane and Blau, 1991; Blau et al., 1992; Bruce, 1992b, 1995b, 1996b, 2000; Beyer, 1997; Verweij et al., 1997; Olson, 1998, 1999; Olson and Hadaway, 1998; Perl and Olson, 2000). Both sides have questioned the methods and interpretations of the other with regard to such things as how diversity is measured, how vitality or participation is measured, the units of analysis to be used, and so on.

While these mushrooming empirical studies leave the whole question of pluralism and religious vitality undecided, the rational choice approach has certainly injected new vigour into the secularisation debate and led to new questions being asked and new sources of data being tapped and analysed. We may well be inclined to agree with Bruce on whether pluralism is positively associated with religious vitality; ‘sometimes it is and sometimes it isn’t’ (1995c, p. 520), depending upon the circumstances. However, even if it is only sometimes, this is in itself an important revision to the position that has for so long been dominant. Similarly, Breault (1989) acknowledges that pluralism might undermine religion far less in very conservative communities and regions.

The rational choice theorists have in turn been led to refine, on occasions, some of their more sweeping claims. For example, Finke and Stark (1988, 1989) relax somewhat their claim that religious monopoly always undermines religious involvement and vitality. In circumstances where a religiously homogeneous, geographically concentrated minority group is surrounded by a majority of different and essentially hostile religious persuasion, religion often receives strong support as the focal point of integration and solidarity. This was very much the case in Ireland and Poland and regarding Catholics in America and Mormons in Utah. This can be seen as a situation in which other, non-religious benefits such as solidarity and integration are provided by religious organisations, rendering any inferiority in the religious benefits irrelevant (Sherkat, 1997). Another refinement was introduced in response to criticisms that it is not only monopoly and regulation that constrain religious choice but also a variety of social factors
Secularisation (Bruce, 1992b, 1993). For example, empirical studies of religious pluralism and vitality have never been able to explain high attendance in Catholic countries and communities. This may be due to certain social and political factors prevailing in those areas as Chavez and Cann acknowledge (1992). The rational choice theorists see this in terms of market distortions arising from such factors (Stark et al., 1996).³

Findings contrary to the expectations of rational choice theory have led Finke and Stark (Finke et al., 1996; Finke and Stark, 1998) to concede that pluralism may not have much effect on religious involvement above certain levels. Its effect would seem to operate only at relatively low levels, somewhere between monopoly and a moderate amount of pluralism. At higher levels increased pluralism will not have much effect since it cannot increase levels of competition among religious firms. They have thus been led to qualify their view of pluralism as an adequate measure of competition. Beyer (1999) considers that a weakness of the rational choice position is that it has, in fact, no satisfactory measure of it other than success.

Beyer’s analysis of Canadian data (1997) leads him to conclude that in the relationship between pluralism and religious vitality, the direction of causation can be the reverse of that assumed by the rational choice theorists. Growth of religious denominations occurred in Canada in a context of pluralistic competition and in the second half of the nineteenth century in the absence of state regulation. Catholicism flourished once state restrictions upon it had been removed after 1840. On the other hand, before 1850 growth of religious denominations occurred against a background of state regulation. It was such growth that brought the end of state regulation rather than the end of state regulation stimulating growth. The same point is argued by Bruce in the cases of Britain, Australia and the United States (1999) and for the Nordic states (2000). Also, deregulation in the Nordic area has not produced a religious revival. The rational choice response to this point, that there is always a considerable time lag after deregulation before the market develops sufficiently to stimulate religious revival, is not very persuasive, given the time that has passed since deregulation. It is also a very convenient device that can be used to protect the theory from uncomfortable facts and, therefore, any possibility of refutation. We cannot understand, Bruce argues, patterns of religious activity if we do not take into account ethnic and national identity and theology. One might add a whole host of factors to these such as historical circumstances, political structures, systems of class and status, and so on as Martin (1978) does.¹ The sluggishness of Europe to produce a vibrant religious market may well be due to such factors. The social, cultural and historical factors that determine what people seek from religion, how or whether they seek to participate in organised religion, the forces which have shaped religious markets, and so on, are highly variable and must be taken into account in understanding different patterns of religious activity across communities and nations (Ammerman, 1997; Neitz and Mueser, 1997).
Beyer (1997) points out that if conventional secularisation theory falsely universalises the European experience, then the rational choice approach runs the risk of replacing it merely with an American provincialism. It is, he points out (1998), quoting Simpson (1990, p. 371), not just American but ‘gloriously American’. Understanding can best be furthered in Beyer’s view by using each perspective to correct the other. His analysis of the situation in Canada shows that in some respects the market model works but not in others. The debate about pluralism and other aspects of rational choice theory is thus proving highly stimulative and fruitful and promises to further our understanding considerably as more studies are carried out.

