2 The secularisation decade: what the 1960s have done to the study of religious history

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Introduction

I start this chapter with a series of presumptions about the state of existing knowledge in the social history of religion. (1) Britain in the 1960s experienced more secularisation than in all the preceding four centuries put together. Never before had all of the numerical indicators of popular religiosity fallen simultaneously, and never before had their declension been so steep. (2) It is clear now at the start of the twenty-first century that what commenced in the 1960s was a statistically secular (i.e. permanent) change, and not a cyclical (or temporary) one. There is currently no evidence, nor theory of human behaviour (outside of faith itself), that posits that recovery in those numerical indicators will ever take place. (3) Statistical evidence previously used to identify what was once supposed to be secularisation during previous periods of history (notably in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) can now be seen in a new context as showing nothing more than relatively minor, ambiguous, often contradictory, and short-term religious change which was, in any event, neither statistically fool-proof evidence even on its own terms, nor sufficiently broad in its coverage of what religiosity is as to offer a safe conclusion.

What happened in the late twentieth century has been unique and epoch-forming. Since around 1963, Britain has been in the brave new world of secular secularisation – that is, the permanent decline of religion. This decline takes two main observable forms. It is the terminal decline of virtually all of the large, organised conventional Christian churches in Britain; and it is the permanent decline of the common and pervasive Christian culture to which most Britons had adhered most of the time to greater or lesser extents for centuries (and arguably since the start of the second millennium CE). For the historian of religious decline, there is no period in history as important as the 1960s. What was different about the 1960s in the history of religion was not just the scale and suddenness of religious decline. The uniqueness of the sixties was, first, that for the first time Christian religiosity underwent a common and virtually simultaneous change within nearly all countries in western Europe. Previous change had been non-simultaneous, appearing staggered between different nations; this

is certainly the conclusion from Hugh McLeod's unique international study which showed that in the period 1880–1930 secularisation took place in stages, with Berlin in advance of London, and London in advance of New York, and from some other cases.[1] Second, the change was not engineered or guided by governments, churches or elites, nor was it the product of any denominational rivalry, nor any specifically anti-religious political ideology. Third, the religious change that occurred was one of profound secularisation of – or decline in – 'conventional' religion which opened up British popular access to previously exotic, bohemian or socially circumscribed religious/spiritual movements, and allowed for the lowering, at the point of consumption, of barriers between religious and spiritual movements. Fourth, the cause of this secularisation was linked to a sweeping and spontaneously developed popular culture that became, for the first time, a dynamic for religious change in the western world as a whole. And fifth, and most contentiously, the 1960s was and remains unique because it marked the beginning in many countries of the collapse of religious culture as a whole: the religious value-system which, embedded through complex cultural formations in the family, community and state, had stewarded European civilisation for a millennium (under Christianity), and possibly longer (under pre-Christian religions).

The themes and arguments in this chapter complement a previous study of gender, evangelicalism and the secularisation of British culture between 1800 and 2000.[2] This chapter is not a restatement of that book. Instead, it focuses on the impact of the 1960s upon aspects of the academic study of the social history of religion. What it argues is that if the 1960s changed British religion, that culture-event has also changed the way in which religion and the religious past (before 1960) are comprehended in the British imagination. The 1960s have changed the ways in which contemporary culture constructs what religion 'is', what it 'was', and what the difference is between what it 'is' and what it 'was'. In short, the 1960s have changed the way in which British culture narratises religion.

This has created an injunction to historians of religion that we too must change the way we construct our 'official' (academic) narratives of religion. A major factor impacting on this will be the greatest structural trend towards the fusion of conceptual approaches and methodologies between social history of religion, ecclesiastical (church) history, religious studies and cultural history – a process that is already underway. We will in the future be examining with greater clarity of terminology than ever before terms like 'religion', 'religious', 'irreligious' and 'spirituality'. In this chapter I want to look at the narrative of 'religious decline' – commonly referred to as 'secularisation' – which developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but which has now been irrevocably altered by the 1960s. How has the narrative of secularisation been affected by the swinging sixties? And how does this leave our academic discipline?

The data on religion

The 1960s represented the majority of the decline in virtually all indicators of the Christian religion's currently quantifiable social significance in mainland Britain. Here I will speak of a 'short 1960s' of 1963–70, and a 'long 1960s' of 1956–73.

