

Similarly, the long-term appeal of NAMs is limited by **knowledge**: once someone has learnt the basics required to do something (how to relax using Transcendental Meditation or yoga, for example), they may have little reason for continued involvement.

This aspect of NAMs defines both their general and, paradoxically, short-term, appeal in the sense that they involve **meaning without motivation**. Middle-class, disillusioned and middle-aged people may turn to NAMs that promise to help them live more harmoniously or successfully in a world that seems to largely pass them by, their 'talents' variously undervalued and unfulfilled. While NAMs offer meaning to life, without the need to make any great break with routine or personal sacrifice, this is both a strength and a weakness:

- If individuals feel their involvement produces benefits, they will consume more of what's on offer (buying into 'new and deeper levels of enlightenment', for example).
- For the majority there is likely to be no great life change — which produces **consumer disenchantment** and a desire to move on to the next product in the shop.

Finally Bruce (1995) suggests the general appeal of NAMs to the middle classes in the following terms:

Spiritual growth appeals mainly to those whose more pressing material needs have been satisfied. Unmarried mothers raising children on welfare tend to be too concerned with finding food, heat and light to be overly troubled by their inner lights and when they do look for release from their troubles they prefer the bright outer lights of bars and discotheques.

OCR examination-style questions

- 1 Identify and explain two reasons for the appeal of New Age movements in the contemporary UK. (17 marks)
- 2 Identify and explain two ways in which religiosity is influenced by ethnicity. (17 marks)
- 3 Identify and explain two ways in which religion may be seen as patriarchal. (17 marks)

The strength of religion in society

Secularisation refers to the decline of the influence of religion in contemporary societies. While this may seem a relatively straightforward idea to test — a simple



comparison between levels of religious behaviour past and present — the situation is complicated by three ideas:

- **Definitions** of religion will affect evidence for and against secularisation: **inclusive definitions** are more likely to support theories of **anti-secularisation** because they give greater scope for finding evidence of religious behaviour in ways that are not conventionally religious.
- **Dimensions** of secularisation: There are different areas of religious activity we could examine, each of which provides different evidence for and against secularisation. For example:
 - **Institutional**: This dimension looks at the role played by religious organisations in the general governance of (secular) society; its focus is on the power wielded by these organisations.
 - **Practical**: This looks at the extent to which people practise their religious beliefs through things like attendance and membership.
 - **Ideological**: This is the extent to which people hold religious beliefs that may involve no actual practice (Davie's (1994) concept of 'believing without belonging').
 - **Operationalisation**: Definitions and dimensions come together in terms of how we operationalise secularisation. Does, for example, evidence of decline have to be found across all three dimensions, two out of three or just one?

Bruce (2002) argues we can only really measure secularisation across two types of decline:

- **institutional** — reflected in a reduced role for religious organisations in areas such as government and the economy
- **organisational** — reflected in a general questioning of the plausibility of religious ideas (religious explanations of the world, for example, losing their influence) and practices (such as a decline in religious commitment)

Although 'personal religious beliefs' can be measured after a fashion, we have no reliable data from the past against which to compare them. As Hadden (1987) notes, 'Public opinion polling has only existed for about sixty years.'

Marshall (1994), on the other hand, argues the focus should be on **beliefs**, since the extent of people's beliefs lies at the very heart of religion, and hence of secularisation. He argues that to understand secularisation we must take account of possible changes to the nature of religious belief. We need to focus, therefore, on the '*privatisation of belief*' rather than the influence of organisations or public religious practice; the focus here is on measuring people's 'core beliefs' as expressed through:

- the importance of religion in any society
- how seriously people take it
- the number of people who take it seriously

While beliefs are likely to be the most valid indicator of secularisation, the problem is not just objectively measuring these ideas but also the fact we have no data from the past against which to compare them.

Although these methodological qualifications are clearly important, we can outline a range of evidence for and against secularisation.



Identify and explain two problems involved in the study of secularisation.