**Bryan Wilson**

Turning now to Wilson’s seminal contribution to secularisation theory – whereas Berger stressed the inherent secularising forces of Christianity, Wilson focuses primarily upon those factors external to Christianity itself, namely modernity, science and technology, industrialisation and urbanisation. Again, it is the growth of rationality that plays the central role, he believes, but in his analysis, as in that of most writers who emphasise such external factors, it is not any rationalising forces inherent in Christianity that are central but the autonomous growth of scientific knowledge and method. The argument is that this has undermined the credibility of religious interpretations of the world. Particularly important is the application of the scientific method or approach to society, a factor which Berger also stresses in a later work (1971). The promise of religion has been undermined in its millennial aspects and so has its capacity to legitimate and justify the social order.

Again, the separation and the institutional specialisation of religion are important here. People look to political institutions and processes for justice and for better conditions, not to the Church or to the life hereafter. The state is expected to provide for those in need. The Church has lost its educational role and with it its ability to promote its message and itself. The role of the Church in defining moral standards has declined now that parliaments and politicians increasingly concern themselves with such questions. The Church retains mainly its role in performing the major *rites de passage* and even this is declining steadily.

A further factor stressed by Wilson (1976, 1982) is the decline of community in the modern urban setting and consequent change in the locus and nature of social control. In true communities social control has a moral and religious basis, whereas in the modern, rational, technical and bureaucratic world, control is impersonal and removed from its former moral and ethical basis. Religion loses its significance in such a setting as do the communal values which traditionally received expression in the form of collective rituals and religious celebrations.

Wilson’s followers, Wallis and Bruce (Wallis and Bruce, 1992; Bruce, 1996b) have summarised the overall approach usefully under the headings of social differentiation, societisation and rationalisation. The first refers to the emergence of specialised spheres and the separation of religious and other social institutions,
already discussed in considering the meaning of secularisation and which Tschannen (1991) identifies as central to most understandings of it. Societalisation refers to decline of community and the growth in scale and bureaucratisation of many spheres of life that Wilson stresses. Rationalisation refers to the prominence of the scientific world-view and technology. Since these are processes that accompany modernity wherever it comes to prevail, then secularisation can be expected to follow but with certain exceptions. These concern specific circumstances which prevent modernity exerting the normal effect upon religion. Religion remains socially significant when it has work to do other than relating the individual to the supernatural (Wallis and Bruce, 1992, p. 17). There are two types of other work which religion continues to have to do, namely, cultural defence and the management of cultural transition. The first is where religion provides a defence against the erosion of a national, local, ethnic or other culture. Poland and Ireland, both north and south are examples of this. In the United States, southern and mid-western Protestantism are other instances. Cultural transition is a process which usually confronts migrant communities which find themselves in a minority ethnic situation. It is a process in which religion and religious organisations often play an important part by easing adjustment and providing support and an integrating focus. This factor explains much of the vitality of religion in the United States. Asian immigrants to Britain similarly look to their religious traditions in order to express their identity and to promote solidarity. Rapid social change also entails cultural transition. In this way we might understand religious revivals such as the rise of non-conformist denominations, particularly Methodism during the early period of industrialisation in Britain.

Despite the importance of these processes, there is a central weakness in the modernisation thesis. Some of the processes referred to are, perhaps, only secondary and not fundamental in accounting for secularisation. In particular, the growth of alternative interpretations of the world of a materialist and scientific kind is itself a part or aspect of the very process of change of which the decline of religion is also a part. It is simply the other side of the coin. The rise of science is no more the cause of the decline of religion than the decline of religion, or at least certain forms of religion, is the facilitating factor allowing the rise of science. The growth of one and the decline of the other are part of the same process. Both are the result of deeply rooted underlying changes.

Of course, it is certainly true that the spread of science has helped to undermine religion. Once science came to have the prestige that it won and to form the basis of so many aspects of life, it could not but help call religious views of the world into question. However, this is so not so much because of anything inherently contradictory in a scientific outlook and a religious one. As has been emphasised many times in this book, religion does not necessarily, at least in any fundamental sense, address the same kind of question or problem that science does. Religion does not necessarily ask how things in the natural world are connected or related empirically. It may be solely concerned with the question why things are the way they are, given that they are that way. Science may reveal to us the way the
world is constructed but the questions about the meaning of the world and of human existence remain. It has sometimes been said that science does not tell us anything that we really want to know. It depends of course on what we do really want to know or think knowable and it does not follow that religion can tell us this either but the point is that they need not necessarily come into conflict with one another (Bellah, 1971; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985).

They need not but in fact they generally have in the Western tradition because religious doctrine has sought to pronounce on empirical matters and on the basis of scripture rather than on the basis of empirical evidence. It was bound to lose and be discredited in these struggles; that over the position of the earth in the solar system and over evolution being notable examples.