It seems irrefutable that church-going declined in mainland Britain during the 1960s, but that this was merely a continuation of an existing trend which stretched back until at least the 1890s and possibly to the 1870s. It might be fair to estimate that the proportion of the population attending church and Sunday school in mainland Britain on a given Sunday stood at around 40–45 per cent in 1851, and fell thereafter to about 30 per cent by 1900, 15 per cent by 1950, 11.3 per cent in 1979–84, and to less than 10 per cent in the 1990s.[3] Moreover, the 1960s seem to have cemented the trend for zones of relatively low church-going in the mid-nineteenth century (industrial zones, and highland and island rural zones) to become, by the late twentieth century, zones of relatively high church-going (not by virtue of any growth in church-going, but by virtue of a much *lower rate of decline* in church attendance compared to metropolitan and lowland agricultural zones). Yet, it is fair to conclude that, viewed in isolation, the decline in church-going in the 1960s was not epoch-making for the Christian religion nationally.

After church-going, the most active form of church connection in the Christian religion is celebration of the rites of passage. Between 1900 and 1997, the proportion of marriages that were religiously solemnised fell for Scotland from 94 to 56 per cent, and for England and Wales from 85 to 39 per cent. There were three main periods of decline: the First World War, the Second World War and the period after 1963. In the main, the declines of the two world wars were reversed in peacetime, and though there was a decline over the course of twentieth-century peacetime, it was the 'short 1960s' which saw the greatest permanent fall. Of the 36-point fall in religious marriage in Scotland during 1900–87, 15.6 points occurred during 1961–73. Of the 33-point fall in religious marriage in England and Wales during 1900–87, 16.5 points occurred during 1962–73. In short, of the whole fall in the proportion of religious marriages between 1900 and 1987, 43 per cent in Scotland and 50 per cent in England and Wales occurred during the 'short 1960s' – a staggering decline.

Interestingly, the other rite of passage for which there are data – baptism – started its rapid decline earlier. Infant baptisms performed in the Church of England as a proportion of live births were still rising in the first three decades of the twentieth century, from 609 per thousand in 1900 to a peak of 668 in 1927. Despite a slight decline to 621 by 1938, this was a remarkably high density of baptism in the English and Welsh population; the addition of baptisms performed by other denominations would raise this figure significantly. But after

a gap in the middle decades of the century (when I was unable to locate data), the figure in 1956 was still relatively high at 602 per thousand – a figure only 7/1000 points down on 1900. But decline was rapid thereafter: within two years it had attained the lowest level for the century, and then kept falling until 1970–73 (when a brief levelling-off at 465/6 occurred) and then resuming from 1976. Of the 303-point fall in the baptism rate during 1927–81, 174 points occurred during 1956–76.

Data for the proportion of funerals celebrated by Christian rite are, to my knowledge, non-existent. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that there was a continuing recourse until very late in the twentieth century by more than 90 per cent (perhaps close to 100 per cent) of British families to religious celebration of lives at death (either in a place of worship, in a crematorium or at a graveside, or any two or even all three of these). A change towards secular (often Humanist) celebration of death seems to have become significant only in the 1980s and 1990s, and from anecdotal conversations with Humanist celebrants this demand grew exponentially in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In any event, it seems highly likely that there was no marked change during the 1960s.

Youth connection with religion is one of the key areas in statistical analysis of religious change in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Data from Scotland show that the peak of Sunday school enrolment was achieved in the 1890s, and there seems every reason to believe that there was a comparable peak for England and Wales. Enrolments in all British Protestant churches represented 77 per cent of children aged between 5 and 14 years inclusive at the start of the twentieth century (a figure probably inflated by multiple enrolment).[4] By the 1990s, the level of Sunday school enrolment is difficult to ascertain because of discontinued statistical series (itself a commentary on crisis), but was probably in the region of 5–8 per cent. The greatest decline before the late 1950s occurred in the Nonconformist churches – especially in Methodist Sunday schools, where the rolls fell by 58 per cent between 1910 and 1956 compared to only 46 per cent over the same period for the Church of England. But the real crisis of Sunday schools occurred after 1956. In that year a peak of enrolment per capita unseen since 1936 was reached, but then the figures for all churches plummeted. The Scottish data are the most complete and – in terms of trend – representative. In 1956, Presbyterian enrolments represented 39 per cent of Scottish children, but then fell to 19 per cent in 1973; 20 of the 32-point fall in Presbyterian enrolments during 1903–81 occurred in the 'long 1960s' of 1956–73. The crisis for Sunday schools did not diminish after 1973. In the Church of Scotland it has continued unabated with a steepening in the 1990s. In 1994, enrolments stood at 60,936 – compared with 167,733 in 1973. The decline is at the rate of 8–10 per cent per year in Scotland in the mid-1990s, which leads to the projection that Sunday schools will have practically ceased to exist by 2010.[5] From the available data,

there seems to be little cause for thinking that the situation in the rest of British Protestantism is any different.

