How useful has 'secularisation' been as a model for understanding religious change in modern Europe?

Introduction.

It has often been argued by thinkers such as Auguste Compte, Friedrich Nietzsche, Voltaire, and Andrew Dickson White with his 'conflict thesis' that as society modernises, religion will gradually decline. This process of religious change became the predominate focus for sociologists in the second half of the 20th century with scholars such as Brian Wilson (1966), Peter Berger (1967), Steve Bruce (2002) and Charles Taylor (2007) interrogating the changing function and status of religion in our public and private lives. Despite the expectations of religious decline, as Peter Berger later observes in his revisionist work on "desecularisation"[1], religious decline did not happen; the model needed reassessment. While Berger bases his argument largely on the "religious passion" and "defiance" of Evangelical Protestantism in America and the rise in Islam in the east, here we will focus solely on historical and contemporary religious changes in Europe.

In this essay we will argue that the secularisation model, that is, "the process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose their social significance"[2], is highly insufficient for understanding religious change in modern Europe, as it does little to account for the complexity of religious trends. As such we will argue, in line with John Hedley Brooke, for a 'complexity thesis', religious trends often develop in unexpected and counter-intuitive ways. To do this, we will firstly assess whether 'secularisation' is a helpful model for understanding historical trends, before looking at contemporary developments, and finally we will question the problematic conclusion that changes in the social functions and practices of religion are indicative of a general loss of personal religiosity.

Complexity thesis: historical trends.

Firstly, we will analyse religious change on the institutional level. That is, the changing role of religion in the public sphere. Talcott Parsons argued that societies develop through a process of "social differentiation" whereby religion gradually loses its central role in society. This increasing "complexity of a social system"[3], as Niklas Luhmann calls it, takes many forms in society, but was seen to ultimately lead to the religious loss of function in social spheres. Indeed, on the face of it, this social model appears accurate, and confirming of the broader secularisation model; it is certain that religion has lost many of its social functions, largely on account of an increasing tolerance and pluralisation of modern Europe, and increasing argument, as outline by Harvey Cox, that the "secular city" is a moral imperative[4]. However, this sweeping generalisation is exceedingly deficient for characterising historical trends of religious change. Indeed, the differentiation model implies a gradual development that pays little credence to the tumultuous and complex trends in religion in 19th century Europe. While we do observe the declining role of the church in the state; Ireland witnessed the 1833 Temporalities Acts, England the Test and Corporation Acts (1828-9), and France the Thermidorian Convention, this did not develop in a gradual or consistent trend towards secularisation that could be matched onto a model of increasing differentiation. Indeed, the flow of history in Europe was far more complex and developed instead in a

[1] Peter Berger (1999), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*
[2] Brian Wilson (1966), *Religion in Secular Society*.
[3] Thomas Schwinn (2017), 'Paths to Modernity and the Secularisation Issue', in *Analyse & Kritik; 39 (2)*, pg. 360
[4] Harvey Cox (2013), *The Secular City: Secularisation and Urbanisation in Theological Perspective* (Princeton University Press).

trend of punctuated equilibrium rather than gradual differentiation. Frances Knight observes that "in one decade there might be the public embrace of atheism, in the next some attempt at reproachment, and in the following an extreme assertion of Catholic hegemony"[5]. Therefore, the model of 'secularisation' and gradual 'differentiation' are unhelpful historically in Europe as they smooth over the complex developments and counter-trends of significant religious revival.

Models which account for this complexity of social change are far more useful for understanding religious trends. Max Weber argues against the over-simplified model of gradual differentiation in his essay on *Zwischenbetrachtung*, suggesting that "rationality is differentiating" and that "rejection releases energies for the construction of an own rationality"[6]. The secularisation model doesn't give enough credence to these competing social forces and the tendency for changes in social organisation to be succeeded by their opposites. Margaret Archer (1988) has developed this idea, arguing that "attempts to establish one conception as the dominant one often evoke vigorous efforts of the opposite side to strengthen its own position"[7]. Therefore, Detlef Pollack's argument that "the theory of secularisation … is similar to an elevator that can only move downwards"[8] is acutely accurate; only once we account for the counter-secularising, or de-secularising trends in history can we gain a more accurate understanding of religious change in Europe.

Complexity thesis: contemporary developments.

If we shift our focus to the present, it could be argued that, despite periodical resurgences, religion and its role in the public sphere is becoming increasingly diminutive. Indeed, as we argued above, it is certain that religion has lost many of its social functions on account of the rise of religious tolerance and the pluralisation of societies. Moreover, lash-back, or "vigorous efforts of the opposite side" against challenges to faith have become increasingly subdued in Europe. For example, Steve Bruce (2011) in his *Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*, that is, secularisation, notes that increasing immigration of non-Christian communities has not stimulated a resurgence of faith or practice amongst nominally Christian Europeans[9]. Despite expectations, such as those of Cardinal Vincent Nichols (2015) that rises in immigration could "help social cohesion" and lead to "wellsprings of faith" amongst the Britain-born population[10], this hasn't happened. Despite a worrying level of anti-Islamic sentiment in Britain, it seems that this sentiment has not manifested itself in a return to religion. Instead, a 2007 survey reveals that 42% of Britons believe that religion has a harmful influence on society[11]. As such, Steve Bruce's argument that "people who do not share a common religion lack the necessary prerequisite to think in those terms or to see "becoming Christian" as an appropriate response to any problem, even one with

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5 Knight, Frances (2008). 'Revival and Renewal', in *The Church in the Nineteenth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris), pg. 151

