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# An Empirical Critique of Re-Sacralisation

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**Abstract:** This article examines the evidence that largely secular societies are experiencing a process of re-sacralisation. It first dismisses four diversions: taking examples from societies that have never been secular; exaggerating the demographics and religiosity of migrant minorities; missing the fact that religious institutions can only hope to have public influence if they can make a secular case for their preferences; and mistaking notoriety for popularity. It then shows that adherence to Christianity continues to decline apace as does specifically Christian belief. None of the candidates for replacement—non-Christian religions, new religious movements and alternative spirituality—has come at all close to filling the gap left by the Christian churches. Furthermore there is no evidence that governments wish to reverse the standard accommodation to religious diversity and secularity: anything in private; little or nothing in the public sphere. There is no evidence that the population at large wishes it were otherwise. On the contrary. As religion has become more controversial, religion enjoying public influence has, like religion itself, become less, not more popular. Finally, the article argues that the current scarcity of religious people, and the unusual characteristics of those who remain religious, make it ever less likely that there will be a religious revival. So that sufficient detail can be presented, the argument concentrates on the United Kingdom.

**Keywords:** Secularisation, re-sacralisation, post-secular society

## 1 Introduction

There is a remarkable—because it is inverse—correlation between the popularity of religion and the popularity of the secularisation thesis. The secularisation thesis argues that there is a non-accidental connection between modernization and the decline in the plausibility and popularity of religious thinking. In 1966, when Bryan Wilson wrote *Religion in Secular Society*—the clearest modern sociological explanation of secularisation—he clearly saw himself as codifying the consensus then prevailing amongst social scientists rather than as innovating (Wilson 2016).

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Since then the Christian churches have declined faster than Wilson anticipated but his theory has become less popular. My purpose in this article is to defend Wilson's case by showing that much of the recent criticism is irrelevant and that, in the first secularizing nation, indices of religious interest continue to decline, that interest in spirituality is nowhere near popular enough to compensate, and that there is little support (even amongst churchgoers) for religion enjoying increased public influence. That is, the case that we are now experiencing some process of post-secular 're-sacralisation' is not sustained.

Before making my case, I will first address four diversions that confuse rather than clarify the argument. Preliminary to that, I want to justify my stress on empirical social science data. There are perfectly good reasons for supposing that secularisation *might* be reversed. As Charles Taylor argues at the end of one of the most thoughtful delineations of *The Secular Age*: "Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief." (2007, 727) After citing a number of famous twentieth century artists and scholars who have had spiritual conversions, he adds that "young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries" (2007, 770). This is entirely possible but 'possible' and 'actually happening' or even 'at all likely' are rather different things and even if significant numbers of young people 'explore', so long as our culture places a high premium on the consumerist individual's right to determine what he or she will believe, it seems highly unlikely that any such explorations will appeal to a sufficiently large number of people to gain significant social momentum. It is important to note that only two of the twenty chapters in *The Secular Age* present the work of social scientists and even there the more discursive and theoretical scholars outnumber social scientists who analyse bodies of data. This is not a petty piece of disciplinary pride. It is simply a recognition that where good data exist to test speculation, we should bring it to bear on works such as *A Secular Age*. This article is intended to present a representative sample of such data.

## 2 Confusions

### 2.1 Red Herring One: The Non-Modern World

One source of confusion is a failure to appreciate the remit of the original secularisation thesis. Its purpose was to explain the decline of religion in the modern industrial liberal democracies of the West. No twentieth century sociologist saw it as a template to be followed by other societies. Indeed such societies cannot develop in exactly the way ours did because, while the secularisation of the West

was unprecedented, the future of all other societies has the West as an influence: a source of interference, of emulation, or of reaction. Hence strictly speaking what is occurring elsewhere is not *apropos*.

But even if we wish to add it to the agenda, it hardly justifies thinking of a general process of 're-sacralisation' because most of those countries usually cited as evidence that religion matters a great deal were never secular. There is no 're' about the sacralisation of Iran or Pakistan or most parts of Latin America.

There are three changes that might explain the mistake. First, some areas of social science have been re-sacralised as scholars, concerned for decades with class and colonialism, have re-discovered religion. The sub-title of Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos's *Religion in International Relations: the Return From Exile* says it all (2003).