A second form of data on youth and religion is confirmation in the Church of England. Girls and young women made up 59 per cent of confirmations in the late 1950s. The density of female confirmation in the population was significant, standing fairly level at around 40 per cent until 1961. Male confirmations, on the other hand, were already in a slow decline. However, it was between 1961 and 1974 that the major decline occurred; female confirmation more than halved from 39.3 to 19.6 per cent in those years. This represents a major loss of the Church's primary recruitment mechanism, and one that undoubtedly contributed to the fall in church communicants.

Success in recruitment of baptised persons into full membership of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland (which took place usually between 12 and 18 years of age) was remarkably resilient until the mid-1950s, and then after 1956 plunged in the Church of Scotland, and fell significantly in the Church of England, whilst both churches experienced a sustained (and as yet unended) recruitment catastrophe from 1966 with, by the mid-1990s, only 17–20 per cent of baptised persons entering full communion. More clearly than any other statistics, these show that the two world wars did not have a permanent impact on internal recruitment – it was the period after 1956 that did. Recent studies of youth attitudes to religion have explored more fully than ever before the mechanism of youth alienation from religion – including how 'religion' and 'the church' are perceived as 'uncool', whilst 'spirituality' and the new moral agenda of environmentalism and respect between human beings can be deeply attractive, yet unfulfilled by conventional religion.[6]

One of the key characteristics of Britain between 1900 and 1960 was that, though church attendance fell, passive association was strongly sustained. Both the Church of England and the Church of Scotland suffered comparatively little loss of adherence during the first half of the twentieth century, with peak of communicants as a proportion of population coming in 1911 and 1934 respectively, whilst their low points in 1947 and 1948 respectively were only marginally lower. The real fall in their constituency came after 1956. Aggregation of data across Christian denominations is nigh impossible for purposes of per capita analysis of church membership in England and Wales, but it is more possible in Scotland. Here, it is possible to construct year-on-year data on church adherence or membership between 1840 and 1994 (including Presbyterian Sunday school enrolment), expressed as a percentage of total population at annual intervals.[7] This shows that nearly all the permanent loss of church adherence per capita in Scotland since church statistics began occurred after 1956, and it was between 1963 and *c*. 1975 that the gradient of decline reached unprecedented proportions. All Protestant churches suffered, and only a small number (like the Baptist Church) experienced a stabilisation of membership loss in the later

twentieth century. Though the decline in the Scottish Catholic Church (as measured by a variety of indicators) only started in the mid-1970s, it has since the mid-1980s experienced an accelerating decline that has reached a gradient unmatched by any other Scottish church before. In short, Catholic Church decline started late, but it is proving to be incredibly sharp.

A final major area of statistical analysis is that of opinion poll data on religious attitudes and claimed religious activities. These data largely apply to the period since the 1960s, and most of them have been extensively analysed by Clive Field.[8] He showed that there has been a marked decline in most self-claimed indicators of religious activity since the 1970s, a decline which is steepest at the end of the period. He also noted how the evidence suggests that by the 1990s the influence of religion is about the same in England and Scotland, is higher than in France and Scandinavia, is much lower in Britain than in most Catholic countries of Europe, and is very much lower than in North and South America. Overall, he agrees with the proposition that in zones previously thought to be 'highly religious' (such as Scotland) there has been a haemorrhage of faith underway in the later decades of the twentieth century.

To summarise, all of the indicators bar two (church-going and opinion poll data) show that the period between 1956 and 1973 witnessed unprecedented rapidity in the fall of religiosity in British society. In most cases, at least half of the overall decline in each indicator recorded during the century was concentrated into those years or a smaller period within them. That in itself makes the 'long sixties' highly significant in the history of British secularisation. What heightens the significance is the fact that so many indices of religiosity fell simultaneously. Across the board, the British people started to reduce the role of religion in their lives: for their marriages, as a place to baptise their children, as an institution to send their children to Sunday school and church recruitment, and as a place for affiliation. The next generation, which came to adulthood in the 1970s, exhibited even more marked disaffiliation from church connection of any sort, and *their* children were largely raised in a domestic routine free from the intrusions of organised religion. Meanwhile, the long-term decline of church-going has continued, and together with the evidence from opinion poll data, there seems every reason to conclude that the data indicate little short of a 'mass' dissolution of popular faith in Britain in the last three decades of the twentieth century.