Evidence indicating the secularisation of society

Pro-secularisation arguments are based on the claim that religion has declined in significance from dominating all aspects of political, economic and cultural life, to its influence being marginal to the first two and increasingly marginal to the third. The general theoretical justification underpinning secularisation arguments is **social change**: Crockett and Voas (2004) argue that as societies change, ‘the social significance of religion, and religious participation, declines’. This is because:

- People are exposed to **knowledge** (such as scientific explanations) and ideas (such as different cultural beliefs) that challenge religious ideas and, in so doing, weaken their power.
- **Ideas and organisations** that once had a strong hold over people’s lives are weakened in large-scale, complex societies.
- **Religious pluralism**: As people develop a more individualistic outlook, their choices of behaviour and belief are reflected in different forms of religious and non-religious belief.



Religious diversity undermines the ‘plausibility of any single religion’, leading to a general decline in religious influence. It means religious organisations can no longer present a ‘united ideological front’ to the world; their ability to impose religious discipline and sanctions, influence social and economic policies or challenge scientific ideas is, therefore, seriously weakened.

While, in the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church could suppress Galileo’s argument the Earth moved around the Sun (the church taught the Sun moved around the Earth), it’s unlikely that any religious organisation has similar levels of power in contemporary Western societies.

Hadden (2001) argues we can best understand secularisation by thinking in terms of its impact on three dimensions of **behaviour**, where the influence of religion is either weakened or in decline:

- **Cognitive**: This focuses on how information and beliefs are organised. People in postmodern society think very differently to people in the past about the nature of God, the social and natural worlds and the like — and the *plausibility* of religious explanations declines.



- **Institutional:** Many of the functions once performed by religion have been taken over by secular institutions.
- **Behavioural:** Religious behaviour retreats from the public to the private sphere. Religion becomes a private matter.

The evidence

For pro-secularisation theorists, religious decline is evidenced in terms of the three areas we noted previously: institutional, practical and ideological.

Institutional

Institutional decline involves ideas like:

- **Privatised beliefs:** Religion is relegated to personal beliefs about 'God' or the supernatural that have little or no meaning outside 'personal crises' (such as illness and ill health — we look to religious beliefs 'as a last resort' when all else fails).
- **Expendable functions,** such as losing the ability to provide social cohesion or the monopoly of knowledge in society.

Bruce (2001) suggests further evidence includes:

- **Clergy:** Over the past 100 years in Britain the number of full-time professional clergy has declined by 25% (despite a hugely rising population).
- **Rites of passage:** The trend for baptisms, confirmations and weddings is one of decline. As Bruce argues, 'In the nineteenth century almost all weddings were religious ceremonies.' Comparable recent figures are:
 - 1971: 60%
 - 2000: 31%

Practical

Practical decline involves:

- **Relevance:** Only a small minority (around 10%) of the population are members of the main Christian church in Britain.
- **Engagement:** Dobbelaere and Jagodzinski (1995) argue for a long-term decline in attendance since the nineteenth century (with a particularly sharp decline since the 1950s).
- **Compensators:** NRMs are often cited as evidence of religious:
 - transformation — people expressing their religiosity in non-traditional ways
 - revitalisation — a growth area in terms of numbers

However, Bruce (2001) argues that if NRMs were 'religious compensators' we should have seen 'some signs of vigorous religious growth'. This, he argues, has not happened.

Ideological

Although 'believing without belonging' is often seen as evidence against secularisation, Bruce argues the evidence for a general decline in religious beliefs is strong — it simply 'lags behind' the decline in religious practice.

Gill et al.'s (1998) analysis of British **survey data** over the past 70 years 'shows an increase in scepticism about the existence of God, the related erosion of dominant, traditional Christian beliefs, and the persistence of non-traditional beliefs'.

In explanation, Wilson (1982) argues that an important individual dimension of secularisation is the extent to which people's understanding of the natural and social world has changed; as a society, for example, we have moved away from a magical (spells and charms) or religious (prayer) understanding to one based on secular, scientific explanations. The things we once explained by reference to religion are now explained by science.



Suggest two arguments in favour of secularisation.

