

Research Article

Open Access

Steve Bruce

Late Secularization and Religion as Alien

Abstract: The argument that modernization and secularization are linked in some non-accidental and non-tautological manner is sometimes rebutted with the assertion that the statistical evidence of decline in indices of interest in religion in the UK and elsewhere in the modern world is a mere trend that may be changed by a revival of interest in religion. This essay considers the obstacles to such a revival. It makes the case that ‘late secularization’ differs in three important ways from ‘early secularization’. The shared stock of religious knowledge is small, the public reputation of religion is poor, and religion is carried primarily by populations that are unusual in being drawn either from a narrow demographic or from immigrant peoples. Given the role of affective social bonds in religious conversion, the alien nature of the carriers of religion makes religious revival extremely unlikely.

Keywords: secularization, revival, conversion

Doi: 10.2478/opth-2014-0003

received May 20, 2014; accepted June 19, 2014

Introduction

The causes of secularization are many and complex. Nonetheless many social scientists accept some version of the idea that there is a non-accidental and non-tautological connection between the decline of religion and elements of modernization. Although it forms an important part of the background to this paper, the secularization thesis will not be explained here (but see S. Bruce 2011); space constraints prevent it and it is not necessary for the argument I wish to present. Even those who reject the secularization thesis could agree with what follows because it is largely an application of general sociological ideas to hardly contentious descriptions of the current condition of religion in the United Kingdom and to many other parts of the western world.

Whenever I present empirical data on the decline of religion in the West, at least one person will assert that there is no reason to assume that current trends will continue and that there may well be a religious revival. It is indeed true that we can be surprised by social change. We all supposed the Soviet Union and the communist bloc to be an immovable fact of life. Yet just twenty years after the tanks of the Warsaw Pact crushed the Prague Spring, communism, like an elderly budgie, coughed twice and fell over dead.

My first response to the hope that the trajectory of decline will change is to say that indices of interest in religion have been showing decline for a very long time. That time varies, of course, with index of interest, country, region, and religion but churchgoing in the UK peaked in the middle of the nineteenth century and church membership peaked around the start of the twentieth century. So our trend is no small thing. Even historians, such as Callum Brown and Hugh McLeod, who prefer a ‘recent and rapid’ view of secularization to the ‘earlier and slower’ view of many sociologists see decline starting in the late 1950s: which is over 60 years ago (C. Brown 2001; H. McLeod 2007).

My second response is to note that, once decline sets in, it follows a similar trajectory in a large number of societies. David Voas makes the point well in a presentation of graphs of indices of religious interest for a large number of European countries. When the graphs for each country are presented on a common time

*Corresponding author: Steve Bruce: University of Aberdeen

scale, they appear to have little in common. But when they are moved so that the points at which decline begins are superimposed the subsequent trajectories look similar (D. Voas 2009). That is, once measures of religious interest start to show decline, the rates of decline are much the same and are, in many countries, very close to what we would have if we assumed a ‘half-life’ rate of decay: each generation is roughly half as religious as the one before.

This has one important implication that is insufficiently often drawn out. Steady decline has continued despite the very best efforts of churches to reverse it, which suggests its causes are not small matters which could be changed with some organizational response (such as making church services more lively, ordaining women, or changing church policy on this or that issue). It is also worth noting that the decline trajectories are not lumpy. This is important for those who believe that social crises might reverse secularization. Western Europe has seen a large number of significant crises that have had no discernible effect on rates of church involvement. In the UK none of the First World War, the Great Depression of the 1930s or the Second World War triggered a religious revival. That fact alone should give pause to those who imagine some future reversal of decline.

But there is no reason why we should not consider the possibility of a religious revival. The true believer can simply hope that God will send ‘showers of revival rain’. Social scientists are no better placed than anyone else to judge the likelihood of that but we can consider what is known about the social requirements for revival and what is known about the current social conditions of religion. In considering obstacles to religious resurgence, I want to suggest that ‘late secularization’ — a condition I define as a combination of a largely formally secular society and an active-involvement-in-organized-religion rate of less than 10 per cent — has some characteristics that make revival markedly less likely than it was fifty years ago.