Second, in the former communist states of central and eastern Europe, the Christian churches have regained their property (the exact reconstruction of the Moscow Orthodox Cathedral demolished by Stalin is an architectural marvel), their right to advertise their religion and the bones of their saints. In some states the dominant religion has been incorporated in the rhetoric of right-wing nationalism. This seems a bit like 're-sacralisation'. But crucially such churches have not regained their members; church involvement is far below pre-communist levels. For example, church-going remains far less popular in the former East than the former West Germany (Lois 2011). And in countries such as Poland, where the church acted as a guarantor of national identity when all other social institutions had been taken over by the communists, the collapse of communism has been followed by a decline in church involvement as the church comes to be seen as just one interest group among others (Wikipedia 2016).

Third, since the 1980s there has been a significant rise of militant fundamentalism in a number of Muslim states. The first Shah of Iran attempted to impose a secular state on his religious people and his son was overthrown by religious leaders. Pakistan politics have gradually become more overtly Islamic. What in the 1960s would have presented themselves as Marxist liberation movements (Boko Haram in Nigeria or the various Tuareg groups in the Maghreb) now affiliate to ISIS or Al Qaeda. This is a significant change in politics. In some societies there has also been a significant change in the tone of the religion: a repeat of Europe's Protestant Reformation. Movements such as ISIS and the Taliban seek to replace what had been a rather lax Islam, with saint cults playing an important role, by a puritanical Islam that requires all Muslims to live by the standards of the most pious. But even if the secularisation thesis had presented a universal template, this would hardly refute it because the countries in question were not secular nor, one could argue, terribly modern.

## 2.2 Red Herring Two: Speculative Demographics

A more appropriate use of the term ‘re-sacralisation’ is the imagined description of the West after it will have been taken over by Muslims. That worst nightmare of nationalists and xenophobes is given some foundation in the work of Eric Kaufmann (2010). He argues that the currently largely secular societies of the West will become markedly more religious because Muslim (and to a lesser extent African Pentecostal) migrants, and the remaining rump of conservative Christians, will outbreed the secular (who currently have smaller families than the religious). Currently Muslims are only 5 per cent of the UK’s and 11 per cent of the French population. Only by making implausible assumptions about future migration, family size, and religious retention can we turn this into a re-sacralisation story. There are two reasons for being sceptical about Kaufmann’s predictions: physical reproduction and ideological reproduction. One of the best attested regularities in human behaviour is the demographic transition: as prosperity and longevity increase and infant mortality decreases, family size falls and there is no reason to suppose that Muslims who move to the West are immune to this trend. Secondly, ideological reproduction will almost certainly decline. As it is, only 79 per cent of the UK’s Muslims claim to be religiously observant and the compliance effects operative in surveys will have exaggerated that figure (Department of Communities and Local Government 2011). After all, 33 per cent of nominal Christians claim to be similarly observant when only 8 per cent attend church, which is either required or very strongly recommended by every denomination and sect. Furthermore current changes will only reduce that figure. According to the 2001 census almost half of Scottish Muslim women, as compared with 6 per cent of all Scots women, had never worked outside the home but 17 per cent of young Muslim women, as compared to only 5 per cent of the Scots population as a whole, were in full-time education (Bruce 2014, 209). What Kaufmann misses is that, though it depends greatly on family socialization, being religious is not genetically transmitted. All panda cubs become pandas but not all the children of religious parents become religious. As with Catholicism in communist Poland, the current tension between Muslim minorities and their host societies gives the former good reason to remain loyal to their faith but, given the power of secular trends in the West, this is unlikely to prevent the gradual attenuation of distinctively high levels of religiosity.

## 2.3 Red Herring Three: The Influence of Religious Institutions

One of the most popular (and most mis-understood) putative evidences of re-sacralisation is José Casanova’s work on the contemporary public influence of

the Catholic Church (Casanova 1994). He makes the entirely valid point that after a period of relative quiet following the embarrassment of its close association with unsavoury regimes in the 1930s and war years, the Church is now again a voice in public affairs, especially in regard to the global south. What is missed in seeing that as evidence of re-sacralisation is that the Church's re-entry to the public sphere is only possible because it has accepted that it can no longer expect to exercise a magisterium and to be heard because it is God's sole representative on earth (Köhrsen 2012). Its officials may retain private fantasies of restoration but in public it no longer claims divine authority. Instead it claims to speak for universal human values. Far from being refutation of the secularisation thesis, this is precisely secularisation.