Evidence against the secularisation of society

Anti-secularisation theorists have offered their own interpretations of the evidence put forward by their pro-secularisation counterparts, based around the following ideas:

- **Overstatement:** Stark (1999) argues the influence of religious organisations and beliefs in the past has been *overstated* and the contribution made by religion to contemporary societies *understated*.
- **Religious influence** in modern societies is still strong. It provides, for example, the basic rationale for moral codes underpinning political life and takes the lead in arguing for *ethical* practices to inform economic life. There is also a strong undercurrent of individual religious belief, even in secular societies.
- **Evolution:** Religion has changed, rather than 'declined' in influence. People are, for example, less likely to follow religious practices because these served functions either no longer needed or performed by other institutions. Religious organisations, for example, served a *leisure function* in the past when there were few, if any, other sources of leisure. A religious festival, for example, was a day spent not working. In the contemporary world we're surrounded by leisure services, so religion no longer serves this function. This is not evidence of secularisation, but simply an evolution of the role of religion.

Although Hadden (2001) notes 'secularization theory was the dominant theoretical view of religion for most of the 20th century', over the past 30 years a number of writers (especially, but not exclusively, in America) have challenged the notion of secularisation itself, in terms of both evidence and interpretation.

The evidence

Is decline only European?

Berger (1999) argues declining congregations are a phenomenon seen in western Europe that has not been replicated in America. The idea that secularisation, if it is occurring, does not have worldwide causes is important, because it refutes the argument that religious decline is an inevitable feature of contemporary societies.



Accommodations

Kelley (1972) suggests that secularisation, where it occurred, was related to particular forms of religious organisation — those that try to accommodate to the secular world — rather than to religion itself. Religious practice *declined* only in organisations that were:

- > image conscious — appealing to the widest range of people
- > democratic in their internal affairs
- > responsive to people's needs (by changing to accommodate particular audiences)
- > relativistic in terms of their teaching and morality

Religious *growth*, on the other hand, occurred in organisations offering a set of basic ideas and principles that were:

- > traditional
- > autocratic
- > patriarchal
- > morally absolute

The argument here, therefore, is that religious organisations that evolve into *consumer religions*, responsive to a range of individual needs, actually end up losing adherents. They neither attract those looking for something different in their spiritual life (NRMs and NAMS could offer far more) nor can they keep those who are looking for the 'traditional' features of a religion.

Religious economy theory

The idea that people will 'buy into' religious/spiritual experiences they find attractive and useful opened the door to a different way of approaching the secularisation debate. Traditionally religion is seen simply as a **cultural institution** to be studied and evaluated in terms of its success or otherwise in propagating particular values. This is fine in culturally *homogeneous* societies where ORMs have little or no competition. In culturally *diverse* societies where spiritual competition is all around, the argument is that we should see religions as **economic organisations** actively engaged in 'selling religion'. In this way the argument is that we should study religion in a similar way to the study of non-religious business organisations.

Religious economy theory, according to proponents like Iannaccone (1994) and Stark and Finke (2000), argues that the standard view of secularisation is too limited a way of explaining developments in postmodern societies, for a range of reasons:

One reason is to do with **monopolies**. In Britain, Christianity, in the form of the Catholic Church and the Church of England, were historically able to establish a 'monopoly of belief' that not only discouraged competition but actively destroyed it (through the idea of **heresy**, for example — anything other than the beliefs held by the monopoly religion cannot be tolerated).

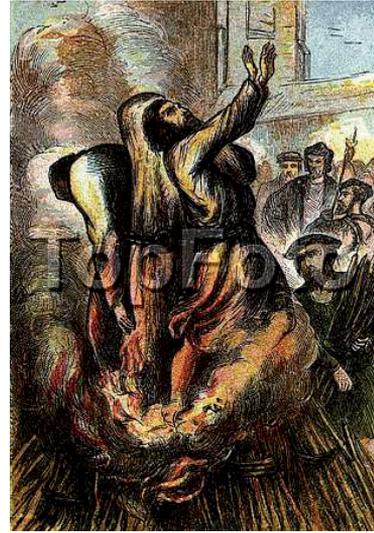
While this made established religions powerful, it also made them 'lazy' — they took their customers for granted. This is not a problem when the secular order supports

religious monopolies (believers have nowhere else to go). However, when societies change and the established order is challenged we start to see **religious pluralism** — the development of different religious organisations (from ORMs, through NRMs to NAMs) that are forced to compete for a limited pool of believers. In economic terms, therefore, organisations must compete for ‘customers’ in the religious marketplace if they are to survive.