Declining Stock of Knowledge

The first problem is clear to all of us whose teaching touches on Christianity. Most Britons under the age of 60 (that is, those who were not taught its basic ideas at school or Sunday school) have almost no knowledge of Christianity. When I started teaching Max Weber’s ‘Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism’ in the late 1970s, I had to spend a lot of time explaining the spirit of capitalism; now I have to spend more time explaining the basic principles of Protestantism. In my lectures on recruitment to new religious movements, I could then use the phrase ‘Pauline conversion’. Now I have to explain who Paul was and how he was converted.

The absence of a common stock of religious knowledge is no small matter. The people of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides do not speak Gaelic because they are genetically programmed so to do. They become Gaelic speakers because they are born into a Gaelic-speaking home and society. They learn it from their parents and from their schools and they deepen that knowledge through use in the home and with friends. As we can see in the fate of minority languages, when the stock of knowledge becomes seriously depleted, the language dies.

Those who see the green shoots of religious revival often rest their case on the notion that religion is not like other social products: there is something about the human condition which causes us all to need or desire religion. There is one obvious rebuttal: many parts of the UK and Europe have been secular for at least two generations. If so many people can get by with little or no religion then being religious is clearly not part of the basic human condition: it is a social product.

But even if we accept that there are features of the human condition (such as the ability to imaginatively separate the body and the person) that might encourage people to ask the sorts of questions that religions have traditionally answered (such as what happens to the person when the body dies), the shrinking stock of religious knowledge is still relevant because without a common culture to shape such questions, we are very unlikely to give the same answers. There is a great deal of sociological naiveté in the idea that social crises might trigger religious resurgence. Social cohesion and social agreement are not automatic. They need to be shaped, coerced even. Systematic indoctrination and continued social pressure are required to produce a shared social product. And it is clear that ‘late secularization’ societies lack the political will or

the social institutions for such indoctrination and pressure. In the national curriculum for British schools, religious education is multi-cultural and treats all religions as if they were equally valid. Our mass media companies (even the state-run BBC) no longer promote Christianity and nor does the government. The two British established state churches (the Church of Scotland and the Church of England; Wales and Northern Ireland no longer have state churches) enjoy a few heritage privileges but those churches are well aware that they will continue to enjoy them only so long as they do not use them in a self-interested manner and it is to their credit that both have often promoted the interests of competing religions. For example, the state churches were active in broadening privileged positions (such as prison, army and hospital chaplaincies) to include officials of other faiths. Finally we should note that the British state no longer imposes any disability on religious dissenters other than barring non-members of the Church of England from the throne.

Thus even if it were the case that people had some foundational need to ponder religious questions, there is no longer a common stock of knowledge from which shared answers can be drawn and coercion into a common faith is no longer an option. This matters because isolated individuals entertaining notions about the supernatural is not the basis for a religious revival. Activity (as distinct from mere pondering) is necessary for the promotion of beliefs and consensus is required for joint activity.

Social Influence in Religious Conversion

In the early stages of secularization, large parts of the population retained some familiarity with the dominant religion and attended church sporadically. What is characteristic of 'late secularization' is an almost complete rift between those who are involved with the churches and those who are not. The 2012 British Social Attitudes survey showed that 65.7 per cent of British adults never attend church; a significant increase on the 1983 figure of 55.9 per cent. There is a gender difference (69.5 per cent of men as against 63.8 per cent of women) but the gap has closed since 1983 and it does not much alter the overall figure (Clements 2014). The well-known problem with church attendance data in surveys is the compliance effect: some respondents temporise when faced with a question for which they suspect there is a 'respectable' answer. Time use diaries avoid that problem because, instead of being asked if they did this or that, with the possible implication that they *ought* to have been doing this or that, respondents are required simply to note every ten minutes what they are doing. A recent examination of evidence of religious activity in time use diaries shows that about 8 per cent of the English population in a typical week engages in more than ten minutes worth of religious activity and almost all of them do more than 60 minutes on a Sunday outside the home and in the company of others; that is, they go to church. The rest does no religion (S. Bruce and T. Glendinning, submitted for publication).

The shrinkage of the penumbra of somewhat involved people means that any significant religious revival or resurgence must now involve the conversion of the non-religious. That may seem obvious but the implications are rarely thought through. So that the significance of my second major obstacle to revival can be appreciated we need to revise what is known about religious conversion.

