

THE SOCIOLOGY OF LATE SECULARIZATION: SOCIAL DIVISIONS AND RELIGIOSITY

Abstract

At the start of the twentieth century the religious differed from the religiously indifferent largely in being religious. Now they differ in a number of other social and demographic characteristics that reduce interaction between the two populations further than simple numbers would require. That some of the main carriers of religion are immigrants or adherents of recently imported faiths reinforces the sense that religion is what other people do. In the context of the stock of religious knowledge being depleted and religion-taken-too-seriously being unpopular, the narrow demographic base of the religious makes conversion unlikely and thus makes the reversal of secularization unlikely.

Key words: secularization, religiosity, social isolation, conversion, irreversibility, UK

8,288 words

Submitted 2 January 2015

Revised 13 April 2015

THE SOCIOLOGY OF LATE SECULARIZATION: SOCIAL DIVISIONS AND RELIGIOSITY

INTRODUCTION

In 2012 a senior academic at the LSE criticised a presentation of data showing the decline of religious adherence in the UK with words to the effect that all it showed was a trend and that trends change, often unexpectedly. The first reply to that is to note the duration and consistency of the trend. Church attendance has never been higher since 1851: 163 years of decline. And despite the best efforts of religious organizations, that decline has been remarkably regular: as Alasdair Crockett and David Voas have shown, the pattern is very close to what one gets by assuming that each generation is half as religious as the previous one (Crockett and Voas 2006). The second reply is to note that the trend can be explained by a reasonable (if no longer universally accepted) theory (Wilson 1966; Bruce 2011). The third reply is given here. To simply say that the future may be different without considering what we know about the likelihood of it being different is intellectual dereliction. This essay will draw attention to a number of characteristics of the religious culture of the UK which allow us to make a reasoned estimate of the chances of a reversal of secularization.

In part what is being described is a change in social relationships within a society which one can suppose would have occurred, albeit in less dramatic form, had the British Isles been entirely sealed off from the rest of the world. But it is exaggerated by a common feature of modern migration: it highlights the difference between the religious and the religiously indifferent. Because the host society (say Sweden or the UK) is largely secular any body of immigrants is almost certain to be from a more religious and more traditionally religious society. Without immigration, the religiously indifferent of the largely secular society could,

through mass media and travel, compare their culture with that of more traditional societies.

With immigration, such comparison is unavoidable.

What follows is a description of insufficiently-remarked features of religion in a largely secular society with an extrapolation of the consequences of that novel set of circumstances for popular evaluations of religion.

THE SECULARITY OF THE UK

We still argue about the precise dating of secularization but, with the exception of Rodney Stark and colleagues, no serious scholar doubts that the UK is drastically less religious than it was in 1850, 1900 or 1950 (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). In 1851 between 40 and 60 per cent of the population attended church. Church data, third-party censuses, and the 2001 time use diary survey all put the current figure around or under 8 per cent (Brierley 2006, Bruce and Glendinning 2014). Importantly, the penumbra of occasional attenders has gone: two-thirds of Britons now say they never attend church (Clements 2014).

Every other measure of religious interest shows a similar decline and none of the innovations comes anywhere near close to compensating for that decline (Wilkins-Laflamme 2014). The membership of the new religious movements of the 1970s was trivial. The 2001 census showed 47 Hare Krishnas, 39 Moonies and 188 Scientologists in Scotland.ⁱ Estimating the popularity of what Paul Heelas called 'holistic spirituality' is more difficult but the very thorough Heelas and Linda Woodhead study of Kendal found just under 1 per cent of the population involved in such activities as yoga and meditation for spiritual reasons (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) and, using very different methods, a coincidental major Scottish survey came to a similar conclusion (Bruce and Glendinning 2011). Immigration has expanded the UK's religious repertoire but because of the small figures involved it has made no difference to its overall religiosity.

Nominal Muslims, with three-quarters in 2005 claiming to be religiously observant, are markedly more religious than nominal Christians but as Muslims were only 5 per cent of the population in 2011, that does not change the overall picture.(Gale and Hopkins 2009: 10).

The decline in the popularity of religion has been accompanied by a decline in its power and prestige. The latter will be discussed below. The former can be seen in almost every major social change in the last 100 years. When the churches have taken a distinctive stand, they have lost the argument. Mothers working outside the home, divorce, abortion, Sunday trading, the legalising of homosexuality, civil partnerships, gay marriage, liberalising the sale of alcohol, making gambling easier; on all these policy issues the churches have been defeated. Religion becoming more controversial should not be confused with it becoming more influential. The fate of the blasphemy laws is instructive. They had remained on the statute books for 50 years after the state last used them.ⁱⁱ Some Muslims demanded that Islam be given the same protection as Christianity. It was. The laws were repealed.

As a clarifying aside, it is important to address the methodological critique of the above. One can question if we are defining, operationalising and measuring religion appropriately. There are two answers brief enough to give here. The empirical one is that the change in scores on any index of demand for religion conventionally defined between any time before, say, 1970 and now is so great that no change in operationalising or measurement will alter the result. The conceptual answer is that attempts to broaden the notion of religion are either pointless or confirmatory. Edward Bailey argues that, while explicit religion may have declined, ‘implicit religion’ is going strong (1998) but, as there are almost no limits to what can be claimed as implicit religion, there is no point to the argument. If the behaviour of people who deny any religious intent or meaning can be claimed as implicit religion then fat men are implicitly thin. The confirmatory response is simply to note that what are now claimed as new forms of

religion are so far away from what the people of the UK in 1900 would have regarded as religion that it is still reasonable to describe the change from then to now as secularization.