Wilson is well aware of these points but does not draw the appropriate conclusions from them. For him it is simply that religion suffered a loss of prestige. The crucial point, however, is that while this is true, it is not the fundamental process. It is not an inevitable consequence that religion or even Christianity need be undermined by the growth of science. Specific doctrines may indeed be so undermined but not necessarily the religious view of the world if it can adjust and modify its doctrines. Evolution, for example, may still present a mystery which for some requires a religious interpretation. The essential point is that science does not just appear from nowhere. The critical, open, sceptical attitude which characterises science is a recent phenomenon which seems to have arisen in specific social and historical conditions – the same social and historical conditions that initiated the long road towards secularisation. It was not simply the result of a slow accumulation of knowledge and evidence about the natural world. For hundreds of years little scientific progress was made in Europe which, under the domination of medieval Catholicism, remained less open to new ideas, less innovative and less original in thought than the ancient Greeks had been. Science quite suddenly burst forth in the early modern era.

Marx and Engels argued that it was the decline of feudalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie which, despite the Reformation, and indeed if Berger is right, to some extent also because of it, were the reasons that religious views of the world and legitimations of the social order received a serious blow. The bourgeoisie laid the foundations for materialism even if they retained a religious outlook. Only the final great upheaval of the bourgeois revolution, the French Revolution, managed to cast off the religious outlook completely. But the bourgeois revolutions paved the way for materialism and the rejection of religious modes of thought, thereby creating the possibility of science. This period witnessed the growth of the scientific approach to the world and advances in all spheres of knowledge. It was an age in which atheism became possible for some.

In the field of politics it was no longer doctrine and scripture that were seen to legitimate governments and regimes but citizens. The divine right of kings was rejected. The affairs of this mundane world were increasingly seen as having nothing to do with God or religion. The social order was no longer seen as ordained by God but as a matter of contract, agreements or decisions made by human beings. In other words, the materialist approach
develops alongside the decline of religion which both facilitates it and is a consequence of it.

Just as the central elements of traditional secularisation theory, such as the ‘golden age’ and the importance of pluralism, have been subject to assault by the rational choice theorists, so has the thesis that modernity, science, technology, industrialisation and urbanisation are inimical to religion. Much of this attack, at least as far as empirical studies are concerned, has been centred upon the relationship between urbanisation and religion. In many ways it is in cities that secular values might be expected to flourish. It is cities that have been associated with rationality, science and technology and which exhibit most extensively the characteristics of modernity. The assumption that cities are less religious than rural and other areas has, however, been strenuously challenged by several studies (Brown, 1992; Finke, 1992; Finke and Stark, 1988). Again the measure of religious vitality is active participation in religious organisations. Finke and Stark conclude from an analysis of data relating to American cities in 1906 that ‘the received wisdom about the relationship between cities and religion is a nostalgic myth’ (ibid., p. 41). They found a higher rate of religious participation in cities than in rural areas. The reasons for this are, once again, that in cities access to churches is easier and there is greater choice. In other words, the conditions of supply produce greater participation. This claim is challenged by Breault (1989) in an analysis of more contemporary data. He found no real differences between city and countryside, suggesting that the relationship between urbanisation and religion is historically variable. In the case of Britain, Brown (1992) shows that between 1840 and approximately 1920 indexes of urbanisation and church attendance increase alongside one another but after 1920 the latter falls off markedly while the former does not. Conventional secularisation theorists have conceded the point that industrialisation, especially in its early stages in which traditional communities and ways of life are seriously disrupted, may indeed stimulate religious revivals (Wallis and Bruce, 1992). Hellemans (1998) takes the view that secularisation is not so much a product of modernity as of advanced modernity since the decline in religious activity in the more secularised countries is very much a twentieth-century rather than a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Differentiation of religious institutions, furthermore, has often given the churches a degree of autonomy and independence that has allowed them to prosper. Again, each side of this debate questions the reliability of the other’s data, methods and interpretations and the result is as yet inconclusive but the challenge to the secularisation theory has raised intriguing questions and stimulated new research.

PATTERNS OF SECULARISATION

One conclusion that can certainly be drawn from these studies and this debate, however, is that the process of secularisation is far from a uniform, continuous or
Secularisation

even, perhaps, irreversible one. Nor has the pattern of secularisation been an
even or homogeneous one across different societies. The process of secularisation
is greatly affected by the surrounding social context, or the religious history of
the country.