First, religious conversion is rare. For all the attention that such new religious movements of the late 1960s attracted, organizations such as the Unification Church (aka the Moonies), the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna and Scientology never had more than a few thousand members in the UK. The 2001 Scottish Attitudes survey asked people in what religion they had been raised and what they were now. Only 5 per cent of those raised with no religion had acquired one by adulthood (S. Bruce and T. Glendinning 2003).

Second, individual conversion (as distinct from socially coerced mass conversion) owes much to positive social relationships. We know this from various research traditions. In the late 1950s and 1960s there were a great many studies of personal influence in the spread of innovation (E. Katz 1960; E. Katz and P. Lazarsfeld 1964; J. Coleman, E. Katz and H. Menzel 1966; E. Katz, M. L. Levin and H. Hamilton 1963). Not surprisingly, it turned out that social influence and social relationships were vital in the spread of some new idea or action, even when the grounds for evaluating that innovation were patently rational and thus apparently above the realm of social influence. When farmers were presented with some new variety of wheat seed, many were reluctant to adopt it, even though the trial evidence that this new seed produced

bigger yields than the old varieties was incontestable. The patterns of adoption showed that many farmers were sceptical when presented with the innovation by academics or seed company reps; they looked to other farmers – people they knew and trusted – for a lead. Once people of influence in the local farming community adopted the innovation, the rest fell into line behind them. As Katz and Lazarsfeld summarise: ‘influencees turn to influentials of their own status level much more often than they turn to those of other statuses’ (1964: 238).

Early studies of religious conversion led to similar conclusions. Detailed studies of tent crusades and evangelistic programs on the radio found that unmediated impersonal mass communication had very little effect. Those who were converted by mass evangelists such as Billy Graham were mostly people who had been raised in religious households and already thoroughly socialized into Christian beliefs. And they were accompanied by friends and family who were already believers. The clue was the car park: it was full of church buses (D. L. Altheide and J. M. Johnson 1977).

One study of radio evangelism found that it was ineffective for single people listening on their own. Where it was effective was when a potential convert listened in the company of friends who frequently endorsed what the preacher was saying by ‘Amen-ing’ and by more substantial commentaries (L. P. Gerlach and V. Hine 1968). That is impersonal communication was only effective when it was used by a group of friends as one device among many to bring an associate into the fold.

When the Unification Church (invented by the Korean Sun Myung Moon, hence the nickname Moonies), first tried to recruit members in California in the early 1960s it was remarkably unsuccessful. The Korean missionaries could not get a hearing. Recruitment only took off when they had recruited enough locals so that the people they put out front were white, university-educated middle class Americans. Then they recruited young white university students (J. Lofland 1966).

What the diffusion of innovation research and the work on religious conversion shows is that people are more likely to entertain some new idea or practical innovation when it is presented to them either by friends or by people who are similar to themselves: same race, same class, same gender. This is not casual racism, class prejudice, or sexism. It is simply one instance of a general practice we use to make life possible. Life is too full of opportunities for us to sit down and consider each and every one in detail. One way we simplify choices is by habit-forming. Another is to rely on simple cues based on familiarity. I walk into a bar in a strange town. I see a lot of young men wearing hair product. I immediately know that these are not my sort of people; hence this is not my sort of place. Some of us are thrill seekers: frequently attracted to the exotic. Many of us occasionally break out of the familiar. But most of us, for most of our lives, rely on the principle of judging novelties by how well they accord with our existing preferences and with our current notion of who we are. We ask ‘Are the people presenting this new idea my sort of people but just a bit happier, more content or more successful than me?’. This is especially important for innovations – such as a new religion – that will require us to develop a new persona. We want some evidence that this will work; that getting right with Jesus will indeed improve our lives. The best evidence is that it has worked for people like us. We have to be able to see ourselves in the people representing the innovation.