THE PRIMARY CARRIERS OF RELIGION

It is well known that religion is unpopular. What is less remarked is the extent to which its remaining adherents are socially, as well as culturally, unusual. In one sense public perceptions of the religious are a distortion: for the obvious reason that they do not stand out, mainstream and liberal Christians tend to be overlooked. Nonetheless there are objective bases to the identifications which follow.

That the decline has largely been generational has created a strong association with age. The religious are much more likely than the religiously indifferent to be elderly. According to a 2007 survey, 30 per cent of regular churchgoers but only 18 per cent of UK adults were aged 65 and over (Ashworth and Farthing 2007: 13). There is also a strong association with gender. The size of the gender gap varies by Christian denomination. Crockett and Voas (2006) merged all the sweeps of the British Social Attitudes survey from 1983 to 2008 to give around 65,000 respondents. Those who claimed to attend church regularly varied from 64 per cent female for Catholics to 67 per cent for Baptists to a high of 69 per cent female for Methodists. One finds a similar gender divide in responses to survey questions about religious beliefs. For example, the British data from the International Social Survey Programme on belief in life after death shows considerable fluctuation, with women being 23 points ahead of men among those born in the 1940s but only 15 points ahead of those born in the 1950s. However the gap is never less than 10 points and for those born in the 1980s the gap is 27 percentage points.ⁱⁱⁱ The gender gap is even greater in the holistic spirituality milieu. Heelas and Woodhead estimate that '80 per cent of those active in the holistic milieu in Kendal and environs are female; 78 per cent of groups

are led or facilitated by women; 80 per cent of one-to-one practitioners are women' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005: 94). The traditional values of the religious result in distinctive demographics. While 49 per cent of adults in England and Wales in 2008 were married, among evangelical Christians in 2012 the figure was 71 per cent and for Anglicans in Kent in 2000 it was 63 per cent. As Peter Brierley summarised: 'several sizeable groups in the general population are severely under-represented among those who attend church' (Brierley 2012: 2).

Precisely because the religiously indifferent majority of the population are, as we will see below, also religiously ignorant, their images of the religious tend to be broad brush, tend to notice the extreme more than the average, and tend to rely more on mass media reporting than on first-hand experience (the lack of which will also be discussed below). Without much exaggeration, it seems reasonable to identify the following groups as primary carriers of religion, in the sense either that they exemplify religiosity or that they are treated by the mass media as being iconically religious. The reasons for the association vary. In the first case, it stems from their predominance in the ranks of the churchgoing. In the second, it is because they are markedly more religious than the population at large; indeed they often serve in popular humour as a shorthand for the hyper-religious. In the remaining cases, it is because they are migrants (or the offspring of migrants) from still traditionally religious countries.

(1) Elderly Women.

As we have noted, in the Christian churches, adherence is disproportionately the preserve of elderly women. Some large charismatic or independent evangelical congregations (many of them placed by ring roads and motorways so that they can draw from very wide catchment areas) have an almost normal age and gender profile but most parish church congregations are notably old and female.

(2) People of the Rural Peripheries.

Church attendance in the Western Isles is now falling towards the Scottish norm but until the 1980s, the Gaelic-speakers of Lewis (and we can broaden that to the people of the Scottish highlands) were an exception to the general decline in church-going (Bruce 2014: Ch. 2). The same can be said for the Welsh-speakers of rural North Wales. A comparison of social changes in four Welsh parishes since the 1950s showed the strength of their religious life to be closely associated with low proportions of English migrants, distance from the English border, and percentage of the population speaking Welsh (Bruce 2010).

(3) Poles.

The accession of Poland to the European Union in 2004 brought a very large number of Poles to Britain and provided an important counter to the trend of rapidly-declining Catholic mass attendance (Office for National Statistics 2011). In major cities Polish priests now conduct masses in Polish and, for nominal British Catholics, Poles now form an important element of the body of exemplary Catholics.

(4) West Africans.

The other growing sector in British Christianity is Pentecostalism. Since the 1980s there has been an enormous growth in churches led by Nigerians and Ghanaians. The Kingsway International Christian Centre, for example, was founded in 1992 and now rivals American mega-churches. The Redeemed Christian Church of God was founded in 1994 and by 2010 had 440 outlets with around 85,000 members (Duffuor 2012). For the argument of this essay it is important to note that despite two decades of presence in London and the south-east of England, the African Pentecostal churches remain almost entirely black (Brierley 2013).

(4) Muslims.

In terms both of making religion newsworthy and of differing from the native culture, the greatest recent change in the British religious landscape has been the arrival of the Muslim

community. While Muslim immigration has certainly made the UK slightly more religious, there is no evidence of significant numbers of non-religious white people converting to Islam.

In a nutshell, religion is now strongly associated with people who are unusual in more than just being religious. Because it is common to find the verb 'to other' (as in *othering*) being used in descriptions of the attitudes of white British people to imported religions, it is worth stressing that a sense among the religiously indifferent that religion is what 'other people' do is based on objective characteristics, many of which are deliberately retained by those other people as a matter of choice. No doubt there is inappropriate stereotyping but to say that Islam or Nigerian Pentecostalism is unlike the feint recollections of Christianity possessed by the religiously indifferent is not the creative work of the religious indifferent nor of the scholar who seeks to describe them. It is a recognition of real difference.