The sociologist who has paid most attention to the different patterns of
secularisation, David Martin (1978), bases his analysis primarily upon the degree
of religious pluralism or of religious monopoly present in the society but
incorporates, also, a wide range of variables in his account including the strength
of religious minorities and their geographical dispersion, the relationship between
religious groupings and the dominant elites and the inherent character of the
various religious traditions. The main types of situation distinguished by Martin
are, first, that of total monopoly where the tradition is Catholic; second, the
duopolistic type where a Protestant church is the major organisation but with a
large Catholic minority; third, the still more pluralistic situation exemplified by
England with a large state church and a wide range of dissenting and other
groups; fourth, the fully pluralist but Protestant-dominated case such as the United
States; and finally those countries that have no Catholic presence including
Scandinavia and the Orthodox countries. Martin traces the complex implications
of the changing role of religion in society in each of these types and the diverse
consequences of this changing role for many aspects of public and private life.5

If secularisation is far from uniform in its impact across countries, societies and
communities, it is also, according to some, far from uniform in its impact over time.
Nor is it, for these theorists, an irreversible process. There have been religious revivals
and declines and the graph of religiosity has its peaks and troughs. There may be
long-range cycles of rise and decline of religion and of particular religions. The rise
of the new religious movements and Christian fundamentalism are the developments
most often pointed to as evidence of this. Stark and Bainbridge (1980b, 1985) have
argued that secularisation is a self-limiting process. Nor is it anything new in their
view. It is part of the normal cycle of religious development. Duke and Johnson
(1992), on the basis of an analysis of patterns of long-term religious change across a
wide variety of societies, conclude that the secularising trends we observe in modern
Europe and elsewhere are not due to modernisation as such but to the decline of
traditional religion which is simply a part of the normal pattern of cyclical change.
New religions usually grow to take the place of the declining ones and may well do
so in the case of the Western secularised societies.

Stark and Bainbridge (1980b, 1985) consider the process of
denominationalisation by which sects progressively lose their sectarian character
and move in the direction of becoming churches to be part of the process of
secularisation. Ultimately, churches decline as a result of their tendency to develop
ever more extreme worldliness, engendering the emergence of revived religious
groups (sects) or new innovative developments (cults). While acknowledging
that the rise of science stimulated an unprecedented, rapid and extreme degree
of secularisation in contemporary society, Stark and Bainbridge argue that science
cannot fulfil many central human needs and desires. It cannot remove all suffering
and injustice in this life; it cannot offer an escape from individual extinction; it
cannot make human existence meaningful. Only God can do these things in people’s eyes. Religion, then, will not only survive and rise to prominence again, it will be transcendental or supernaturalist in form. Furthermore, it is more likely to be the innovative cult movements rather than the sectarian revivals of established traditions that will flourish since the latter can only come up against, in their turn, the same forces which have brought about a degree of secularisation in the first place. The new cult movements, however, are generally free of the deficiencies of the older traditions which have made them inappropriate to the needs of an altered social situation.

SECULARISATION AND THE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Signs of the continued central importance of religion and its potential reinvigoration are found by Stark and Bainbridge in the fact that those who report no religious affiliation or belief in their surveys are more likely to accept or show interest in some form of unorthodox or fringe supernaturalism such as astrology, yoga and Transcendental Meditation. Americans who have grown up in non-religious homes are more likely to belong to a religious denomination than not to. And although the more secularised American denominations are in decline, the least secularised are not. Finally, recent decades have witnessed the emergence of hundreds of new religious movements.

Stark and Bainbridge reject the charge of Wilson (1976) and Fenn (1978) that the new sects and cults are marginal, insignificant ‘consumer items’ in the religious supermarket. Such a view fails to see the potential importance of new religions and is rooted in Christian-Judaic parochialism. It also stems from a failure to distinguish between different types of cult. Stark and Bainbridge consider that it is what they call the cult movement that is significant rather than what they term the audience cult and the client cult. The audience cult has no formal organisation and is a form of consumer activity. Its doctrines and ideas are disseminated and consumed through magazines, books, and the media. An example might be UFO enthusiasts. The client cult is rather more organised but only to the extent that the typical services offered – teachings, therapies, and so on – are offered on the basis of a practitioner–client relationship requiring some degree of organisation on the practitioner’s side but none among the clientele. Both of these differ from the fully organised cult movement which differs from the sect only in that it is a new group standing quite outside older and more established religious traditions. Stark and Bainbridge’s theories apply only to cult movements. The tendency to conflate cult movements, audience and client cults has led others, Stark and Bainbridge claim, mistakenly to assess all cults, including cult movements, as trivial and marginal phenomena.

Stark and Bainbridge offer empirical verification of their theory in the form of two derivative hypotheses which can be tested using data they have gathered.
The first hypothesis holds that cults will abound where conventional churches are weakest because in these areas a greater proportion of the population, free from attachment to established churches, perhaps as a result of geographical mobility, will be able to experiment with new ideas. The second hypothesis holds that there will be a greater incidence of sectarian revival than new cultic experiments where the traditional churches are relatively strong. Stark and Bainbridge find their hypotheses confirmed by their data and conclude that cult and sect formation are not functional alternatives to secularisation but different responses. Secularisation has greatly undermined the traditional churches but it has not produced an irreligious population, only an unchurched one. Even in areas of low church membership, belief in the supernatural remains high.