Competition encourages:

- innovation — religious organisations have to find new ways to attract customers
- invigoration — organisations must listen and be responsive to their customers, otherwise they may decide to shop elsewhere
- reinvigoration — organisations continually reinvent both themselves and their services as a way of ‘keeping ahead of the competition’

Where established religions are slow to change in the face of increased competition, as their congregations decline they focus their efforts on retaining their monopoly position rather than finding new ways to attract adherents.



TOPFOTO

Monopoly religions have often not tolerated alternative forms of belief; the ‘Oxford Martyrs’ Latimer and Ridley were burned at the stake for heresy in 1555



Suggest two arguments against the secularisation of society.

Summary

On one level, therefore, anti-secularisation theorists concede that a form of secularisation occurs among the old, established religions — they lose members and attendance at services declines, as does their influence over secular matters.

However, just because **established religions** go into decline (secularisation) doesn’t necessarily mean the decline of **religion itself** — it simply evolves, into new religious movements that compete with established religions — and their success is measured in terms of their ability to offer alternative:

- forms of religious beliefs
- ways to express those beliefs

In other words, they develop ‘innovative methods’ of providing people with religious services (which also serve as testing grounds for ideas that can subsequently be exploited by mainstream religions — as with evangelical movements within the Church of England). To put these ideas into a contemporary economic context:

- If Tesco were the only supermarket chain in Britain, everyone would have to buy their food from them.



- If other supermarket chains are allowed into the marketplace then Tesco will lose customers (their economic position will gradually decline).

However, the bigger picture here is that people still shop for food — and it doesn't really matter if they shop at Tesco, Aldi or the corner shop — they are still buying food. As with supermarkets, so too with religion.

The anti-secularisation argument, therefore, is not that religious belief itself has necessarily declined but that the nature and shape of religious organisations has changed. As Crockett and Voas (2004) note, this theory involves the use of two significant ideas:

- **Supply and demand:** Religious organisations, if they are to survive and prosper, have to meet the (changing) demands of their actual and potential customers.
- **Rational choice:** People are attracted to (or turned off by) religious organisations on a **cost/benefit** basis. If the benefits outweigh the costs, individuals will join; if they don't, they won't. The task of religious organisations, therefore, is to make the benefits of membership more attractive than the costs — and this is something NRMs and NAMs are very good at doing.

In the contemporary religious marketplace, therefore, people have more choice, so they 'shop for religion' in different places. These places are many, varied and difficult to measure — but difficulty in measuring something doesn't mean, as pro-secularisation theorists implicitly argue, that these kinds of religious expression are irrelevant. Rather than see religious development as *either* flourishing *or* declining, the argument here is that like any business, religions are subject to *cycles of expansion and contraction* — sometimes they flourish, at other times they contract.

Just as when a large business goes bust or a particular sector of the economy goes into decline we don't talk about the 'end of capitalism', the same is true of religion. When some religions 'go bust' or spin into terminal decline, the 'underlying religious economy' still exists — people want to buy and spend **spiritual capital** — they just choose to do it in ways that are difficult to:

- measure
- fit into conventional notions of religion

Anti-secularisation theorists such as Stark (1999) don't, however, simply question secularisation. Rather, they argue religious changes — the decline in some forms, the rise in others — are evidence of a **resacrilisation** of society: That is, people are actually becoming more, rather than less, religious:

- In the *past* they had no choice but to 'be religious' (sometimes on pain of death). While this meant there were a lot of apparently religious people, we don't know about their actual religious commitment — did they attend church services because they were, as Turner (1983) has argued, coerced in various ways into attending?

- In the *present* people *choose* their religion — and by so doing they are actually showing greater religious commitment. Having fewer but more committed believers demonstrates resacrilisation.