The same point can be made about the Christian Right in the USA. Although its supporters are inspired by their religious commitments, it plays by the rules of secular democracy. It justifies its policy positions by universal human rights and by secular social functionalism. Abortion should be banned, not because God says it is evil, but because it denies the unborn the right to life. Homosexuality and divorce are to be opposed, not because God says so, but because they are socially dysfunctional. And, unlike Donald Trump, conservative Christians accept the results of elections when their favoured candidate loses. One might add that, for all the money it has raised and spent, the Christian Right has failed to win any of its policy objectives. Compared with 1979, when the Moral Majority was founded, gay rights has made enormous strides; divorce is more, not less, common; more mothers work fulltime; creation science (aka 'intelligent design') is still banned from public school biology classes; and abortion remains legal. This is not re-sacralisation; it is the plaintive cry of conservative Christians for a world they have lost (Bruce 2011, 171–172).

## 2.4 Red Herring Four: Confusing Notoriety with Popularity

A fourth source of confusion is the elision of notoriety and popularity. It is certainly true that public debate in the West has been re-sacralised, in the sense that we now argue a lot about the proper place of religion. Muslim migration and the backwash of Western involvement in wars in Muslim lands have made religion a focus of contention. However, religion becoming contentious and religion becoming popular are two very different things. Indeed, far from the former being a symptom of the latter, it seems clear that, by strengthening the impression that religion taken too seriously is a threat to public order, the migration of assertive non-Christian minorities and the violence associated with jihadi Islam have made a religious revival in the West less, not more, likely (Bruce 2017). In addition, that

the only growing sector of Christianity in the West is the Pentecostalism carried by West African immigrants, has reinforced in the public mind a very clear impression that religion is something done by ‘other people’.

### 3 Correctly Formulating the Problematic

I take ‘re-sacralisation’ to mean a growth in the influence of religious and religiously-inspired ideas on private behaviour and on the public sphere in the largely-secular societies of the West. Gauging public influence is difficult but, as it is unlikely that the religiously indifferent will be promoting religious values, we can take the proportion of religious people (which can be measured with some accuracy) as a good indicator. Hence I will begin by considering the evidence for changes in the popularity of Christianity and, because it is often argued that religion is not so much declining as changing its shape, I will also consider the popularity of contemporary spirituality (AHRC 2012; Woodhead 2014). I will then present what we know about the public’s desire for religion to have a greater influence on the public sphere. Finally I will briefly consider the long-term prospects for change in the popularity of religion.

I confine myself to Christianity and to contemporary spirituality because, despite the attention they receive, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs remain a very small proportion of the populations of the West and because the new religious movements of the late 1960s have recruited only tiny numbers. According to the 2001 census, Scotland had only 58 Scientologists, 25 Hare Krishnas, and no members of the Unification Church (Bruce 2014, 15). I confine myself to the UK because no wider remit could be covered well in a journal article and because, as the first society to secularize, the UK offers a good site for testing the secularisation thesis. I might add that I know of no data which suggests other western countries are markedly different. Even the USA, long held up as the exception to secularisation, is now showing decline in religious attachments. This is important because, along with the resurgence of politicised religion in countries that were never secular, American exceptionalism is often stated as a reason for rejecting the secularisation thesis. Much salient data can be found in the reports of the Pew organization but two simple facts make my point. Between the 1970s and 2016 regular churchgoing fell from around 40 to around 20 per cent of the population and the number of those saying they had no religious attachment rose from 21 million in 2007 to 36 million in 2014. In addition attitude surveys show those religion ‘nones’ becoming more clearly secular (Lipka 2015).

## 4 The Continued Decline of Mainstream Religious Attachment

For reasons justified elsewhere, I define religion substantively and conventionally (Bruce 2011). That is, I take religion to be that which most people take to be religion: beliefs, activities and institutions predicated on the existence of a supernatural being or impersonal agency with the power of moral judgement. And I begin with measures of religious activity because, even for assessing the importance of religiously-inspired values, doing something is a more severe test of what matters than are responses to survey questions.

Far from proving Wilson wrong, demand for religious offices has declined faster than he anticipated in 1966. The evidence from the churches, from third party censuses, and from surveys is consistent and clear. Clive Field summarises a mass of data to conclude that at the start of the twentieth century: “It is likely that the national average [...] [for churchgoing] was roughly one-quarter of adults on any given Sunday.” He adds “two-fifths of Edwardians probably went to a place of worship at least monthly” (Field 2013, 61). A variety of sources put typical Sunday church attendance in 2001 between 6 and 8 per cent (Brierley 2011).