Stark and Bainbridge may be criticised on the ground that, whatever the strength of the correlations they find, the numbers involved in new cults and sects remains extremely low and insignificant (Bibby and Weaver, 1985; Lechner, 1991; Wallis and Bruce, 1984). Against this Melton (1993) shows that new sects, cults and movements have been founded at an accelerating rate in the United States and, while a few do disappear, most of them continue to survive and to flourish. Melton’s argument is based entirely upon the number of new sects and cults. The crucial statistic, however, as Lechner, Wallis and Bruce point out, is the ratio of recruits to the new movements to the loss of membership of the older mainstream denominations and sects. This loss is far greater than the increase in numbers involved in the new movements at least as far as Europe is concerned. Stark and Bainbridge’s analysis, even if it applies to the United States, would seem to be somewhat ethnocentric.

Anticipating this, Stark and Bainbridge are careful to point out that they do not think that the new sects and cults are filling the gap left by the churches; only that to the degree that a population is unchurched will there be efforts to fill the void. This still leaves them rather open to the criticism that such efforts will remain precisely that – efforts rather than achievements. They also fail to address the question of why it is that audience and client cults have mushroomed in recent decades. It is these, perhaps, rather than cult movements, that are coming to typify the modern spiritual scene, leading us to question their rejection of Wilson’s claim that it is the very marginality of these phenomena which testifies to the degree to which religion finds difficulty retaining any hold in the contemporary situation. Stark and Bainbridge take refuge in the claim that we do not know whether some, or perhaps only one, of these new movements will take off in the future just as new movements have in the past. This is, however, to enter into speculation and cannot in itself support their theory. Also, as Dobbelaere (1987) points out, we should not forget that most of the world religions only took root among the masses with the help of rulers. Since then the structures of society have changed in such a way that it is extremely unlikely that the historical processes which led to state promotion and dissemination of particular religious systems will ever be repeated. Even if many efforts continue to be made by individuals and groups to promote new religions, none may succeed to any great extent. It may be, to use an analogy from Berger (1971), that the supernatural cannot rise
above the status of a rumour. It may be that the contemporary predicament is that people do need and desire the kind of promises that religion has traditionally offered but find all the alternatives, old and new, no longer credible.

Rather similar to Stark and Bainbridge’s emphasis on the potential significance of the new cult movements is Campbell’s view of the role of the cultic milieu (1972, 1982). Whereas specific cults are generally transitory, the cultic milieu is, he claims, a constant feature of society. It is characterised by seekership and there has been a major shift in contemporary society away from commitment to specific doctrines and dogmas and towards seekership or, in other words, a valuation of personal intellectual and spiritual growth. This is reminiscent of ‘epistemological individualism’ (Wallis, 1984; see Chapter 17). Rationalisation, then, does not, in Campbell’s view, promote permanent secularisation but may actually strengthen the superstitious, esoteric, spiritual and mystical tendencies in modern culture. Even those who acknowledge the superiority of science are not usually in a position to judge between orthodox and heterodox claims and are likely to accept beliefs in flying saucers, extrasensory perception and a whole host of other quasiscientific beliefs. Sharot (1989) points out that since what characterises science is its acknowledgement that it does not have all the answers and probably never will, it leaves much territory for magical ideas to occupy since these can claim to explain what science cannot. In so far as people may not come to wholly endorse the scientific world-view, and it is unlikely that they will, they will be susceptible to all manner of magical and mystical beliefs. Such beliefs are likely to be highly individualistic and fragmentary. This is because, Bibby and Weaver (1985) argue, in contemporary industrialised societies individuals play a variety of specialised roles which are not amenable to legitimation by overarching meaning systems.

Luckmann (1967) has also characterised contemporary societies as having no need for such overarching systems of values because they do not need religious legitimation. Religion becomes an aspect of private life, of individual choice from a variety of alternatives which can be constructed into a personally satisfying system. This leads Luckmann to argue that modern societies are witnessing a profound change in the location of the religious; away from the ‘great transcendences’ concerned with other-worldly matters, life and death and towards the ‘little transcendences’ of life which concern self-realisation, self-expression and personal freedoms (1990).