Religion is Now Alien

With that background in mind we can now move on to consider the relationship between the carriers of religion and the non-religious. Because secularization affects some social groups earlier and more severely than others, and because all cultural consumption tends to be socially patterned, religion in ‘late secularization’ societies is concentrated in particular social groups. This creates a major social gulf between the religious and non-religious. In the case of the UK and most Western European societies that gulf is reinforced by immigrants being major carriers of religion. In the UK at the moment (and many other countries are similar) there are five major populations that are known for their religiosity.

(1) *Elderly Women*. Church-going is now largely the preserve of elderly women. A few large charismatic Protestant churches which draw their congregations from very wide catchment areas by placing their outlets next to ring roads and motorways have an almost normal age and gender profile but most church

congregations are disproportionately old and female. This is well-established from sources such as the time-use diaries (S. Bruce and T. Glendinning, submitted for publication) and church data (P. Brierley 2014).

(2) *People of the Rural Peripheries*. Church attendance in the western isles is now falling rapidly 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 (S Bruce 2014). The same can be said for the Welsh-speakers of rural North Wales (S. Bruce 2010).

(2) *Poles*. The accession of Poland to the European Union brought a very large number of Poles to Britain and provided an important counter to the trend of rapidly declining Catholic church attendance. In major cities Polish priests now conduct masses in Polish.

(3) *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 (A. Duffuor 2012). Despite two decades of presence in London and the south-east of England, the membership of African Pentecostal churches remains almost entirely black (P. Brierley 2013).

(4) *Muslims*. The greatest recent change in the British religious landscape has been the arrival and subsequent growth through internal reproduction of the Muslim community. While Muslim immigration has certainly made the UK more religious, there is no evidence of significant numbers of non-religious white people converting to Islam.

In a nutshell, religion is now primarily carried by, and hence associated with, people who are demographically, ethnically and culturally distinctive. Being religious is no longer a characteristic that is thinly but fairly evenly distributed throughout the population: it is concentrated in specific minority populations, which reinforces the sense that religion is what other people do. The alienating effect of the ideological distance between most British people and organized religion is compounded by the extent to which the carriers of religion are socially distanced from the bulk of the population. The reasons why there is relatively little social interaction between believers and the rest of the population differ for our various carrier populations. In the example of the regional peripheries, it is geographical isolation compounded by language barriers. In the case of British Muslims, residential concentration is reinforced by major differences in social mores: the role that alcohol plays in British social life is a major barrier to informal mixing between Muslim and non-Muslims, as are major difference in gender roles. Whatever the reason, the sense that religion is alien is amplified by the fact that the main carriers of religion — for reasons additional to being religious — seem alien to the religiously indifferent majority of the population. One could put this in terms of the probability of any British person who is not involved in organized religion developing positive social interaction with any believer: it is slight.

The Public Reputation of Religion

An important consideration for the likelihood of mass conversion is the public reputation of religion. Because the elements of public reputation and our reaction to it are extremely complicated, this is not easy to demonstrate but the following seems to depict reasonably accurately the attitudes of the British to religion: religion in the abstract is a good thing because it is associated with morality and it is a consolation to people in troubled times but religion should not be awkward or troublesome. In particular, it is best confined to the home and leisure sphere. It should certainly not be imposed on others (YouGov 2007, S. Bruce and T. Glendinning 2011).

One of the consequences of its decline is that most British people have no idea what Christians believe. That ignorance has a number of consequences but for our interests, the most important is that Christianity (indeed all religion) is reduced to a parody of the Golden Rule. Christianity is about being nice. People who are not nice are not real Christians. When clergy try to protect their specific beliefs and practices by, for example, refusing to rent a church hall to a yoga group, they are criticised by the popular press. When Pope Benedict explained that most of the flummery that surrounds Christmas was not in the Bible, he

is attacked by the press for ruining people's Christmas. When the Catholic Church defends faith schools on the grounds that it wants to teach Catholic beliefs to the children of Catholics, it is attacked for being improperly self-interested. When a pop star says she is attending classes in the Alpha programme — a well-meaning if somewhat dull system for educating people in the basic ideas of Christianity — she is described as joining a 'dangerous cult'. When the Calvinistic Free Presbyterian Church expels a member for attending a Catholic requiem mass, it is roundly condemned for being a spoilsport. In all these examples drawn from the popular press over the last few years, religious people are not condemned for having the wrong religion: they are condemned for misunderstanding the proper nature of religion, which is simply to be nice.