Deconstructing the data, redefining the study

If the data emphasise the suddenness of religious change in Britain in the late twentieth century, they also suggest much greater continuity in the measurable social significance of religion between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries than has long been assumed. This fits quite comfortably with trends

in recent 'revisionist' scholarship that have downplayed the extent of damage to organised religion rendered by industrialisation and urbanisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the data also suggest that the focus of traditional social history of religion on the 1880–1930 period as a turning-point in Britain has only partial validity. Only church-going decline seems significant then, and it is counterbalanced by much evidence of the vibrancy of religious culture in both plebeian and bourgeois life in the late Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war periods. The modern puritan revolution was very far from exhausted by the 1930s, and was to revitalise in the vigour of church growth and the 'crusade evangelism' of Billy Graham in the mid-1950s.

By contrast, despite the difficulty of church-going data, the 'long 1960s' from 1956 to 1973 appear as a cataclysm for the place of religion in British society. The sheer scale of religious change in that decade puts in the shade the more equivocal change of the 1790s and 1840s and the 1880–1910 period so beloved of historical debate. The years 1963–65 appear striking as the turning-point at which virtually all indices of religious adherence, youth education and rites of passage passed below the known scale. It is from 1963 that historians have to recalibrate their barometer of religiosity.

Two important sets of interpretational points arise from these observations. First, the obvious – the 1960s can be empirically identified as the commencement of the first period of steep, multi-factorial, long-term and (statistically) secular (as distinct from cyclical) dechristianisation of Britain. Though the characteristics of a multi-faith society first become significant from the 1960s, the rise of non-Christian religions and quasi-religions (including New Religions and New Age movements) did not, have not and will not fill the void of religiosity left by the decline of Christianity. Thus, it also seems irrefutable that what Britain has experienced since 1963 is 'genuine' secularisation. Though this argument deserves much greater focus on theoretical, conceptual and empirical issues, it strikes me as as clear commonsense. This will be deeply unsatisfying to some observers, but they will mostly have flags of faith to fly.

The second interpretational point arises from the first. It is that it is only the 1960s – and our experience of it – that actually provides a sensory, empirical and conceptual understanding of what 'secularisation' is, and of what kind of society it produces. If you think of those efforts of historians to argue that secularisation started in the Enlightenment or the Industrial Revolution, then the nature of the process they are able to describe as taking place is *at most* merely one of 'forgetting to observe' Christianity, and the society produced out of it is a strongly self-reflectively neglectful religious society. There was nothing 'secular' whatever in nineteenth-century British society. It was a society which knew well, from top to bottom, what it knew it *ought* to believe and *ought* to do religiously, and what it was that some were alleging was being 'lost' in the midst of urban–industrial change. When members of society did not do

the expected and observable 'religious' things, they were loudly harangued by moral and religious gatekeepers from pulpit, corner gossip shop and Sunday lunch table. This was the discursivity of faith-power. It was the power of late modern puritanism which enveloped British (as well as European) society until the 1950s. That power was only challenged effectively by a cultural revolt (not a revolt of neglect or secularism or politics), and it did not happen until the 1960s. The sixties produced not the end but the beginning of the revolt against the discursivity of Christian culture in Europe.

Therefore, there was no conception of what secular society was until after the 1960s had been fully absorbed into our consciousness. For this reason, each book on the subject written before or without that understanding (including most famously Bryan Wilson's *Religion in Secular Society* of 1966) is not a book which did or could conceptualise what secular society looked like or felt like. Our ability to conceptualise that society is dawning bit by bit as we progress in Britain through to third- and fourth-generation secularists.

The third interpretational point is potentially more far-reaching for the social history of religion. I will give a bald statement of it first and elaborate on it after. The bald statement is this: secularisation fillets the religious spine out of the body of human culture. When that happens, as in Britain since the 1960s, it is not possible to continue to study the subject by looking at the churches, church membership, religious observance or opinion polls. The basis of the academic subject has fundamentally changed. The churches are now less relevant; indeed, to be frank, they become increasingly irrelevant with every year. They are so marginal to the place of religion in society that the academic game has to change fundamentally.

