



Secularisation in Britain

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Definitions of secularisation

- Historical meaning denoted the transfer of Church assets to lay ownership or temporal use
- Primary contemporary meaning describes the process whereby religious ideas, customs, values, and institutions lose social significance over time to the point of becoming irrelevant
- More prescriptively, and sociologically, secularisation has been seen as an inevitable (but unintended) consequence of modernity, associated with the rise of individualism and rationalism – this thesis has been heavily contested and is less fashionable than it once was

Indicators of secularisation – belonging

- Affiliation: the rise of ‘religious nones’ is a post-war phenomenon – they now constitute one-quarter to one-half of the population (depending upon how the question is worded)
- Self-identification as religious: this has fallen over time, and (since the 1960s) fewer than one-tenth have ever regarded themselves as very religious, with the self-described non-religious standing at 59% in 2016
- Importance of religion in personal life: three-fifths to two-thirds regard it as unimportant
- Church membership: this has declined since the late 19th century, to reach 13% in 1980 and under 10% in 2016
- Sunday school enrolment: from a peak participation of 90% of the relevant age groups, the movement has now almost entirely collapsed

Indicators of secularisation – behaving

- Attendance at religious services: this has declined since the mid-19th century, the actual weekly figure (as opposed to inflated claims in opinion polls) being 6% in England in 2005 (down from 10% in 1979) and 7% in Scotland in 2016 (down from 17% in 1984)
- Religious rites of passage: there has been a relentless fall in participation, especially over the past half-century – today, about one-third of babies are baptised, fewer than one-third of marrying couples have a religious ceremony, and about one-half of people a funeral conducted by a religious celebrant (albeit the service’s content may not be wholly religious)

- Private prayer: since the 1970s, the proportion claiming never to pray has increased from one-fifth to one-half, with parallel falls in belief in prayer and its efficacy
- Bible: since World War Two, individual and household ownership of Bibles has declined significantly, and reading of it similarly (even among churchgoers)
- Sunday observance: substantial legislative deregulation of out-of-home Sunday activities has occurred, with strong public support for, and take-up of, such liberalization

Indicators of secularisation – believing

- Belief in God: a majority of Britons believed in God until the 1990s but the number has fallen since – there has also been a marked shift from belief in a personal god to a spirit or life-force
- Belief in Jesus Christ: belief has declined from the 1990s, with a fall in those believing He was the Son of God from 71% in 1957 to 30% in 2015
- Belief in an afterlife: one of the few indicators of secularisation to have shown stability rather than decline, two-fifths to one-half of adults believing in some form of afterlife over the years
- Religious authority: according to opinion polls, there has been diminishing respect for, and confidence in, Church and clergy since the 1960s
- Perceptions of religion: post-Millennium polling has revealed that only a minority regards religion as a force for good

One interpretation

- Secularisation in Britain has been progressive, not sudden, but there have been "accelerants" at particular times
- It has been especially marked in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, although this partly reflects greater availability of evidence
- It has not been uniform, individual indicators moving at different speeds and from different bases
- Nevertheless, of 25 key performance indicators, all bar one has moved downwards (relative to population) in the past half-century

- People are not necessarily well-informed, logical, nor consistent in their religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, taking a "pick-and-mix" approach
- Organised irreligion has not benefited from secularisation, and the much larger constituency of "religious nones" is not homogeneous
- There has been no single cause of secularisation but a combination of causes
- Notwithstanding, diminished religious socialisation and respect for religious authority have been recurring themes since the mid-20th century
- Britain has become one of the most secularised countries in the world, according to multinational polling

Some counter-arguments

- Several attempted refutations or qualifications of the reality of secularisation, through recourse to a 'change not decline' lens, are ultimately unsatisfactory and unproven
- Some parts of the Church are growing – true, but the scale of growth has not been large enough to offset decline elsewhere, so the net movement is still downwards
- Christianity is declining but non-Christian faiths are growing – true, but the scale of non-Christian gains (even with continuingly above-average fertility and immigration) is insufficient to offset Christian losses (through death or disaffiliation), so the net religious population is still shrinking
- Religious influences continue to permeate society and public culture, as in "diffused religion", "implicit religion", and "vicarious religion" – true, albeit these claims are empirically impossible to validate, and the persistence is often at a very superficial level, with minimal religious content, and invariably not perceived as religious by the "adherents"
- There has been a shift from religion to spirituality, leading to the emergence of the "spiritual but not religious" (SBNRs) – this is only true at the margins, there has been no "spiritual revolution" in Britain, and many alternative belief systems veer to the secular end of the spectrum

In sum, will secularisation continue?

- It is probably best to avoid quasi-actuarial projections of numbers, but underlying trends do suggest ongoing secularisation in Britain

- Embracing religion is mostly no longer a matter of legislation or societal expectation but of personal choice, the "prestige effect" of being seen to be religious is wearing off, and respect for religious authority is declining
- Diminished religious socialisation (mainly on the part of parents, but also by Churches and schools) has led to a marked inter-generational effect, each generation being less religious than the previous
- In reflection, recruitment to organised or individual religion (through birth or conversion) is hugely exceeded by losses (adult disaffiliations and deaths)
- Areas of religious or spiritual growth are currently numerically insufficient to offset decline in more traditional forms of religion
- However, complete secularisation of Britain still seems too far off to call

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