Religious identification is a weaker measure than church attendance because it is in the first place simply an assertion. Nonetheless, as *disclaiming* any religious identity may be socially costly in a religious society, the growth in the number of those willing to say they have no religion is significant. A series of Gallup polls from 1949 to 1982 show an average ‘No Religion’ figure of 8 per cent. Field concludes from a review of all extant polls that declaring one has no religion was almost unknown at the start of the twentieth century (2013, 60). In 1983—its first year of operation—the British Social Attitudes survey gave ‘No Religion’ as 33 per cent followed by a steady rise to 47 per cent in 2011–12. The British Household Panel survey has 38 per cent ‘No Religion’ for 1991–92 and 44 per cent for 2008–09. The longest running of the major British social science surveys—the British Election Studies—starts in 1974 with 34 per cent saying they have no religion. In 2010 the figure was 48 per cent (Field 2014, 373–376). One 2016 poll has the ‘No Religion’ figure for white British respondents at over 50 per cent (Hellen 2016). This suggests that a conservative estimate would put the proportion of people willing to say they had no religion as having risen over the twentieth century from perhaps 5 to at least 40 per cent.

## 5 Not Decline, Just Change

Over the fifty years since *Religion in Secular Society* was published, secularisation deniers have serially altered their ground. Initially they denied there was a decline in Christianity. When that became implausible they denied that religious belief had become less popular; what had declined was only a desire to join others in public activities redolent of those beliefs. Hence, as Grace Davie put it, we were “believing without belonging” (Davie 1994). Her evidence was that at any one time claiming religious beliefs was more popular than church-going. She did not look at the long-run trajectory of either. When David Voas and Alasdair Crockett (2005) examined religious identification, religious belief, and church-going over the twentieth century using a data set with over some 60,000 respondents, they found all three had declined at much the same rate.

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2004) argued that, while conventional (that is authoritarian, hierarchical and dogmatic) religion was declining, there was marked growth in the popularity of relativist, individualist, demotic, and amorphous spirituality. This is entirely possible and indeed is exactly what Wilson expected in 1966. The vital question is just how popular is such spirituality. Their thorough two-year study of the holistic spirituality milieu in the small but reasonable typical English town of Kendal concluded that 1.8 per cent of the town’s residents were engaged in some holistic spirituality activity in a typical week, which could be re-phrased as ‘98.2 per cent of residents were not so engaged’. Furthermore, when asked, half of their respondents denied that their activity was primarily spiritual. They were involved in yoga, meditation and various forms of alternative therapy, not to discover the God (or Goddess) within or their Angel Spirit, but for reasons of psychological and physical well-being.

A detailed module of religion and spirituality questions in the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes survey, which was planned in consultation with Heelas, produced similar results (Glendinning/Bruce 2006). Time use diaries are unusually valuable because they simply ask the subjects to note what they are doing every ten minutes throughout the day. As there is no ostensible purpose and no questions, they are less likely than conventional surveys to be distorted by compliance effects. The 2001 British Time Use Diary study showed that there is little religion of any form practised, public or private. Fewer than 11 per cent of adults in England engaged in any religious or religion-related activity whatsoever (and that included choir practice, committee meetings and church decoration as well as personal prayer and meditation) of any duration at any point during a typical week. Only 8.25 per cent of adults engaged in any episodes of communal practice in the company of others. Less than 7 per cent attended church on a Sunday. Read the other way



round—7 per cent going to church on Sunday, 8 per cent doing some communal religion, and 11 per cent doing any religion at all—these data offer little support for the claim that the decline of conventional church-going has been offset by an increase in alternative religious activities.<sup>1</sup>

The point about such data is that, even when allowance is made for non-Christian religions and new religious movements, they fall an extremely long way short of what is needed to fill the gap left by the decline of the Christian churches. Depending on precisely how one measures church attachment, the gap that would have to be filled by innovations to give us as many religious and spiritual people in 2000 as there were religious people in 1900 is between 20 and 40 per cent of the population, not the 0.8 per cent found by the Kendal study. I might add that Detlef Pollack and Gert Pickel come to the same conclusion from German data: “One should definitely avoid inferring that the trend to stray from institutional forms of religion suggests an upswing in the popularity of non-institutional forms.” (Pollack/Pickel 2008, 208)