For example, three of the five populations identified above conduct their religious business in a foreign language. We are not referring here to a sacred language learnt specifically for the purposes of religion and appearing in the services as though in quotations: Arabic for Muslims being similar to Latin for Tridentine Mass Catholics or Hebrew for Jews. That religious business, like stock trading or dog racing, has its own language is probably expected by most outsiders. What reinforces the sense that religion is alien is that the non-core bits are conducted in a foreign language: Welsh, Gaelic, Polish and, for many mosques, Urdu. Or to put it another way, religion is conducted in a foreign language, not because the religion requires it, but because the carriers of religion are cultural or ethnic minorities.

In the case of Welsh and Gaelic-speaking Calvinists, their cultural separation comes with geographical separation and it is their position of the peripheries that has allowed both linguistic and religious distinctiveness to survive. Although the UK's Muslims are located in or close to large urban centres, many are separated from the non-religious by their concentration. Though they form only 5 per cent of the population in total, in the London Boroughs of Tower

Hamlets and Newham, they are over 30 per cent and in Blackburn, in the north-west of England, they are 28 per cent of the population. West African Pentecostals are similarly concentrated. Not only are they rare outside London and the South-East but even within London they are concentrated. According to Brierley's 2012 London Church Census there were 391 Pentecostal churches in just three London boroughs: Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark (2013: 2).

Isolation and concentration are important for many reasons but one that concerns us here is the effect on an important statistic. When less than one in 10 of the population — a convenient figure constructed by splitting the difference between church or equivalent attendance and survey-response assertions of religiosity — are religious the odds that any member of the religiously indifferent will knowingly meet a religious person even casually, let alone in circumstances which will encourage affective bonds to develop, are small. When the religious are either isolated or concentrated, the odds get even smaller. And they are kept small by the fact that most religious minorities wish to preserve their distinctive religions and that requires endogamy.

As an aside we should note the relationship between numbers, family formation and introversion. David Voas has demonstrated statistically what is well-known anecdotally: the odds on children remaining in the faith are much reduced if the parents are not of the same religion. For the last half of the twentieth century the odds of children remaining in the faith are 1 in 2 if both parents are the same (e.g. Catholic and Catholic, Methodist and Methodist). If only one parent is religious or even if the parental difference is in types of Christianity, the odds fall to 1 in 4 (Voas 2003). As the number of the religious declines they are increasingly confronted with the choice of marrying out or not marrying at all and either option much reduces the chance of the faith being maintained. The solution is for the religious to gather together. Britain's Jews are an example. As the number of Jews in Belfast, Aberdeen, Dundee

and other peripheral cities declined below reproduction size, young committed Jews moved to Manchester or North London. Less visibly because their religiously-mandated lifestyles are less visibly different, the Closed Brethren have also tended to converge on the areas where they are strongest. We mention this because it amplifies the unlikelihood of the religious and the religiously indifferent meeting in circumstances which permit or encourage friendship bonds to develop.

This absence of positive social interaction between the religious and the religiously indifferent is an entirely new circumstance. The contrast can be seen if we look at the mining village of Bowers Row during and shortly after the First World War (Bullock 1976). As Jim Bullock has recorded, the colliers who lived side-by-side in terraced rows divided into unbelievers, Anglicans, Catholics and evangelical Protestants. The evangelicals were slightly more prosperous because they did not drink or gamble. They spent two or three evenings in the chapel. They did not enter the pub. That apart, there was nothing to separate the religious adherents from the unbelievers. They lived side-by-side. They worked together. They were members of the same trade union. They supported the same political party. They played sports together. They shared common hobbies. The unbelievers might sometimes resent the holier-than-thou attitudes of some evangelicals but they voted for them for the all-important position of check weighman, they elected them to union offices, and they choose them to stand for Westminster seats. Though membership of these four 'religious' groups was initially inherited, it was always possible that people would move between them. An unbeliever would get saved and give up going to the pub; a believer would lose faith and start going to the pub. The boundaries were porous.

There is nothing new about *particular* religions being carried by distinct populations. As the foundation principles of sociology would expect, though economy, society and culture rarely stack up like a triple burger, differences in material circumstances tend to have some non-

accidental relationship with social relations and position which in turn affect worldview. That the people attracted to Methodism systematically differed from those who did not leave the Church of England is only to be expected, as is the same point made one level down: each schism within Methodism tended albeit imperfectly to reflect the material interests of class fractions (Gilbert 1976).

But in every previous instantiation of this principle, what has differed between identifiably distinct populations is the *type* of religion. That religion *as such* is now the preserve of a number of small distinct populations, divided from the rest of the population by boundaries that are far less porous than before, is new.

In brief, were the religious randomly distributed, the religiously indifferent would find that around one in ten of the people with whom they interacted in the normal course of a working and social life were religious. As it is, the majority of the religiously indifferent will never meet a religious person in a context that encourages the development of affective bonds.