Evaluation

Resacrilisation has caused a great deal of controversy and argument:

- **Proponents** argue it explains things like the growth of fundamentalist religious movements (Christian and Islamic, for example), as well as the fact that, as Greeley and Jagodzinski (1997) note, in many countries around the world religious beliefs and practices are, at worst, not declining, and, at best, flourishing. **Antagonists**, however, point to a number of problems:
 - Crockett and Voas (2004) note that in the UK 'British religious markets have become more competitive' through the influence of ethnic groups, but there has been little or no corresponding rise in overall religious practice or belief.
 - Norris and Inglehart's (2004) research goes further to argue that in Europe, countries with the closest links between church and state have the highest levels of practice (contrary to religious economy theories).

On a wider level, the debate appears *inconclusive*; whether secularisation is a feature of contemporary societies depends to a large extent on how different 'pro' and 'anti' positions interpret the problems we identified earlier — definitions, dimensions and operationalisations. For these reasons, ideas about the significance of religious behaviour have moved beyond a simple 'pro' and 'anti' secularisation debate to 'post-secularisation'.

Post-secularisation

Contemporary approaches to this debate cover a range of positions, a number of which acknowledge both:

- pro-secularisation in the sense of a decline in the influence of religion in some areas of social life (such as government and economic activity)
- anti-secularisation in that religion still makes significant contributions to other areas, such as culture, personal morality and beliefs

Yip (2002) characterises this general position as being one where religion is 'in a constant state of transformation (and persistence)', an idea from which we can draw two conclusions:

- **Non-linearity**: Secularisation is not a simple, linear process from 'the religious' to 'the secular'.
- **Dimensions**: The institutional, organisational and individual dimensions of religion are interconnected:
 - **Pro-secularisation** theory takes a 'top down' approach, whereby institutions become secularised, followed by organisational practices and, eventually, individual beliefs.



- **Anti-secularisation** theory reverses this process, with individuals seen as being 'prone to religion'; religion is a **cultural universal** serving some form of human need (Maslow (1943), for example, sees the 'safety' people derive from religion as a significant psychological need).

Post-secularisation theory attempts to resolve this argument by redefining secularisation.

Differentiation

Phillips (2004) argues that secularisation can be redefined using the idea of **differentiation**. Institutions once heavily under the influence of — or controlled by — religious organisations and ideas become secularised, so that a separation between religious and non-religious institutions occurs in contemporary societies. However, the general thrust and extent of secularising tendencies is limited to institutions and practices. In other words, post-secularisation theory argues differentiation also involves a **separation between social structures and social actions**.

This makes it possible to chart the secularisation of *two* dimensions of religiosity (institutions and religious practice) by arguing a *third* dimension (individual beliefs) should be left out of the equation.

Social actions

The question of whether, in an institutionally secularised society, people hold religious-type beliefs is unimportant. These beliefs are significant only if they inform general social actions; in other words, it is not the fact of people saying they believe in ideas like 'God' that's significant; rather, it's what they do — or fail to do — on the basis of such beliefs.

- If, for example, religious beliefs are so strongly held they become the basis for *social action* — such as the creation of, and active involvement in, political parties that advocate religious laws — then this becomes a matter that must be addressed by secularisation theory.
- If, however, religious beliefs are 'simply matters of *personal preference*' that have little or no impact on social structures, then for post-secularisation theory they are irrelevant.

Casanova (1994) notes that secularisation, under these terms, involves the liberation of secular spheres (politics, economics, etc.) from the influence of religious organisations, values and norms, but it does not necessarily involve the disappearance of personal religious beliefs (as traditional pro-secularisation theory generally argues).

Similarly, Tschannen (1991) suggests that, for post-secularisation theory, the main object of study is the changing position of religion as an institution in society; whether or not people believe religious ideas on a personal basis is conceptually unimportant. As Sommerville (1998) argues, **institutional differentiation** is not something that 'leads to secularisation. It *is* secularisation.'