In the early phase of secularization arguments over religious rights were reasonably well-informed; people had some sense of what distinguished Roman Catholicism and the competing varieties of Protestantism and they had preferences. The people of, say, 1900, were not far distant from the rise of successful dissenting movements (such as the Methodists in England and Wales and the Free Church in Scotland) and they were living through popular controversies over such new religious movements as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists and through arguments for the dis-establishment of the state churches. There was considerably greater general religious literacy then than is characteristic of our times. Even as late as the 1950s, a popular Scottish newspaper could lead an extravagant campaign of opposition to a proposed change in the structure of the Church of Scotland. 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' (S. Bruce 2014: 105-7).

Seventy years later, the presence of such words in a popular national daily paper would seem decidedly eccentric. In our largely secular society, familiarity with religious differences among the non-religious is negligible and all religions tend to be treated as being much the same.

Now we need to add an observation that, because of the strong feelings aroused by the subject, needs to be put carefully: the introduction of Islam to the UK's religious repertoire and the native reaction to it has damaged religion in the eyes of the non-religious. Most Muslims come from cultures which accord a significant position of social honour to religion 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, the right for exemption from uniform requirements to allow head coverings, the broadening of blasphemy laws to protect Islam, the closing of premises selling alcohol in areas with a large Muslim population, changes to the culture and management of schools with a high proportion of Muslim pupils, 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 emblematic of Islam.

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 (C. 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 are 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 I suspect the elision of different populations goes further than this and we now arrive at one of my key points: *in a largely secular society, trouble created by people claiming religious justification is blamed, not on the specific religion in question, but on religion in general.*

The word ‘trouble’ needs some justification. To the religious, pressing for their religious preferences or requirements to be met seems entirely reasonable. To the non-religious majority such assertiveness seems at the very least like a nuisance and at most a danger. 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 an interesting parallel with the effect of the Northern Ireland Troubles in the 1970s. When the violence between Catholic Irish nationalists and Protestant Ulster Unionists began a small number of conservative Protestant preachers in Britain and a much larger number of Protestant leaders in Northern Ireland tried to persuade us that the violence of the Troubles was the result of Catholicism: bad religion had bad social consequences. But most British people did not see it like that. Instead of distinguishing the good from the bad religion, they read the Troubles as what happens when people take any religion too seriously.

Similarly some conservative Christians have hoped that dislike for the social mores of Islam and affront at the demands made by some Muslim leaders would provoke a Christian revival. But again, that would require the religiously indifferent to make a clear distinction between Islam and Christianity and my impression is that, insofar as they think about these things at all, the non-religious blur such distinctions and tend to generalise their reactions to any particular religion to them all.

This is particularly likely when the response of some conservative Christians to Muslim demands for exemptions and recognition has been to complain that Christian interests are being relatively neglected and to make similar demands. Between 2010 and 2014 a former Archbishop of Canterbury and a retired bishop 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 have claimed the right to refuse to accommodate gay couples. A registrar has refused to register gay civil partnerships. An air hostess has claimed the right to exemption from her employer’s dress code so that she can display a crucifix. And most unusually in an electoral system which offers little opportunity for third parties, two Christian parties contested elections between 1997 and 2011 (S. 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 almost entirely a critique of immigration, recent equality legislation and 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 – I 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 have been 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 these issues the Church of England is entirely 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. And in 2013 Cardinal Keith O’Brien resigned. As leader of the Catholic Church in Scotland, O’Brien had sent decades denouncing homosexuality before he was exposed as a sexually abusive homosexual.

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) make religion seem narrow-minded and mean.