## 6 The Public Influence of Religion

Although it is hard to see why non-religious people should wish religion to enjoy greater public prominence or influence, arguments for re-sacralisation could be made independent of the proportions of the populations that regard themselves as religious or spiritual. But such arguments face the problem that they are without empirical support. It is not easy to convert the actions of social institutions into numerical measures that would show change over time but there is considerable recent evidence of formal secularisation and very little evidence of counter-trends. Largely because political parties cannot agree on what should replace it, the upper house of parliament still gives seats *ex officio* to 26 Church of England bishops but their influence has been steadily diluted by the expansion of the House of Lords (which now has 812 members) and, significantly, when devolved assemblies were designed for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the 1990s no-one suggested that religious leaders should have reserved seats.

From the nineteenth century, secularists had argued that the laws making blasphemy a criminal offence should be repealed but rather than repeal them (which would have provoked contention), successive governments from 1843 in Scotland and 1921 in England simply refused to sanction official prosecutions. As

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<sup>1</sup> These figures are from my original analysis of the TUS 2001 data. I am, as always, grateful to Tony Glendinning for his preparation and statistical analysis of the data.

Britain's Muslim population grew, many Muslims argued that it was unfair for the criminal law to protect Christianity but not Islam. After much deliberation the Blair government agreed but instead of extending the protection of the law to cover non-Christian religions, it levelled the playing field in the other direction by repealing the laws. On every issue where the Christian churches have struck a distinctive position—gambling, divorce, alcohol consumption, contraception, marriage, pornography, shops trading on the Sabbath, homosexuality, gay marriage, religious exemptions to equality legislation—they have lost.

Arguably their greatest loss was the 2010 Equality Act, which made it illegal to discriminate in the provision of goods and services on the ground of a variety of largely demographic variables but which included religion. The limits of the law are still being tested in the courts but it is already clear that religious exemption will only be permitted in the narrowest of circumstances. Christian bed-and-breakfast owners who wish to refuse bookings to gay couples have lost their court cases, as has the Belfast bakery which refused to accept a booking for a wedding cake with a slogan endorsing gay marriage. As the judges said, a bakery can refuse to put any slogans on its cakes but it cannot decline only slogans in support of causes which the bakery's owners find objectionable. The law protects people against discrimination on the grounds of their religion but it also prevents religious people using their principles as justification for discrimination against groups of which they disapprove. The act effectively says three very important things about the status of religion. First, it is no more important than sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, or disability. Second, it cannot trump anything else. Third, it is trumped by universal human rights.

Perhaps the only institutional change that might be taken as increasing support for religion is government support for religious schools. As many 'confessional' accounts in middle-class newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* show, non-religious parents in English cities will pretend to church involvement in order to have their children accepted by Church of England or Catholic schools but this has nothing to do with religion and everything to do with a wish to shield their children from the working class and from children for whom English is a second language. Since 2011, Conservative governments have sought to undermine the power of local councils by creating schools outside of (often Labour) local education authority control. Because the vast majority of faith schools are Christian, recent governments have encouraged bids from non-Christian groups. Transcendental Meditation now runs two schools as does the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The growth in faith schools could be taken as a sign that Britain's public administration is becoming more religious, except that the numbers involved are, in the context of British schooling overall, trivial. And they need to be set against two much more powerful secular trends. First, there is

the widespread abandonment by British schools of the still-mandatory obligation to hold regular vaguely religious assemblies. Second, there is the secularisation of what in the 1960s was still called 'religious instruction'. Education in the Christian faith has been largely replaced by 'RMP': classes in 'Religious, Moral and Philosophical' studies that explore general ethical issues and that treat all religions as if they were equally true (and thus equally false).

Though the religious loading of actions of social institutions is difficult to describe numerically, a large body of surveys show what Britons think of religious influence. An example is the response to the proposition that 'Religious leaders should not try to influence government decisions'. In 1998 only 21 per cent of respondents disagreed; in 2008 only 15 per cent disagreed (Glendinning/Bruce 2011). The remarkable thing about that change is that the opposition of non-religious people to public religion had remained stable; what had changed was that regular Christian churchgoers had become more hostile to religion enjoying increased public influence, presumably because what they had in mind in 2008 was Islamic influence.