Arguments such as those of Campbell and Luckmann are open to the charge that Wilson makes against those who point to the new sectarian and cultic movements as a source of religious revival. This is the more so given the fact that these little transcendences are most likely to find their expression in somewhat ephemeral cultic forms which Stark and Bainbridge agree are unlikely to develop into major religious forms due to their reliance on magical elements.
Richard Fenn

It is this lack of overarching values or the necessity for them in integrating modern social systems that is stressed by Fenn in his extensive discussion of the secularisation process (1972, 1978, 1981). Fenn’s work has its roots in a dialogue with the functionalist view of religion as the essential integrating and legitimating force in society. He rejects the assumption that modern societies like the United States must be held together by systems of overarching values, in which case there is no necessity for any religious legitimation of the social order. Fenn discusses the process of secularisation in terms of the boundary between the sacred and profane in society. It is a boundary which various groups, collectivities, organisations and individuals seek, for their own various purposes, to determine. Secularisation, then, is a process of struggle, dispute, conflict, or negotiation, involving social actors who attempt to press their own claims and views of reality and is not an automatic or evolutionary process. It is a complex and contradictory process which at each stage is liable to conflicting tendencies. For these reasons it is, therefore, reversible.

Fenn discerns five stages in the process of secularisation. The first is the differentiation of religious roles and institutions which begins very early and of which the emergence of a distinct priesthood is a part but which continues throughout the history of religion. The second stage consists in the demand for clarification of the boundary between religious and secular issues. Secular structures are generally differentiated from religious ones well before the spheres of jurisdiction of these religious and secular institutions have become clear. They may never, in fact, become wholly distinct but remain blurred. This blurring of the distinction between the sacred and profane is itself something that may be promoted by the very process of secularisation itself. The third stage involves the development of generalised religious symbols which transcend the interests of the various components of society. In the American context, Fenn is referring here to the development of what has been called the ‘civil religion’ (Bellah, 1967). In stage four, minority and idiosyncratic ‘definitions of the situation’ emerge. Political authority is secularised but there is a dispersion of the sacred as many groups seek legitimacy on religious grounds. Finally, in stage five there is a separation of individual from corporate life.

At several stages the contradictory nature of the process can be seen. The emergence of a civil religion is a stage of the process and yet also a form of desecularisation. In attempting to determine definitions of situations the state may seek to curb religious autonomy and restrict the scope of religion, especially sectarian forms, and yet at the same time seek to borrow the authority of sacred themes and principles in order to legitimate itself.

Fenn suggests that the form of religious culture which is perhaps most compatible with modernity is that which grants a limited scope to the sacred and which promotes a low degree of integration between corporate and individual value systems. It is occult and esoteric religion which best exemplifies this type of religious culture. It can be practised without coming into conflict with everyday occupational roles since it confines itself to very particular times, places, objects,
and issues. It provides an ecstatic and magical form of activity and an opportunity to indulge in the irrational against the enforced rationality of formal and bureaucratically structured organisations and roles of everyday life. Clearly Fenn is close to Campbell in this view and the notion of ‘epistemological individualism’ (Wallis, 1984) would also fit well here. A recent study which exemplifies Fenn’s points empirically and insightfully (Luhrmann, 1989) shows how followers of witchcraft and magic in London and the surrounding areas of south-eastern England are for the most part well-educated, well-qualified professionals, many of whom are scientifically trained and employed in such industries as computers and as research chemists.

Fenn goes further than writers such as Campbell and Wallis, however, in emphasising the difficulties that religious cultures with overarching value systems, which give a very wide scope to the sacred and which require a high degree of congruence between the private and the corporate spheres, can present in contemporary society. A religious culture of this kind generates conflicts and tensions in societies in which technical rationality dominates, and which are not and cannot be integrated by overarching values.

For Fenn, then, religion may persist in modern society but with a very different role and character. Secularisation actually produces a distinctive religious style appropriate to modern circumstances (Beckford, 1989, p. 116):

Secularisation does not drive religion from modern society but rather fosters a type of religion which has no major functions for the entire society. … The affinity between secular societies and certain types of sectarian religiosity, then, derives from the tendency of both to foster the disengagements of the individual’s deepest motivations and highest values from the areas of political and economic action.

(Fenn, 1972, p. 31)

There are many advantages in Fenn’s approach, particularly his emphasis on secularisation as the boundary between sacred and secular being a matter of social contest and the complex and often contradictory nature of the process. There is a worrying aspect to his work, however, which stems from his very deliberate eschewal of any attempt to define his terms and concepts clearly or to directly address central debates. He considers that any attempt to define too precisely what religion or secularisation mean would fail to reflect the ambiguous and highly contested meanings these terms have in everyday life. He abdicates any responsibility to state as precisely as he can what he means by religion and secularisation by declaring his intention to put such difficulties themselves at the core of his analysis since they provide critical information as to the nature of secularisation which is ‘lost by analysts who use only satisfyingly clear concepts with adequate boundaries’ (1978, p. 29). A technically adequate vocabulary is of little use, he claims, in interpreting the contradictory aspects of secularisation. There is much confusion in such claims. It may be true that critical information might be overlooked in the desire to fix concepts precisely but it does not follow
that one’s own vocabulary can be vague, loose and contradictory in confronting the issues. Fenn confuses the contradictory nature of the process of secularisation with the contradictory nature of the concepts that have been used to describe it and with the contradictions that exist within and between discussions, debates and theories about it. How could Fenn know that the contradictions and disagreements about the meaning of secularisation can provide useful information about the nature of the process unless he knows what the process in essence is? His conception is, in fact, left to a large extent implicit apart from the characterisation of it as the separation of the sacred from the secular. Such a conception is clearly related to the more inclusive definitions of religion which are associated with Durkheimian and functionalist approaches in which Fenn’s roots clearly lie and with which he has not entirely broken, despite his criticisms of the functionalist account of religion.