STOCK OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Measuring a society's shared stock of religious knowledge is difficult and accurate comparison across time more so but there is no doubt that the decline in committed adherents has reduced the common knowledge of Christian belief and ritual. That change has been amplified by a decline in occasional attendance. The diocesan records for the Deerness Valley, County Durham, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example, show that 'occasional communicants' were often more numerous than regular ones. Now the former category is very small.^{iv} It has also been amplified by the decline of Sunday schools, which once taught rudimentary Christian beliefs to a population far wider than the narrow circle of adherents. At the same time religious education in state schools has changed from Christian exposition to

even-handed teaching about all the major religions. Despite the statutory obligations, school collective acts of ‘worship’ are now more ethical than religious and, with a shortage of trained teachers, religious education is one of the least well served parts of the curriculum (OFSTED 2013; Paton 2013).

Many recent surveys highlight a lack of knowledge of the Christian faith. A 2014 survey of 1,000 children aged 5 to 12 that used multiple choice questions showed more than half of the children thinking that Christmas Day was the birthday of Santa Claus, 20 per cent thinking that Jesus Christ was a footballer with Chelsea FC and 35 per cent thinking Christ was born at the South Pole (Field 2014a). A Comres survey of Londoners produced similarly wayward answers. Santa Claus was placed at the birth of Christ by 12 per cent of Londoners and a slightly larger number of 18 to 34 year olds thought that Christmas trees were in the Bible. (Christian Institute 2014).

We should beware of mythologizing the past but we should also remember the public presence of religion even as late as the 1950s. Choirs of northern cities regularly sang Handel’s *Messiah*. In areas where nonconformity had been strong, such as the fishing villages of the East Coast and the South West, public hymn singing was still common (Clark 1982). And in Scotland a popular daily paper could devote its front pages to a campaign against a proposed change to the Presbyterian structure of the national church. Max Beaverbrook, the owner of the *Daily Express*, instructed his editor to fight the proposal for elected bishops and to do so with detailed reference to classic Presbyterian texts:

Please turn up the denunciation of bishops by John Knox. Then having printed it, conclude with the final sentence of the Scots Confession of 1560 ... ‘Arise, O Lord, and let thy enemies be confounded. Let them flee from the presence that hate thy godly name: Give thy servants strength to speak thy word in boldness; and let all nations cleave to thy true knowledge’ (Bruce 2014: 105-7).

Seventy years later, the presence of such words in a tabloid paper would seem decidedly eccentric.

For the religiously indifferent, the decline in the shared stock of religious knowledge has reduced religion to its simplest common ethical principle: be nice. Religion is about being nice. Religious people should be nice. Any concern to promote specific beliefs or patterns of behaviour is self-serving and is not nice. Hence Pope Benedict politely pointing out that most Christmas flummery has no basis in the Bible is criticised for spoiling the kiddies' Christmas: 'Killjoy Pope crushes Christmas nativity traditions: New Jesus book reveals there were no donkeys beside crib, no lowing oxen and definitely no carols' (*Daily Mail* 2012a). A Manchester vicar is similarly criticised: the headline 'Kids' tears over Vicar's Santa message' says it all (*Manchester Evening News* 2007). A vicar who refused to rent a church hall to a yoga group on the grounds that he should not use Anglican church property to promote Hinduism is monstered by the tabloid press (*Daily Mail* 2012b). A vicar who asked the Girl Guides to stop using his church hall because their ties to the Church had become attenuated was given a similar treatment: 'Vicar orders Girl Guides to quit church HQ they have used for 86 years because they haven't been to enough religious services' (Creasy 2013). And popular musical artiste Sir Elton John settled the Church of England's problems over gay marriage: Jesus would be in favour because he 'was all about love' (Molloy 2014).

PUBLIC REPUTATION OF RELIGION

As the following observation can be contentious it needs to be put extremely carefully: the introduction of Islam to the UK and native reaction to its demands have created the impression in the minds of the non-religious that religion taken-too-seriously is troublesome.

We will begin with the smallest issues and move to the largest. Most Muslims come from cultures which accord a significant position of social honour to their faith and, not having been party to the gradual evolution of church-state relations in the UK, some Muslims demand that aspects of British life be changed to accommodate their religious preferences and requirements. Examples include demands for halal meat products, censorship of criticisms of Islam, gender segregation, provision for attendance at Friday prayers, exemption from uniform requirements to allow head coverings, the broadening of blasphemy laws to protect Islam, the incorporation of the Sharia in British family law, the closing of premises selling alcohol in areas with a large Muslim population, changes to the culture of schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils, graveyards being arranged so that all plots are aligned with Mecca rather than facing east, and the like. Just how representative are those who press such issues is neither here nor there for understanding their public impact because a largely hostile mass media ensures that such campaigns are given a high profile and are presented, as their promoters wish them to be, as emblematic of Islam.

Second, there was the Rushdie affair. In 1988 Salman Rushdie, an English novelist of Muslim Indian heritage, published *The Satanic Verses*. Awarded prizes by a literary community apparently unaware of its controversial nature, it was burnt in public by Muslims in Bradford. There were numerous attacks on individuals and organizations associated with the book and the Ayatollah Khomeini put a price on Rushdie's head. For the next ten years Rushdie lived under police protection. The anti-Rushdie demonstrations provoked much argument about the rights of free speech and the right of a religion to be protected against insult. The British government took a strong stand in defence of the former and broke diplomatic relations with Iran. Most non-Muslim opinion leaders supported Rushdie, though the Archbishop of Canterbury and a number of other church leaders condemned the book. A large number of British Muslim leaders supported, or at least refused to condemn, the fatwa.