6 Thomas Schwinn (2017), 'Paths to Modernity and the Secularisation Issue', in *Analyse & Kritik; 39 (2)*, pg. 361

7 Thomas Schwinn (2017), 'Paths to Modernity and the Secularisation Issue', in *Analyse & Kritik; 39 (2)*, pg. 363

8 Pollack, D./G. Rosta (2015), Religion in der Moderne. Ein internationaler Vergleich, Frankfurt–New York, pg. 458

9 Steve Bruce (2011), 'Will Conflict Reverse Secularisation', in *Secularisation: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford University Press), pg. 222

10 Graham Davidson (2018), 'Immigration Will Not Spark a British Religious Revival in *Areo Magazine,* Accessed 09/11/2022: https://areomagazine.com/2018/08/06/immigration-will-not-spark-a-british-religious-revival/

11 YouGov poll, reported in J. Humphries (2007), In Gods We Doubt (London: Hodder and Stoughton)

putatively religious roots" appear accurate; religion itself is seen as the problem, and no longer the appropriate 'other' of opposing religious truth claims.

However, here we will once more introduce the benefits of applying a complexity thesis. While immigration in Europe has not encouraged the "double differentiation" that Weber anticipated, it would be misleading to conclude that the pluralisation of Europe has led to its secularisation. Indeed, multiple trends are at play, and immigration, while not provoking oppositional religious resurgence, has certainly led to a religious revival in Europe. Perhaps surprisingly given media portrayals of the migrant population, a 2011 census on British Immigration revealed that "just under 50 per cent of the non-UK-born population self-identified as Christian, 19 per cent as Muslim, while only 15 per cent had no religion"[12]. Thus, it is clear that the pluralisation of society has had the dual effect of increasingly levels of religiosity, while also exposing the unwillingness for oppositional religious resurgence. While the first trend indicates 'desecularisation', the second implies religious tolerance; in neither regard is the model of secularisation particularly helpful.

Complexity thesis: individual religiosity.

What complicates matters further is the difficulty in arguing that changes in religious practice and the changing relation between church and state implies a loss of underlying religiosity. Often, arguments for secularisation are made statistically, pointing out startling facts such as that 53% of UK adults describe themselves as having 'no religion', up from 31% in 1983, and that only 3% of those aged 18-24 describe themselves as Anglican, compared to 40% of those over 75[13]. However, it is problematic to associate these noticeable religious changes with 'secularisation' or the general decline of individual religiosity. Grace Davie (1994) famously described the concept of "believing but not belonging"[14] that is missed by these statistical representations. Indeed, Linda Woodhead addresses the rise of 'no religion', or 'nones' in Britain, arguing that this need not be associated with the loss of personal belief (atheism), (interestingly only 41% of 'nones' identify as atheist[15]) but with a general agnosticism and refusal to fit into religious categories; there is more to the statistics than first meets the eye. This rising agnosticism has often been associated with the emergence of cultural pluralism. As Charles Taylor identifies, modern society is typified with the increase of diversity and multiculturism. These challenge "taken-for-granted" cognitive frameworks and traditions[16] which leaves faith as "a condition of doubt and uncertainty"; "belief in God is no longer axiomatic" since "there are alternatives"[17]. Not only does pluralism explain the increased ethic of tolerance and respect for 'the other' and for different religious practices, but for the increased epistemic uncertainty in the modern era. Indeed, this is characteristic of post-positivism and explains the growth of agnosticism and scepticism against religious absolutism. Therefore, once more, the model of secularisation fits clumsily onto this case study. While pluralisation certainly has significant impacts on religious practice, it is problematic to conclude from these changes that the religiosity of individuals in Europe is also declining.

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12 2011 Census: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/04/11/faith-in-a-better-migration-policy-what-we can-learn-from-christianity/

13 2011 Census: https://revisesociology.com/2018/08/28/evidence-for-secularization/#:~:text=53%25%20of%20UK%20adults%20describe,having%20'no%20religion'%20up%20from

14 Grace Davie (1994) *Religion in Britain since 1945*

15 Linda Woodhead (2016), 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority'. Journal of the British Academy, 4, 245–61, pg. 250

16 Linda Woodhead, 'The rise of 'no religion' in Britain', pg. 254

17 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 2007) pg. 3

Conclusion.

To conclude, not only are religious trends in Europe often more complex in groups (both through history and in contemporary developments), but it is also difficult to associate social 'group trends' (such as declining church attendance and the attenuated role of the church in the public sphere) with the declining religiosity of the European mind. Therefore, we have suggested that the secularisation model is misleadingly simplistic, and that a 'complexity thesis' is preferable.

Two new questions and discussions spring from the assessment of the secularisation model in Europe. If we are correct, as we have argued that religion has not declined, and 'god is not dead' as anticipated, or at least that religious trends are far more complex than the 'secularisation' model evinces, then we must consider the ways in which religion continues as a social force on our economy, our international politics, on instructing issues of human rights and social justice. As Peter Berger attests, "those who neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril"[18]. Secondly, and in line with Dylan Reaves' assessment of the theory of secularisation, the role of attempting a sociological understanding of society is to enable the question of whether, and in what ways, we should change it[19]. I argue that an adoption of a 'complexity thesis', and an abandonment of the 'grand narratives' such as the secularisation model for religious change in Europe is the necessary approach for uncovering case-by-case religious phenomena and for initiating productive discussion on these two vital questions for the modern world.

18 Peter Berger (1997), 'Secularism in retreat', *National Interest,* 46, pg. 12
19 Dylan Reeves (2012),), 'Peter Berger on the Rise and Fall of the Theory of Secularisation', in *Denison Journal of Religion, Vol.11,3,* pg. 18

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