It is this conceptual ambiguity in Fenn’s work that may underlie his characterisation of the process of secularisation as contradictory and therefore reversible. For example, the desecularising tendencies of stage three, with the emergence of a civil religion, clearly assume an inclusive conception of religion whereas the secularising aspects of this phase presuppose a more restrictive conception. It is not clear, therefore, if Fenn is showing that the process of secularisation is in reality contradictory and ambivalent or whether he is showing that it can be seen as such when one takes into account the conflicting conceptions of religion that underlie debates about secularisation. We are not sure to what extent he is attempting to further our understanding of the process of secularisation per se or our understanding of what has been said about it and debated – a discussion of theories and views of secularisation. It would seem that what he is actually doing is more the latter than the former. In this respect his work may be enlightening but it is misleading if it pretends to be other than this.

A final point about Fenn’s work is that it is largely applicable only to the United States. Indeed, most discussions of secularisation are addressed to the Christian Western world. Much less has been said on the question of the extent to which non-Christian and non-Western countries are or are not undergoing such a process and why. Comparing Europe, North America and the Middle East, Martin (1991) concludes that secularisation is largely a European phenomenon. He relates this to the struggles between the churches and secular forces in the history of Europe in the early modern era which discredited religion to an extent not experienced elsewhere. These struggles are, however, now at an end, he claims, perhaps leaving religion some space once again.

Casanova (1994) takes a similar view and documents just how effectively religion has in many instances begun to occupy the more public regions of that space. Beyer (1994) has explored the impact of globalisation on religion, which, while tending to promote its privatisation to some extent, nevertheless simultaneously provides opportunities for it to play a public role in certain contexts. The new Christian right, liberation theology, Islamic revivalism, and militant Zionism are clear examples that he analyses. Less obviously, environmentalism also, he argues, provides scope for the re-entry of religious orientations and
sentiments into public life. Voyé (1999) notes how prominent leading representatives of the churches in otherwise highly secularised contexts are on various commissions set up to look at ethical issues, for example, relating to new bio-technologies. It is as if only religion retains the requisite level of competence to judge these matters. This is a good example of how religion may be increasingly becoming what Beckford (1989) has characterised as a cultural resource. No longer institutionalised, it has the flexibility and adaptability to be put to many purposes often in combination with a variety of other ideas and beliefs which are less clearly religious but which might claim to be, or not at least object to being labelled, ‘spiritual’.

RELIGION IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

The vitality of religion in many parts of the non-Western world leads many to cast doubt upon the likelihood that it will undergo a process similar to that seen in the West. Pereira de Queiroz (1989) argues that in the case of Brazil the rise of the new and often syncretistic sects and in particular Umbanda, which has become almost a new national religion rivalling Catholicism, tells against the thesis that industrialisation and modernisation will bring about a similar decline of religion that the West and the developed world have witnessed. On the other hand the process of industrialisation, especially in the early stages, frequently generates religious revivals and it could be argued that what we observe in the developing world today is reminiscent of England in the early nineteenth century (Bruce, 1996b). Brazil is a country which is clearly in the early stages of industrialisation. The striking growth of Protestantism in Latin America generally, so well described by Martin (1990), may similarly be attributed to the social changes stemming from the modernisation process; a ‘transformative process’ (Martin, 1995, 1998; De Mola, 2000). In Africa, according to Jules-Rosette (1989), the reaction to industrial change has often been to seek novel ways to create a sense of religious unity and group identity through the integration of the sacred into everyday life.

In the Islamic world does fundamentalism represent a challenge to the secularisation thesis as Stark (1999) believes or is it better understood as a reaction to Western power and influence and the work of cultural defence against it? In developing countries we would expect that the educated and professional groups would be most likely to espouse the values and ethos associated with rationalisation and less likely to be actively religious. However, in the case of Indonesia, Tamney (1979) finds that such groups are the most religious and pious. On the other hand, religion receives official support in Indonesia and in legitimating it the political elite there create an association between religious piety and modernisation, on the one hand, and traditional, popular religious forms with backwardness, on the other. Also, Islam became a symbol of freedom against Dutch rule and highly prestigious as a consequence. In Malaysia Islamic fundamentalism is the counterpart of the new religious movements that have affected the West, Regan argues (1989). It has generated a new religious feel to
the culture which has come to characterise almost every aspect of modern life. Arjomand (1989) shows that the political ideology of Islamic fundamentalism in its various forms, most of which have rejected Western models of liberalism, nationalism and socialism, is very much a modern development which seems to run counter to earlier expectations of growing secularism and materialism as the forces of development took effect. Indeed, reformist, ‘puritan’ Islam, in the sense of the rejection of popular and folk forms, is not necessarily incompatible with certain aspects of modernity even if it opposes much of the culture associated with modernity in the West (Gellner, 1992; Turner, 1991a).