Third, and most recently, there has been violent fall out from the Twin Towers attack and the subsequent 'war on terrorism'. As a very large body of survey research shows, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a number of spectacular jihadi attacks have created a strong popular association of Islam with violence (Field 2007). That those who support such attacks are a very small proportion of British Muslims does not change the fact that the bombing of London Transport in 2005 and Glasgow airport in 2007, and the murder of Lee Rigby in 2013, were the work of Muslims and were seen by the non-religious in the terms in which the perpetrators wish to be understood: as a consequence of Islam.

Muslims worry that the acts of the tiny jihadi minority will be imputed to all of them. Hindus and Sikhs worry that they will be mistaken for Muslims. But the decline in the stock of religious knowledge and the lack of interest in religion leads to a greater elision of different religions. For the religiously indifferent and ignorant, trouble created by people claiming religious justification is blamed, not just (and sometimes not even) on the specific religion in question, but on religion in general. Hence the 2007 survey finding that only 17 per cent of the British thought religion beneficial while 42 per cent thought 'the influence of religion on this country' was 'harmful' (YouGov 2007).

There is not scope here to try to untangle the complex relationships between the serious jihadi violence and the low-level irritation of Muslim agitation for recognition of their religious requirements but it seems clear that responses to the latter are conditioned by fear of the former. Sikh demands (for exemption from work-related dress codes or the requirement to wear motor bike helmets, for example) have generally provoked little response. And the Jewish slaughter of unstunned cattle went unremarked for decades until anti-Muslim groups latched on to the animal rights issue and made ritual slaughter controversial. What matters for our argument is only that, leaving aside the international conflicts that involved Western powers intervening in Muslim countries, and the domestic ripples of those conflicts, the last two decades has seen a

large number of small disputes over the rights of Islam that have been brought to public attention and kept there by popular mass media sources such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*.

The general sense that religion-taken-too-seriously is troublesome is inadvertently encouraged by the response of some conservative Christians to Muslim demands for exemptions and recognition: to complain that Christian interests are being neglected and to make matching demands. Between 2010 and 2014 George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury and Michael Nazir-Ali, former Bishop of Rochester, very frequently complained of government bias towards Muslims. Conservative Christian organizations have supported a number of legal challenges by Christians to the government's equality legislation. Bed and breakfast providers claimed the right to refuse to accommodate gay couples. A registrar refused to register gay civil partnerships. A counsellor working for Relate refused to counsel gay couples. An employee of an airline claimed exemption from her employer's dress code so that she can display a crucifix. A nurse defied her hospital's dress code to do likewise.^v And most unusually in an electoral system which offers little opportunity for third parties, two Christian parties contested elections between 1997 and 2011 (Bruce 2012: 122-38). Although both the Christian Party and the Christian People's Alliance formally presented themselves as full spectrum parties, their local campaigns were largely a critique of immigration, equality legislation and supposed discrimination against Christians. Although there was no systematic research on reactions to the CP and CPA – they were too obviously unpopular for social scientists to take them seriously – we made a point during the 2011 elections of asking large numbers of people what they thought of this Christian electoral intervention. For those of the non-religious who noticed (and most did not) it was just another example of religious people 'whinging'.

The public reputation of religion has not been helped by events within the major churches. In recent years the Church of England has been in the headlines mainly because of its bitter

internal divisions over an issue which to outsiders seems incomprehensible. Although women priests now make up around one-fifth of the full-time clergy, attempts to allow women bishops were repeatedly thwarted by a well-organized conservative minority within the laity. Other very public arguments involve the ordination of gays and the acceptance of gay marriage. On both issues the Church of England is at odds with young British people (that is, those who will need to convert if there is to be a religious revival) for whom gender equality is taken-for-granted and homosexuals are unremarkable. Although the ordination of women is not a problem for the Church of Scotland, the ordination of gays is contentious. And Muslim leaders have also been vocal in opposing gay rights. Outside of the mainstream churches, conservative Christian bodies continue to very publicly oppose any move from the social mores of the 1950s. To the general problem of the churches appearing to be out-of-touch, we might add the scandals of sexually abusive Catholic priests and the Church's lame response to them. It says something about the poor esteem in which the Church was held that, when his exposure as a sexually abusive homosexual in 2013 forced Cardinal Keith O'Brien, the leader of the Catholic Church in Scotland, to resign, a taxi driver said: 'Well at least he wisnae a kiddie fiddler!'.

Of course in any era the seriously religious have been at odds with the irreligious. What makes the current public reputation of religion important for understanding the effects of secularization is the relative proportions of the population within and outside the body of the seriously religious and the general decline in understanding of, and sympathy for, religiously-inspired social mores. When the non-religious majority either has no idea of religion or has reduced it to the notion that religious people should be nice, the conservative positions promoted by many Christians (and by most Muslims) seem narrow-minded and mean.