The above could be dismissed as anecdotal but it is based on a long career of deliberate observation. It is unfortunate that while surveys often ask how people feel about particular religious groups, they very rarely ask how people feel about the religious in general. I know of only one source of apposite data. The 2008 British Social Attitudes survey (which, once weighted, provides a representative sample of British adults) added ‘The deeply religious’ and the ‘non-religious’ to a list of Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jew and Buddhist in a ‘feelings towards’ thermometer. Where 50 is the neutral midpoint, scores range from a high (or positive) of 62.6 for Protestant people to a low (or negative) of 46.8 for Muslims. The interesting result for my argument is that the deeply religious at 50.0 are the second least popular group after Muslims (Clements 2012: 421). It is no surprise that those people who describe themselves as having no religion dislike the deeply religious and as almost half the sample claim no religion, that suggests a large obstacle to religious revival. But more important for my argument overall are the attitudes of those in the middle, between the religious on one side and the committed humanists and rationalists on the other side. It is possible to get some sense of their views by using the ‘belief in God’ question to divide the respondents. It offers the alternatives which can be summarised as ‘Sure God exists’, ‘Almost sure God exists’, ‘Sure sometimes’, ‘Not sure’, and ‘No’. We take the first two responses to represent firm believers, the third and fourth to represent the religious indifferent majority of the population, and the fifth to represent the atheists. As an aside I should add that this grouping is validated by the similarity of the results achieved using it with those achieved using religious affiliation and that the application of the results to British adults is confirmed by multivariate statistical analysis. Not surprisingly, our firm believers are positive towards the deeply religious; they score 56.71. Equally predictably, the atheists dislike them a lot: they score 41.43. The crucial observation is that the middling group – with a score of 45.60 – also clearly dislike the deeply religious.

An Aside on Othering

Although it is not central to my argument, there is an important point worth making here about what used to be called ‘invidious stereotyping’ and is now often called ‘othering’. ‘Othering’ is the regarding of religious or ethnic groups as markedly different and inferior to us, and, in so doing, exaggerating what distinguishes them from us. The notion is probably best known from Edward Said’s argument that the West created and sustained elaborate fantasies about Islam, which allowed us to treat Muslim people and Muslim countries in a way we would not treat Christian people and Christian countries (E. Said 1995). That is: ‘othering’ often justifies bad politics. I have no problem with the propositions that we should not exaggerate differences, that we should not treat differences as if they were set in stone; and that we should recognise that many of the social mores associated with British Islam owe more to the culture of rural Pakistan than to core Quranic principles. I also recognise that the British press treatment of Islam is close to hysteria in its exaggerations. The food industry’s covert use of halal meat products, gender segregation, school curriculum censorship, head covering and the spread of sharia law; these are regularly inflated into a dystopian view of Britain being ‘taken over’ by Muslims (Malik 2014).

That public perceptions have been distorted by mass media treatments that could have been different does not change the fact that the public perception is the reality that is relevant to my argument (and for survey data see C. Field 2007). But even if we could imagine it away and suppose that the more tolerant and accurate *Guardian* was more popular than the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* – actual sales figures show the last two sell 10 times as many copies as the *Guardian* – important differences between Muslims and the non-religious would remain. And those are the choice of Muslims. It is not the non-religious who make British Muslims conduct religious business in Urdu and Arabic, for example. Hence although an end to invidious stereotyping might greatly improve public perceptions of Islam, it will not stop it seeming ‘alien’.

The point needs to be extended to conservative Christianity. It was conservative Christians who created the Christian Party and the Christian People’s Alliance and contested elections as champions of ‘traditional

values'. It was conservative Christians who opposed every advance in the equality agenda. What makes religion generally 'the other' for the non-religious is not a product of ideological work by the non-religious. It is the preferences of the conservatively religious — Muslim and Christian — that makes them 'the other'.

Conclusion

Considering the likelihood of a religious revival is an interesting exercise because by identifying obstacles to such a revival we can see a number of crucial facets of what I have called 'late secularization'.

Before I revise these I should defend confining this discussion to a revival of Christianity. As I have detailed elsewhere (S. Bruce 2011) there is no evidence that any other religion (or anything like a religion) is growing to make any significant impact on the 90 per cent of the British population that has no involvement with Christianity. The new religious movements of the late 1960s attracted far more academic interest than members. For example, the 2001 census showed only 58 Scientologists in Scotland. Despite Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead calling their detailed study of the 'holistic spirituality milieu' in Kendal *The Spiritual Revolution* (P. Heelas and L. Woodhead 2005), their own evidence shows at most 2 per cent of the population were involved and most of the activity was centred on physical and psychological well-being rather than on any alternative to religion. That figure was confirmed by a detailed Scottish survey in 2001 (S. Bruce and T. Glendinning 2006). Furthermore, those attracted to yoga, meditation and the like were drawn from a very narrow slice of the population (essentially women over 55 in the caring professions), which brings with it precisely the problems discussed above of the product seeming alien to most of the possible market. Even the families of New Agers are not interested. Two-thirds of the Kendal sample reported that their children did not share their interests, a failure of transmission far worse than that of the mainstream churches. The third possible novel religious expression is conversion to one of the major non-Christian religions but there is no sign that such conversions are running at anything like the rate needed to make a dent in the UK's non-religious population. For these reasons, it seems sensible to suppose that if secularization is to be reversed it will be by conversion to Christianity. Is this likely?