Social capital

We can develop this idea further in relation to **social capital**: Putnam (2000) reworks the idea of 'believing without belonging' by arguing social capital refers to the extent to which individuals are **connected**. In other words, it represents the idea of:

- social networks
- participation in social/communal activities and the extent to which people trust each other

Social capital, therefore, is the '*social glue*' that binds people as a *society* (rather than as a collection of isolated individuals) — the roles, values, norms and so forth developed to facilitate communal living. It relates, as Cohen and Prusak (2001) suggest, 'to the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible'.

In this respect, any decline in religious participation is linked to wider questions of participation across all social groups (such as trade unions, political parties and the like). The **secularisation of participation**, therefore, is not simply a question of religious transformation, but one of a *general social transformation*.

In other words, we can explain the relative decline in religious participation in terms of a general 'process of withdrawal from the public sphere' in contemporary societies — hence Putnam's use of the *Bowling Alone* metaphor to describe how the traditionally social activity of ten-pin bowling in America has been transformed into an individual activity. This metaphor has been challenged however; Crockett and Voas (2004) note that 'unlike bowling, people are not "praying alone"'.

The implication of this idea (one shared by Davie, 2001) is that post-secularisation theorists don't need to account for any increase or decline in religious practice/ participation in religious terms (the activities of religious organisations, the influence of secular ideas and so forth). Rather it can be explained in terms of **social capital** and a decline in general **social cohesion** (measured in various ways, such as participation rates in voluntary work).



Briefly explain the concept of post-secularisation.

Evaluation

Social capital

Wuthnow (2002) has questioned the extent to which social capital in America has declined. He argues that while there has been some decline in social capital, this has not been to 'drastically low levels' — and certainly not enough to fully explain changes in religious participation. While Putnam's thesis suggests lower levels of social capital should result in a decline in religious participation, many religions in America have witnessed a recent revival.



Beyond secularisation

A wider form of evaluation is to move beyond a narrow debate about whether religion is declining or reviving since, as Harper and LeBeau (1999) note, 'The evidence is pervasive and clear; religion has disappeared nowhere but changed everywhere.'

Spickard (2003) rejects the idea we can see secularisation as something that can be operationalised and objectively tested; instead, he argues, we should view it as one competing **narrative** among many in postmodern society.

This follows because the same 'secularisation data' can have different meanings, depending on the observer's interpretation:

The membership declines of American mainline Protestant denominations can be interpreted as the result of growing secularisation or increased fundamentalism... or as a sign of growing religious individualism, or as the result of these denominations' failure to deliver a religious product that appeals to American consumers. Or, it can be all of these...

Rather than attempt to resolve an insoluble problem, going 'beyond secularisation' means we should, according to Spickard, simply see religiosity in terms of six main *competing narratives in postmodern societies*:

- > **Secularisation:** The 'decline and loss of influence' story, backed up to some extent by evidence relating to 'European religion (and its decline), the relative decline of American mainline churches, and a loss of religiosity on the part of many intellectuals'.
- > **Fundamentalisms:** The idea, mainly perpetuated through the media, that religion is becoming 'increasingly Fundamentalist. A resurgent Islam certainly makes this story plausible. So does the intrusion of American rightwing religion into national politics.'
- > **Reorganisation:** the shape of religious organisations is changing, rather than declining or becoming more fundamentalist. The phenomenon of 'cell churches' (where people meet in small groups in each other's houses rather than in a church) is an example here.
- > **Individualisation** sees religion as increasingly 'a matter of personal choice' — not only in terms of things like worship and practice, but also of a 'pick-and-mix' approach to religions (combining various ideas and philosophies to create personalised forms of belief). Such individualisation evolves to satisfy religious yearnings in situations where individuals 'can no longer rely on social institutions'.
- > **Religious markets:** This story, as we've seen, relates to an anti-secularisation message that involves a plurality of organisations servicing a range of religious needs.
- > **Globalisation:** In a sense, a catch-all story that sees the ease of communication coupled with economic and cultural globalisation contributing to the rise (and decline) of religious organisations, fundamentalism and the like around the globe.

OCR examination-style questions

- 1** Outline and evaluate the view that religion has lost its importance in the contemporary UK. (33 marks)
- 2** Outline and evaluate the view that the rise of new religious movements shows that religion is still strong in the contemporary UK. (33 marks)