This cannot be dismissed as mere anecdote. It is supported by Clive Field's extremely detailed and comprehensive study of surveys of public attitudes to the churches and the clergy since the 1960s. He concludes 'the standing of both the Church and the clergy in the eyes of the

general public has diminished over the past half-century, whether quantified in terms of perceived importance, influence, confidence, admiration, respect, trust, veracity, corruption and extent of being “in touch” or of being a positive or a negative force in society’ (Field 2014b: 211). The extent of decline in the public standing of the clergy can be illustrated from one of Field’s sources. Ipsos Mori has maintained a standard measure of trust in 16 professions since 1983. Then, with 85 percent of respondents saying they would ‘trust them to tell the truth’, the clergy headed the list. In 2013 the clergy figure was just 66 per cent and the change is not due to a general increase in cynicism. Civil Servants, businessmen and trade union leaders had improved their standing, journalists and politicians had held their albeit low position, and doctors, teachers, judges and scientists had maintained their scores of over 80 per cent (Ipsos Mori 2013).

SOCIAL REACTIONS TO RELIGION

We can now put the last two points together. That most British people know almost nothing about religion means that hostility to one sort of religion may easily bleed into hostility to religion per se. The 2008 British Social Attitudes Survey contains a useful item. The interviewers said to over two thousand respondents: ‘I’ll read the name of a group and I’d like you to rate that group using something we call a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favourable and warm toward the group. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don’t feel favourable and don’t care too much for that group. You would rate the group at the 50 degree mark if you don’t feel particularly warm or cold toward the group. Feel free to use the entire extent of the scale’. The scores are displayed in Table 1.

Tables 1 and 2 around here

When we look at the association between ‘feelings toward’ and church attendance (Table 2) as a mark of religiosity we find, not surprisingly, that the regular churchgoers like the deeply religious more than they like the non-religious and those who never attend church reverse that order. But the middle group of occasional church attenders also prefer the non-religious to the deeply religious. The important consideration for social reaction as a whole is the relative sizes of those three groups. As we see from the bottom line, the groups which prefer the not religious to the deeply religious number contain a total of 1,797: more than four times the number in the group which prefers the deeply religious.^{vi}

THE CONDITIONS FOR RELIGIOUS REVIVAL

There are three ways in which the decline of religion might be reversed. First, there may be further immigration of religious peoples. But it is unlikely that there will be sufficient immigration to change the balance of the religious and the religiously indifferent and to the extent that the current balance between those two populations is changed by immigration the sense that religion is alien will be reinforced.

Second, the religious people in the UK might outbreed the religiously indifferent (Kaufmann 2010). It is true that religious people who do have families tend to have larger than average ones but the age and gender imbalance of white British Christians prevents this principle having any significant consequences for them. Non-Christian populations show higher than average rates of growth but we can expect that to change as the ‘demographic transition’ from many children-low survival rates to few children-high survival rates is completed. And while religious minorities with a strong community base may be less vulnerable to secularization than

the majority population, they are not invulnerable. Finally to the extent that such minorities do grow, the sense that religion is alien will increase (Wolfe 2006).

Third, people who are now religiously indifferent might convert to become religious. To simplify the presentation, I will leave aside the Heelas and Woodhead argument that a spiritual revolution will replace conventional religion. As already noted, the numbers are currently far too small and projections of considerable future growth are implausible for the following reasons. The product has been around long enough and is well enough advertised to suppose that levels of adult recruitment are unlikely to change. Second, most New Agers are beyond child-bearing years. Third, two-thirds of their children do not share their beliefs (Heelas and Seel 2004: 234; Voas and Bruce 2007: 54).

So how likely is a major increase in conversion to Christianity? First we know that conversion is rare. The 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey asked for current religion and for the respondent's religion of upbringing. Only 5 per cent of those who said they were raised with no religion had acquired one in adulthood (Bruce and Glendinning 2003). It could be that this low figure is partly a consequence of most people in the older generations having been raised in some religion and conversion will 'naturally' rise as the number of people raised with no religion increases but against that expectation we can set the declining stock of religious knowledge and the disappearance of the penumbra of the slightly involved. As the churches have been trying very hard without success to reverse their decline for the last century, it is difficult to see why they should be more successful in the future than they were in the past when the clergy were held in greater esteem, when the state and para-state agencies were more sympathetic, and when the religiously indifferent were a deviant minority. So we can view the currently available major religions in the UK as having the same relationship to the non-religious as the New Religious Movements of the 1960s had to the people they tried to recruit

and consider what was learnt by the very large number of detailed sociological studies of conversion and recruitment.

Two things seemed to be vital for conversion. First the targets have to see something of themselves in the promoters of the new religion. Simply asking oneself ‘Are these people like me?’ allows the process of ‘trying it on to see if it fits’ described in the Bromley and Shupe role-theory model of conversion to be short-circuited (Bromley and Shupe 1979). Most new religious movements have a socially similar membership because their product has a distinctive appeal but the front end of that product is the people promoting it. The initial members and promoters set the standard for the movement and that is reinforced by each subsequent wave of joiners attracted as like attracts like. To borrow a health product slogan, the target needs to see in the movement’s promoters ‘myself but better’.

Second, the targets need to form affective bonds with the promoters. The conclusion of a study of recruitment to Nicheren Shoshu in the USA can stand for the conclusion of very many studies of conversion: ‘The analysis suggests that affective and intensive interaction are not only essential for conversion ... [and also] that conversion in general is highly improbable in the absence of these two factors’ (Snow and Phillips 1980, 430).

Here we can return to Bower’s Row. Non-religious colliers worked and lived alongside religious colliers. In such circumstances it was possible for bonds of friendship to form. When the religious are few and socially concentrated and when the religiously indifferent see religion as something that ‘other people do’ and as something that is troublesome if taken too seriously, the chances of the religiously indifferent now becoming religious – when they have declined so to do for the last fifty years – must be slight.