First, there is the problem of the declining stock of religious knowledge. While demonstrations of secularization tend to concentrate on such easily identifiable matters as the proportion of the population that joins and attends churches or assents to religious beliefs in surveys, an equally important element of secularization is the decline of familiarity with religious beliefs and religious rituals in the wider population. Put in practical terms, most of the British population is as little Christian as the foreign heathen that the nineteenth century missionary societies set out to convert. Hence any religious revival will require a radical change in the non-religious. Compared to the circumstances of previous religious revivals (such as the rise of Methodism in the nineteenth century or the brief flourish of Methodism in Wales in 1904) any future mass conversion will have to overcome general ignorance of beliefs, of liturgies, and of even the very idea of worship, and it will have to do so in a religiously pluralistic environment which prevents important social institutions from promoting Christianity as the one true faith.

Second, the environment is probably now more hostile to religion than at any time in the century of church decline. The British remain sympathetic to religion in the abstract and in somebody else's home but have no wish to be told what to do by religious leaders and resent the claims of the religious to exemption from laws that embody basic social values. The current hostility to Islam is obviously related to international politics and may abate now that British involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan has ended but the general impression that conservative Muslims and Christians are a nuisance will continue. This is a simple consequence of the shift in balance between the religious and non-religious. Long after the religious ceased to be a majority, their interests were treated with a sensitivity and courtesy that reflected the relative balance a century previously. The religious are now so few that any re-consideration of the privileges of religion will go against them. Two examples are blasphemy laws and ceremonial prayers. Blasphemy remained a criminal offence because the state declined to prosecute. When Muslims argued that Islam should have the same protection as Christianity, the result was that, in 2008, the blasphemy laws were scrapped. For centuries the deliberations of public bodies such as local councils have begun with a short

prayer. As the UK became more diverse over the second half of the twentieth century, the list of those invited to lead in such prayers was expanded to include non-Christians. Now the practice is being challenged and the result is almost invariably abandonment.

But arguably the greatest obstacle to religious revival is the lack of similarity between the non-religious and the religious. At early stages of secularization, the religious were like the non-religious in almost every respect except being religious. A terrace of houses in a Durham colliery village in 1920 would contain families that had no religious attachment, sporadically attending Anglicans, regular attending Catholics, and 'reet pious' Primitive Methodists who attended chapel twice on a Sunday and twice on weekday evenings. Because they were puritans, the Primitive Methodists had cleaner and slightly better furnished houses, did not drink alcohol, and their children were better turned out but in most other respect – work, politics, trade union activity, sports, hobbies – those four identifiable religious groups were similar and they lived side by side and mixed with each other. The non-religious might resent the smugness of the Prims but they never thought of them as foreign and regularly elected them to trade union and Labour party offices because they were articulate and trustworthy.

In late secularization, the religious are now alien to most of us: alien either because they are demographically narrow (elderly women and the residents of regional peripheries, for example) or because they are recent foreign imports recruiting almost entirely from immigrant populations and their offspring. This is not a political, moral or ideological objection to religion. It is merely a description of the social gulf that now exists between the religious and non-religious.