While it may be agreed that evidence from the developing world might lead us to question whether secularisation is the inevitable consequence of modernisation and industrialisation, it is far from conclusive. Many of these societies have hardly yet industrialised to the extent that Britain had when Methodism and other nonconformist denominations made their great advance among the new industrial working classes. Today Methodism is among the most rapidly declining of denominations. Martin (1991) warns proponents of the secularisation thesis, however, against too much reliance upon this sort of alibi and also against the tendency to dismiss intensified religiosity in Eastern Europe as essentially nationalism and only incidentally religion.

The fact is that we do not yet know if secularisation is a specifically Western or a specifically Christian phenomenon or if it is a phenomenon of industrialisation or of some wider process of modernisation. It is unlikely to be simply the result of industrialisation. Non-Christian and non-Western countries, therefore, may only experience it if their industrialisation is accompanied by westernisation or modernisation along Western lines. If secularisation is specifically a Christian phenomenon, they are certainly unlikely to undergo it since westernisation, if it occurs at all, is unlikely to mean Christianisation.

CONCLUSION

The supply-side challenge to the assumption that pluralism undermines religion, that the past was as religious as supposed, that modernity and industrialisation are incompatible with religion and the general emphasis upon the continuing survival of religious belief, have led many sociologists of religion to conclude that the secularisation thesis is dead. Others have strenuously opposed such a conclusion but for the anti-secularisation theorists, especially in the United States, the old paradigm for understanding religion in the modern world has for the most part given way to a new one (Warner, 1993). Rather than assuming secularisation to be an inevitable and (eventually) universal concomitant of modernity, industrialisation and urbanisation, it is seen by such writers as a highly variable and entirely reversible phenomenon contingent upon a variety of factors which are on the whole due to the state of the prevailing religious market rather than to progressive processes of change and development. Whereas the old paradigm saw the United States as the exception to the general trend of
secularisation associated with modernity, industrialisation and technology – American exceptionalism – the new paradigm treats it as one variant in a range of possibilities. Rather than the United States lagging behind Europe and other industrial societies for particular local reasons, its religious vitality is seen as potentially a model for any society, should religious market conditions elsewhere come to resemble those of the United States. The persistence in European nations of relatively high levels of belief in the face of low levels of participation is taken as evidence of potential demand (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994). According to this view, the situation could change dramatically if the supply side in Europe were to become as active as it is in the United States in catering to this potential demand. On the other hand, as Bruce (2000) has pointed out, the conditions for such supply-side vigour have been around now for some time and we are yet to see much activity beyond the peripheral and the fringe. The jury is still out.
Rational choice theory has been encountered quite extensively in discussing secularisation. It is perhaps the most systematic recent attempt to provide a general theory of religion. It shares much in common with several of the theoretical approaches discussed in earlier chapters. In some ways it might be classified as an intellectualist theory, given its emphasis on achieving rewards, while in others it is reminiscent of emotionalist approaches. To some extent it echoes the emphasis on deprivation that is characteristic of Marxist theory. It has certainly sought to integrate the insights of many of these approaches.

STARK AND BAINBRIDGE

The earliest statement of the rational choice approach was set out by Stark and Bainbridge (1980b, 1985, 1987). In later work Stark has modified and extended his position somewhat (1999) and others have made, and continue to make, important contributions. Their work has generated intense debate and criticism. To begin, however, with Stark and Bainbridge’s original systematic statement of the approach. They present what they consider to be a deductive theory of religion (1980b, 1987) in that it is derived from a general theory, of human nature and action constructed from a small number of basic axioms concerning the fundamental characteristics of individuals and small groups and a larger number of propositions either derived from these axioms or elsewhere. The approach relies very heavily on exchange theory which is based on the principle that all, or nearly all, human interactions can be treated as a form of exchange. This basic and very general theory is then developed further to account for a wide range of specific forms of religion and in particular is applied to the understanding of the emergence and development of sects and cults. And, as we saw in the previous chapter, they also apply their ideas extensively to the understanding of the process of secularisation and what they claim is a process of desecularisation in contemporary Western Christian societies. Space does not permit a detailed presentation of the theory from first principles here. We shall take up the account at the point at which religion enters the picture, referring back to prior propositions as necessary.