CONCLUSION

Despite the apparent death of the secularization thesis, religion has continued to decline in popularity in the West. In the first instance this means that there are fewer religious people about. If the conversion of the non-religious will be anything like the conversion processes that have been intensively and extensively studied by sociologists, that scarcity has its own consequences for the possibility of secularization being reversed. The social circumstances that facilitate conversion are considerably rarer now than they were fifty years ago.

But more importantly, the social distinctiveness of the remaining religious people has created a sense among the religiously indifferent majority that religion is for other people. Had the UK (or any other largely secular society such as Denmark) been a sealed unit, that would have been the case as religion came to be associated with the elderly and with a number of geographically peripheral groups. However, because religion is strongly associated with migration from more traditionally religious societies the sense that religion is alien is amplified.

There is nothing new in strands within the hegemonic religion reflecting social differences. Nor is there anything new about religious enthusiasm in general being socially patterned. What is new is (a) the very small number of people who show any interest in religion and (b) the attendant very low levels of stocks of religious knowledge. What is also novel is (c) the lack of social similarity between the religious and the religiously indifferent. These observations allow us to go from simply asserting that the future might be different to an assessment of the odds on it being different. Observation (a) draws our attention to the very low likelihood of the religiously indifferent developing positive social relationships with the religious. Observation (b) draws our attention to the difficulty the religious have in defending their distinctive principles without seeming troublesome and thus increasing hostility to religion. Observation (c) is important because it suggests that, even when the religiously indifferent and the religious do interact, the former are unlikely to see the latter as models for emulation.

The causes of secularization are complex. We could have considered the role of technology in creating a generally instrumental attitude to life, the effect of the end of state promotion of religion, or the effect of toleration on the effort that parents of middling religious commitment bring to indoctrinating their children (Wilson 1966, Bruce 2012). The focus here is narrowly on relationships between the religious and the religiously indifferent and the latter's attitude to the former. The argument of this paper could be put thus. That the last century has seen no reverse of religion's decline in popularity suggest that revival has always faced some powerful obstacles. This essay has identified an additional barrier that gives us good reason to see secularization as more than a mere trend. That being religious is now associated with particular minority populations makes it remarkably unlikely that the religiously indifferent majority will convert at the rate required to reverse the trend of decline.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ashworth, J. and Farthing I. 2007 *Churchgoing in the UK*. Teddington: Tear Fund.

Bailey, E. 1998 *Implicit Religion*, Hatfield: University of Middlesex Press.

Brierley, P. 2006 *Pulling out of the Nosedive: a Contemporary Picture of Churchgoing*. London: Christian Research.

Brierley, P. 2012 'Marital Status of Churchgoers' *Future First* December: 2.

Brierley, P. 2013 'Black Churches in London', *Future First* April: 2.

Brierley, P. (ed). 2014 *UK Church Statistics 2010-2020*, Tonbridge, Kent: ADBC Publishers.

Bromley, D. and Shupe, A. 1979 *Moonies in America: Cult, Church and Crusade*, New York: Sage.

Bruce, S. 2010 'Religion in Rural Wales: Four Restudies', *Contemporary Wales* 23: 219-39.

Bruce, S. 2011 *Secularization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bruce, S. 2012 *Politics and Religion in the UK*, London: Routledge.

Bruce, S. 2014 *Scottish Gods: Religion in Modern Scotland 1900-2009*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Bruce, S. and Glendinning, T. 2003 'Religious beliefs and differences', in C. Bromley, J. Curtice, K. Hinds and A. Park (eds), *Devolution – Scottish Answers to Scottish Questions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp 86-115.

Bruce, S. and Glendinning, T. 2011 'Privatization and de-privatization', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 50: 503-16.

- Bruce, S and Glendinning, T.** 2014 'The Extent of Religious Activity in England', in P. Brierley (ed). *UK Church Statistics 2010-2020*, Tonbridge, Kent: ADBC Publishers, section 17.5.
- Bullock, J.** 1976 *Bower's Row*, Wakefield: EP Publishing.
- Christian Institute** 2014 'Brits Believe Santa Present at Jesus' birth, new poll reveals', *Christian Institute* 23 December. uk/news/brits-believe-santa-present-at-jesus-birth-new-poll-reveals/. Accessed December 2014.
- Clark, D.** 1982 *Between pulpit and pew: folk religion in a North Yorkshire fishing village*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clements, B.** 2012 'The Sources of Public Feelings Towards Religious Groups in Britain', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27: 419-3.
- Clements, B.** 2014 'Changes in Attendance at Religious Services in Britain', *British Religion in Numbers*; <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2014/changes-in-attendance-at-religious-services-in-britain/>. Accessed January 2015.
- Creasy, R.** 2013 'Vicar Orders Girl Guides to Quite Church HQ They Have Used for 86 Years Because They Haven't Been to Enough Religious Services', *Daily Mail* 31 March 2013.
- Crockett, A. and Voas, D.** 2006 'Generations of decline: Religious change in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45: 567-584.
- Daily Mail** 2012a 'Killjoy Pope crushes Christmas nativity traditions: New Jesus book reveals there were no donkeys beside crib, no lowing oxen and definitely no carols' 22 November.
- Daily Mail** 2012b 'Is Yoga Religious?' 26 September.