Which brings us back to conversion. It is remarkable how rarely discussions of the possible reversal of secularization mention the very large sociological literature on conversion. If there is to be a reversal of secularization, large numbers of the currently non-religious will have to convert. We know a lot about conversion. We know that it is rare: as noted above, in Scotland in 2001 only 5 per cent of those adults who said they had been raised with no religion then claimed one. We also know that it depends a lot on potential converts forming strong social bonds with those promoting the new beliefs and the new persona. The conclusion of a study of recruitment to Nicheren Shoshu in the USA can stand for many such studies: 'The analysis suggests that affective and intensive interaction are not only essential for conversion ... but [also] that conversion in general is highly improbable in the absence of these two factors' (D. Snow and C. L. Phillips 1980, 430). And affective bonds are much more likely to form if the potential converts can see something of themselves in those who embody the new life. It is hardly likely that young British white people raised with no religion will look at the current carriers of religion and think 'These are my people. They are like me but just a bit better'. So long as there is little or no social similarity between the religious and those who would have to become religious to reverse secularization, such a reverse is sociologically implausible.

References

- Altheide, D. L., Johnson, J. M., 'Counting Souls', *Pacific Sociological Review*, 1977, 20, 323-348.
- Brierley, P., *Capital Growth: what the 2012 church census reveals*, ABDC Publishers, Tonbridge, 2013.
- Brierley, P., *The ageing of English churchgoers*, *Future First*, 2014, 32, 4.
- Brown, C., *The Death of Christian Britain*, Routledge, London, 2001.
- Bruce, S., *Religion in rural Wales: four restudies*, *Contemporary Wales*, 2010, 23, 219-39.
- Bruce, S., *Secularization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011.
- Bruce, S., *Politics and Religion in the United Kingdom*, Routledge, London, 2012.
- Bruce, S., *Scottish Gods: religion in Scotland 1900-2006*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2014.
- Bruce, S., Glendinning, T., *Religious beliefs and differences*, in C. Bromley, J. Curtice, K. Hinds and A. Park (eds), *Devolution – Scottish Answers to Scottish Questions*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2003, 86-115.
- Bruce, S., Glendinning, T., *New ways of believing or belonging: is religion giving way to spirituality?*, *British Journal of Sociology*, 2006, 57, 399-413.
- Bruce, S., Glendinning, T., *Privatization and de-privatization*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2011, 50, 503-16.
- Bruce, S., Glendinning, T., *Church attendance in England*, submitted for publication.

- Clements, B., The sources of public feelings towards religious groups in Britain, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 2012, 27, 419-3.
- Clements, B., Changes in attendance at religious services in Britain, *British Religion in Numbers*, June 2014. <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2014/changes-in-attendance-at-religious-services-in-britain/>. Accessed 24 June 2014.
- Coleman, J. S., Katz, E., Menzel H., *Medical innovation: a diffusion study*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1966.
- Duffour, A., Moving up and moving out? The expansion of a London-based African Pentecostal church, in D. Goodhew (ed.), *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the present*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2012, 145-160.
- Field, C., Islamophobia in contemporary Britain: the evidence of the opinion polls, 1988-2006, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 2007, 18, 447-477.
- Gerlach, L. P., Hine, V., Five factors crucial to the growth and spread of a modern religious movement, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1968, 7, 23-40.
- Heelas, P, Woodhead, L., *The Spiritual Revolution*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005.
- Lofland, J., *Doomsday Cult: a study of conversion, proselytization, and maintenance of faith*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1966.
- Katz, E, *Communication research and the image of society: On the convergence of two traditions*, *American Journal of Sociology*, 1960, 65, 435-40.
- Katz, E, Lazarsfeld, P, *Personal Influence, the part played by people in the flow of mass communications*, Transaction, New Brunswick, 1964.
- Katz, E., Levin, M.L., Hamilton, H., [Traditions of research on the diffusion of innovation](#), *American Sociological Review*, 1963, 237-252.
- McLeod, H. *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.
- Malik, N., Muslims ate my hamster, *Guardian*, 14 May 2014, G2, 1-2.
- Said, E., *Orientalism: western concepts of the Orient*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1995.
- Snow, D., Phillips. C. L., The Lofland-Stark conversion model: a critical assessment, *Social Problems*, 1980, 430-447.
- Voas, D., [The rise and fall of fuzzy fidelity in Europe](#), *European Sociological Review*, 2009, 25, 155-68.
- YouGov, John Humphrys religion survey, February 2007; <http://iis.yougov.co.uk/extranets/ygarchives/content/pdf/Humphrys%20Religion%20Questions.pdf>