As always I would give greater weight to actions than to stated attitudes and here we have one extremely important but unremarked data source. From 1997 until 2015 various Christian parties contested British elections. They polled miserably. In the 'winner takes all' system for Westminster elections, the Christian parties were placed among such eccentrics as the Monster Raving Loony party. Elections for the Scottish parliament use a system of proportional representation that allows two votes: one for a conventional constituency contest and one to express a party preference that serves as a baseline for allocating additional seats by region to correct the imbalances created by first-past-the-post constituency election. The ability to use the second vote to express a general value-preference was thought to create a novel opportunity for minority parties. The average Christian vote in the 8 Scottish regions was 0.4 per cent in 1991 and 2003. It rose to 2.3 per cent in 2007 and then fell back to 0.9 per cent in 2011. In 2015 the Christian Party and the Christian People's Alliance disbanded. Remarkably the leaders of both parties defected to the UK Independent Party (UKIP) where they were able to present their hostility to gay rights, immigration and Islam without the patently unpopular Christian baggage.

As already noted, there may be pressure towards religion enjoying greater public influence that is not a direct reflection of public preferences; for example, if the governing party wishes it and can achieve it without jeopardising its popularity. However, beyond the Blair government's tepid and tentative attempts to co-opt moderate Muslim opinion against jihadi violence, I know of no such elite pressure. We can then fall back on what is known about public attitudes towards religious people. A common recurrent survey question asks respondents to rate

how warm they feel towards various named populations. Such questions have long been asked about specific religious groups but in 2008 the British Social Attitudes survey added ‘People who are deeply religious’ and ‘people who are not religious’. The results, divided by church attendance, are shown in Table X. Not surprisingly, regular churchgoers like the deeply religious more than do those who never attend church and feelings about the non-religious are reversed. The crucial detail is the bottom ‘n’ line: there are more than three times as many people who never attend church (and who prefer the non-religious to the deeply religious) as there are regular churchgoers.

**Table 1.** Feelings towards various groups by church attendance. British Social Attitudes Survey 2008. Source: Ben Clements, University of Leicester

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

## 7 Religion as Alien

As the key variable in support for the public influence of religion is the respondent’s religiosity, we can suppose that any ‘re-sacralisation’ will depend on growth in the number of religious people. Kaufmann’s model of how this may occur has already been dismissed. Given the failure of immigration, of support for the new religious movements of the 1960s, and of new expressions of religious and spiritual interest to come anywhere near to filling the gap left by the decline of conventional religion, we can reasonably suppose that any major change in overall levels of religiosity will have to come from the conversion of non-religious people to Christianity. How likely is that?

This argument is made at greater length elsewhere but it is important to consider the implications of three facets of secularisation (Bruce 2017). First, there are

very few regular churchgoers in Britain. Second, the decline in churchgoing has not been even across all degrees of attendance. In 1900 attendance at many congregations was twice the membership. By the 1950s the lines for attendance and membership were crossing so that attendance was less than membership. While the core of frequent attenders has shrunk, the penumbra of occasional attenders has vanished. Third, whereas in 1900 the religious generally differed from the non-religious only in their religiosity, now being religious is a property of distinct and relatively isolated sub-populations: the elderly, those residing in geographical peripheries, and ethnic minorities (who tend to cluster). Taken together these three facets produce the unprecedented situation of religion being what 'other people' do. It is alien and exotic. There are many signs of that but one obvious one is that much of this religion is conducted in a foreign language. For the conservative Protestants of rural north Wales and the Scottish Western Isles, it is Welsh and Gaelic. For British Muslims it is Arabic (for the core religious activities) and Urdu. Most western African Pentecostals speak and conduct their religious business in English but because they recruit almost no white English people, their services are visibly unusual.

The relative scarcity and social isolation of religious people means that most British people will not knowingly engage in positive social interaction with *any* religious people. And that is a major obstacle to religious revival. A very large body of research on religious conversion points to the importance of positive affective bonds between pre-converts and believers. In the absence of such bonds developing naturally (as they might between religious and non-religious co-workers), they need to be engineered and here the fact that the main carriers of religion are often literally (and always metaphorically) alien makes the engineering of such bonds remarkably difficult (Snow/Phillips 1980).

