3 Is Religion Important Today?

It is often claimed that the importance of religion in modern societies is declining. Supporters of this view point out that there has been a decline in the number of people who attend church on a regular basis. Moreover, surveys reveal that celebrations such as Christmas and Easter have lost much of their religious significance for the majority of the population. Some commentators argue that the media has taken over from religion as the major force shaping the attitudes and beliefs of people in Britain today. The influence of the media is discussed in more detail in the fourth pack in this series, Pack D: Media and Communication.

However, there is counter evidence to consider which casts a rather different light on the issue of whether or not religious influence is in decline. Much also depends on the way key concepts are defined: for example, there are different ways of defining what it means to ‘practise a religion’ and to ‘believe in God’.

Key issue

What is religion?

There is no general agreement on what religion actually is. There have been many attempts to define it but none have met with universal approval. However, there are two main characteristics that seem to apply broadly to all world religions:

1. Concern with questions of ultimate meaning (e.g. ‘What is the meaning of life?’ ‘Is there an after-life?”)

2. An identification with a sacred and supernatural power (though this does not necessarily apply in the case of Buddhism – see page 4).

Thus religion can be defined as a set of symbols, beliefs, values and practices directed towards a supernatural power and focused on questions of ultimate meaning.

Secularisation

Historians have noted that there were periods in the past when religion exercised considerable power and influence in society. During the Middle Ages, leading churchmen were among the main advisers to the monarch in matters concerning the government of the country. At this time, the church exercised many powers similar to those which we now associate with the modern state, including the right to hold religious trials and to punish those found guilty of offences such as blasphemy and heresy.

By comparison with the Middle Ages, religion clearly has less power today. The process through which religious thinking, practice and institutions lose their significance is known as secularisation.

There have been many attempts to measure the extent of secularisation in British society this century. However, this has proved a complex task for several reasons.
• Secularisation is not necessarily uniform. Some religious groups may gain in influence, while that of others declines. Different age groups may be affected differently.

• It is difficult to determine if or when the decline commenced. This is partly because early historical records are incomplete and may be unreliable. A religious census in 1851 indicated that only a third of the population attended church. It is difficult to know if 100 years before that the population was any more religious. (Some commentators have actually questioned whether a ‘golden age’ of religion ever existed – see the Key issue on page 19.)

• The increase in secular forces or signs of religious decline may lead to a reaffirmation of religious values – in other words a counter-secular trend. This may be happening today where the apparent decline in popularity of the Church of England has led to a renewed interest in evangelism as a way of ‘rejuvenating’ the Christian faith in the UK.

• In seeking to measure the extent of religious influence in society, much depends on the questions asked. For example, a researcher may ask: “Do you believe in God?”, believing the question to be a straightforward one, but the idea of God means different things to different people, so technically they are answering different questions.

The statistical analysis

One way of assessing the influence of religion is to consider the degree to which people engage in acts of worship. Attendance figures at church are used, although home worship is excluded.

Consider what the following evidence suggests about changes in religious practice during the twentieth century:

**Church of England Sunday School attendance 1894-1994**
(number of children per 1000 population aged 3-14 in England)

**Church of England Easter Day Communicants 1885-1990**
(rate per 1000 population over 15 years in England)

**Church of England Confirmations 1960-1990**
(number of children per 1000 population aged 15 in England)

**Degree of Church of England membership**

In England in 1992:

• 26 million were baptised Church of England
• 8 million were confirmed
• 1.6 million were on the Church of England electoral roll
• the average weekly attendance at church was 1.1 million

Source: Social Trends and Church Information Office.
The value of these statistics as indicators of religiosity (how committed people are to religion) is questionable. On the face of it, people seem less religious now than at the beginning of the century, but it may simply be that less importance is being attached to the outward manifestations of religiosity, such as attendance at church. Surveys consistently show that people still have strong religious beliefs and identify closely with the church. A Gallup poll found that 45% of the sample believed in life after death; 27% believed in hell; 57% in heaven; 30% in the Devil; and 76% believed in God.

Much also depends on which churches the statistics relate to. As the table below shows, while membership of Trinitarian churches in the UK fell by 17% between 1975 and 1999, membership in the ‘other religions’ category has more than doubled. Indeed, some religious groups have been particularly successful in attracting new followers in Britain recently. Examples include various evangelical and revivalist movements, and the Mormon church. There are dangers, therefore, in making quick generalisations about what may be relatively short-term trends in attendance.

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United Kingdom church membership, adults (millions)

Key issue

Was there a ‘golden age’ of religion?