- Duffuor, A.** 2012 ‘Moving Up and Moving Out? The Expansion of a London-Based “African Pentecostal” Church’ in D. Goodhew (ed) *Church Growth in Britain*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 145-160.
- Field, C.** 2007 ‘Islamophobia in Contemporary Britain: The Evidence of the Opinion Polls, 1988–2006’, *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 18: 447-477.
- Field, C.** 2014a ‘Christmas Observance and Other News’, *British Religion in Numbers* December. <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2014/christmas-observance-and-other-news/>. Accessed December 2014.
- Field, C.** 2014b ‘Another Window on Secularization: Public Attitudes to Church and Clergy Since the 1960s’, *Contemporary British History* 28: 190-218.
- Gale, R. and Hopkins, P.** 2009 ‘Introduction’ in P. Hopkins and R. Gale (eds), *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 1-22.
- Heelas, P. and Seel, B.** 2003 ‘An Ageing New Age?’ in G. Davie, P. Heelas, and L. Woodhead (eds), *Predicting Religion. Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 229-47.
- Ipsos MORI** 2013 *Trust in Professions*: <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/15/Trust-in-Professions.aspx>. Accessed October 2014.
- Kaufman, E.** 2010 *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* London: Profile.
- Trzebiatowska, M. K. and Bruce, S.** 2012 *Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Manchester Evening News** 2007 ‘Kids’ Tears Over Vicar’s Santa Message’, *Manchester Evening News* 15 December 2007.

Molloy, A. 2014 'Sir Elton John Says Jesus Would Support Gay Marriage: "He Was All About Love"', *Independent* 29 June 2014.

Office for National Statistics 2011 *Polish People in the UK - Half a million Polish Residents*; <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/migration1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/august-2011/polish-people-in-the-uk.html>. Accessed November 2014.

OFSTED 2013 *Religious Education: Realising the Potential*. London: OFSTED.

Paton, G. 2013 'Religious Education "Being Edged out of School Timetables" illegally', *Daily Telegraph* 29 November.

PewResearch 2012 "'Nones" on the Rise', *Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project*; <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>. Accessed March 2013.

Snow, D. and Phillip, C.L. 1980 'The Lofland-Stark Conversion Model: a Critical Reassessment', *Social Problems* 27: 430-47.

Stark, R. and Iannaccone, L. R. 1994 'A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the "Secularization" of Europe', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33: 230-52.

Voas, D. 2003 'Intermarriage and the Demographics of Secularization', *British Journal of Sociology* 54: 83-108.

Voas, D. and Bruce S. 2005 'The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred', in K. Flanagan and P. Jupp (eds), *A Sociology of Spirituality*, Aldershot: Ashgate, p.43-62.

Wilkins-Laflamme, S. 2014 'Towards Religious Polarization? Time Effects on Religious Commitment in US, UK and Canadian Regions', *Sociology of Religion* 75: 284-308.

Wolfe, A. 2006 'Realism on Religion', *Prospect*; www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2fmagazine/2frealismonreligion. Accessed November 2009.

YouGov 2007 John Humphrys religion survey, February 2007;

[http://iis.yougov.co.uk/extranets/ygarchives/content/pdf/Humphrys%20Religion%20Questions.](http://iis.yougov.co.uk/extranets/ygarchives/content/pdf/Humphrys%20Religion%20Questions.pdf)

pdf. Accessed January 2010.

Young L. 1997 *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment*. New York: Routledge.

Table 1 Feelings Towards Various Groups BSA 2008

Degrees of warmth	s.d.	
62.6	19.8	Protestant people
60.9	20.3	Catholic people
60.0	19.6	People who are not religious
56.6	19.6	Jewish people
56.1	21.1	Buddhist people
50.0		NEUTRAL POINT
50.0	21.5	People who are deeply religious
46.8	23.3	Muslim people

Source: Ben Clements, University of Leicester

Table 2 Feelings Towards Various Groups by Church Attendance BSA 2008

		Degrees of Warmth		
		CHURCH ATTENDANCE		
Objects of feeling		At least monthly	Less Often	Never
Protestant people		66.3	64.2	61.0
Catholic people		65.9	61.9	59.1
Jewish people		60.0	57.7	55.2
Muslim people		53.2	46.9	44.9
Buddhist people		56.5	57.1	55.6
People who are deeply religious		62.3	50.9	46.2
People who are not religious		54.9	56.9	61.9
N		427	418	1,379

Source: Ben Clements, University of Leicester

ⁱ The breakdown of the write-in 'Other Religion' category was generously provided by the office of the Registrar General for Scotland.

ⁱⁱ The well-remembered *Gay News* case of 1977 was a private suit brought because the state would not prosecute.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am very grateful to Prof. David Voas of the University of Essex for these data, which are described in more detail in Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2012: 5) and for numerous helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

^{iv} This observation is based on detailed analysis of parish registers of services and diocesan records in the Durham Records Office and the Library of Durham University. I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for funding this research and to the staff of both archives for their generous assistance.

^v This is the only one of these four cases in which the European Court of Human Rights found for the appellants. The 2013 judgements are reported in <http://www.bailii.org/eu/cases/ECHR/2013/37.html>.

^{vi} I am extremely grateful to Dr Ben Clements of Leicester University for supplying these data and to my colleague Tony Glendinning for a similar analysis of the same data.