That would be the case even if the non-religious majority of the population was vaguely sympathetic to religion. But survey evidence suggests that religion is now less popular than it was at any time in the modern era. In the 1980s I would have described the attitudes of most non-religious British people as being sympathetic to religion in the abstract: it was seen as harmless source of moral teaching and as a comfort to the elderly and bereaved. That has changed as some British Muslims have become increasingly vocal in their insistence that our secular culture be changed to accommodate their putatively religious demands. There was remarkably little condemnation of Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence on the novelist Salman Rushdie from Muslim leaders. In Birmingham a number of Muslim schools have pursued a policy of gender segregation. In a number of English universities Muslim student societies have gender segregated their audiences. There has been a series of court cases in which Muslims have claimed that their religion should exempt them from the civil law. And in 'me too' fashion conservative Chris-

tians have argued that the current church-state relations constrains their religious rights and that successive governments have neglected Christians in their desire to woo Muslims. Finally jihadi violence has reflected negatively on the value of religion. Those who support IS in Syria, approve of the beheading of a soldier in a London street or think the bombing of London transport was justified are a very small proportion of British Muslims but that does not change the fact that most onlookers take such violence as its perpetrators intend: as being religious in motivation. Liberal Muslims may similarly wish to place the blame for anti-Semitism, sexism and homophobia on the conservative cultures from which many Muslims come rather than on the core teachings of Islam but again onlookers take at face-value the justification given for gender segregating school children or university students and the like. The net result has been a large growth in the number of people who think that religion is a bad thing (YouGov 2007).

## 8 Does Controversy Lead to Conversion?

I began by suggesting that much talk of the ‘post-secular society’ and the like stems from a confusion of religion becoming newsworthy and religion becoming popular. One way in which the two could be positively connected is to suppose that controversy will encourage people to take sides and, in particular, that dislike for Islam will cause non-Christian white British people to return to their Christian roots (or, more likely, to their grandparents’ Christian roots). It is certainly the case that some conservative Christians have tried to use fear over Islamic assertiveness as a recruiting device. But this would require that people distinguish between good religion and bad religion and allow fear of the bad religion to push them into a positive commitment to the good religion. The failure of Christian parties that tried to mobilise anti-Muslim feeling has already been mentioned as has the continued decline in measures of religiosity. In brief there is no evidence that dislike for assertive Islam translates into support for Christianity.

There is a one very good reason for that: a secular critique of Islam is possible, is consistent with most people’s existing value positions, and allows criticism of the Christian churches for the same vices. A Christian critique of Islam’s homophobia and sexism is awkward because the Christian churches themselves are not blameless on these two fronts. Almost every stage in the extension of equality to homosexuals (from de-criminalization to gay marriage) has been vocally opposed by some or most Christian churches. The largest Christian body—the Church of England—did not ordain women until 1994 and then spent a decade very publicly arguing whether women priests could become bishops, and it still does

not officially accept the ordination of openly gay men and women as priests. It is hard to imagine why liberal critics of the conservative social mores of one religion should be attracted to another religion which suffers the same faults.

## 9 Conclusion

Given the preponderance of the evidence, it is something of a mystery why notions such as re-sacralisation, de-privatization, and post-secular society have attracted any support from scholars. Some of the explanation may lie in the cyclical nature of fashions in academic life: there is always more pleasure (and possibly more fame) in leading a paradigm shift than in agreeing that one's predecessors had it right. Part may lie in the four diversions I criticised at the start of this article. But there is little value in speculating why people believe what they believe; when those beliefs concern descriptions of some characteristic of the social world it is much more profitable to examine the evidence. Unless the data I have presented are unrepresentative, the picture seems entirely clear. Adherence to Christianity continues to decline apace as does specifically Christian belief. None of the candidates for replacement—non-Christian religions, new religious movements and alternative spirituality—has come at all close to filling the gap left by the Christian churches. Furthermore there is no evidence that governments wish to reverse the standard accommodation to religious diversity and secularity: anything in private; little or nothing in the public sphere. There is no evidence that the population at large wishes it were otherwise. On the contrary. As religion has become more controversial, religion enjoying public influence has, like religion itself, become less, not more popular. Finally, I have given good reasons why the current scarcity of religious people, and the unusual characteristics of those who remain religious, make it ever less likely that there will be a religious revival.

It seems appropriate to leave the final word to a man who has inadvertently been responsible for popularising the idea that we now inhabit a post-secular society. Those who cite Jürgen Habermas in support of identifying such a change have not noted what he actually said:

“In terms of sociological indicators [...] the religious behaviour and convictions of the local populations [of the West] have by no means changed to such an extent as to justify labelling these societies ‘post-secular’. [...] [T]rends in these societies towards de-institutionalized and new spiritual forms of religion have not offset the tangible losses by the major religious communities.” (Habermas 2008, 17)

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