Several researchers have questioned whether there ever was an age when all or most of the population shared a high level of religious belief and commitment. They point to growing evidence that even in the Middle Ages there were constant complaints of scepticism and laxity in religious observance, while the religiosity of the Victorians has been exaggerated.

One historical study has shown that the people of feudal England had little knowledge of religious beliefs and practices. “Many are so ignorant,” complained one bishop of the time, “that they know not what the Scriptures are; they know not that there are any Scriptures.” In 1551, in Gloucester, it was found that 171 out of 311 clergy could not list the Ten Commandments, 27 did not know the author of the Lord’s Prayer, and ten could not even repeat it. Even as late as the seventeenth century, some country clergymen were still using prayers as charms to ward off disease, physical as well as mental; writing them on pieces of paper and hanging them around the sufferer’s neck.
Records of church courts show how many ordinary working-class men and women rejected Christianity and turned instead to magic. Many relied on astrology, palmistry, faith healing and sorcery, seeing these practices as being not in competition with but complementary to the church’s teachings.

If there has never been a religious age, then secularisation seems an irrelevant concept.

Questions
1. Suggest reasons why it might be difficult to assess how religious people were in the past.
2. Many more people claim to believe in God than actually attend church or take part in religious ceremonies. How would you explain this fact?
3. What evidence might be used to support the claim that the media has more influence today than religion in shaping our attitudes and values?

The secularisation debate

Reference to statistical evidence based on church attendance figures seems insufficient in itself to settle the issue of whether or not religion is declining in importance. Other issues also need to be considered. Below are some of the main arguments for and against the idea that British society is becoming increasingly secularised.

Arguments for secularisation

1. There has been a change in the pattern of thinking so that everyday patterns of thought are now less ‘religious’ than they once were. For example, science has displaced religion as the main reference for explaining events in the natural world. Work is no longer seen as a religious duty, and modern technology gives people a sense that they control their own destiny.

2. Religious institutions are less powerful than they once were and their influence in society is waning. For example, religious control over the education system has declined. The church no longer plays a key part in the political life of the country. Moreover, the welfare state has reduced the need for much of the charity work performed by the church in earlier centuries.

3. Religious institutions have been weakened and the church has been forced to change in order to accommodate more worldly values and influences. For example, many churches have become multi-functional in an attempt to widen their appeal (youth clubs, community centres, sports facilities, etc) but in the process they may lose religious ‘feeling’. Some critics see the decision of the Church of England on the ordination of women priests as an example of religion being forced to accommodate itself to modern societal values, in this case feminist values. There is less ritual in the church today. A new version of the Bible and changes to services have been seen in the last 40 years, partly in an attempt to make religion more accessible and ‘popular’. Many sects have formed as alternatives to the existing churches, and this may reflect growing
dissatisfaction with orthodox Christian religion. These and other developments may indicate that the church has become weaker rather than stronger in recent years.

Arguments against secularisation

1 **Religion still exercises a major influence over our attitudes and values.** For example, many deeply-held moral principles are based on biblical teachings. Moreover, most people still believe in God.

2 **The church continues to be active in many areas of society.** For example, religion is still a focus for teaching and other school activities, especially in primary schools. Religious bodies are the largest voluntary agencies and they continue to fulfil an important charity and welfare function. Britain also retains a public commitment to the Christian faith expressed in part through the monarchy. The church is involved in debates on important social issues – eg nuclear weapons, euthanasia and inequality.

3 **The decline in organised religion has been over-emphasised.** Traditional churches still exist and the more established are visited by millions each year. There is still widespread public involvement in church ceremonies such as marriages, baptisms and funerals. In so far as there has been a decline in church attendance, this does not necessarily mean a decline in belief and commitment. Home worship, growth of sects, and continuation of high rates of belief in God suggest ‘transformation’, not rejection, of religion.

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**Fact file 1: Secularisation in the USA**

An American sociologist, Herzberg, has argued that religion in the USA has compromised with materialism and to some extent religion has become secularised. The major denominations increasingly reflect the American way of life rather than the word of God. For the typical churchgoer, religion is “something that reassures him about the essential rightness of everything American, his nature, his culture and himself”. It is thus frequently a religiousness without serious commitment; without inner conviction.

However, this idea has been criticised on the grounds that there is some evidence to suggest that evangelical Christianity is growing at a faster rate than the traditional denominations. Evangelical movements are more closely modelled on biblical teaching and have little to do with supporting American materialism. It has also been pointed out that the lack of depth and conviction in American religion is not necessarily anything new; it may have existed before the country became wealthy and materialistic.