Church history could once claim to encompass the social history of religion. It can't any more. Religious studies – the academic discipline, with all its research and theorising about the diversity, overlap, decentredness and fluidity of spiritual and religious experience – have done enough to convince that the study of the spiritual and religious past needs to change with it, and adopt the same conceptual challenges and diversity of empirical investigation. At the same time, religious studies must change because of major weaknesses in empiricism, conceptualisation of historical change and obsession with theorising (faults drawn, I suspect, from sociology). But that is another matter. Let me be plain. Religious studies represents the future of the past. The secularisation decade in Britain has destroyed the conceptual validity of religious history as we have known it, just as it has destroyed what we once understood to be 'religion'.

Of secularisation and other concepts

'Secularisation' represents a number of different things to scholars. First, it is a *theory* which, broadly speaking, defines the decline in the social significance

of religion as a long-term and inevitable historical process, with short-term accelerants (such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, industrialisation and urbanisation) and also short-term retardants (generally referred to as 'revivals'). In general terms, this *theory* of secularisation is regarded by some scholars as now being in tatters. Intellectually and – above all – empirically, the notion that the decline of religion has been an inevitable and inexorable accompaniment of 'modernisation' is now enjoying diminishing support amongst British social historians of religion.[9] Sociologists of religion, who were the most ardent promoters of the theory in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s,[10] have become since the 1980s and 1990s largely silent on the issue.[11] Even in the United States, a 'revisionist' group of sociologists have turned full square against the notion that cities secularise and, instead, have argued that cities are centres of increased religious activity.[12] The language of academic debate has now started to change from religious 'decline' to religious 'change', marking the growing acknowledgement of not merely the ability of religion to survive modern social and economic change but its ability to change and grow in parallel to it and, perhaps, because of it.[13]

Second, secularisation is, as Jeff Cox has called it, a 'master narrative'. As a history, it is a narrative predominantly written of the period since the eighteenth century, and centred in the historiography between 1780 and 1914. This history encompasses most of western Europe, Great Britain and the United States, and though it varies its causative forces according to national (and sometimes regional) context, fundamentally the course, timing and scale of change is similar across this territory. Secularisation is thus an international historical development, drawn by scholars both in incredible detail at local level and in broad brush on an international canvas.[14] This history or master narrative has been fairly constantly revised, updated, qualified and empirically enriched by scholars since the 1960s. Indeed, so qualified has the secularisation story researched for the 1780–1914 period become, that many scholars seek now to replace the master narrative. 'Secularisation' has become a *bête noir* for revisionists who maintain that not only did religion not decline during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it could just as well have grown.[15]

Many scholars have thus increasingly devalued the concept of 'secularisation' as an historical development. As a result, the demise of secularisation as a theory ('it is a social-scientific illogicality') has been accompanied during the 1980s and 1990s by the decline of secularisation as an acknowledged historical process of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ('it didn't happen that way'). Amongst sociologists of religion, there has been a secularisation side-show concerning debate about 'secular society', with one tradition arguing that Britain is not a secular society – or not as secular as is often thought[16] – whilst the other tradition argues that it is patently obvious that Britain of the mid-1990s was radically secular in comparison to the Britain of, say, the mid-1890s.[17] This is a debate

which is poorly invested with an historical perspective; even if it is charitably classified as contributing a 'narrative', it fails critically to be interested in identifying when the transitions to secularity occurred. It resonates too much with a similarly forlorn debate in the 1960s, and neither of these really does anything to enhance understanding of historical change.

The failure in theory and in narrative gives rise to a third status to secularisation: as a postmodernist (and poststructuralist) *problematic*. A methodological revolution is underway in how scholars study religiosity. Much of the work of unpicking the stranglehold of secularisation theory now involves discourse analysis upon those sources (authors, institutions, media) in which were intellectualised, refined and circulated the key discourses on what it was to be 'religious' and what it was to be 'irreligious' in industrial society. These discourses (or representations) were framed within complex class, gender and ethnic structures, and they had a resilience which rendered them still relevant well into the third quarter of the twentieth century. (Thus, incidentally, they became the active discourses of analysis in most of the scholarship on the social history of religion during the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s.[18]) The effect of these discourses in the English-speaking world was to make religiosity be perceived as something intrinsically good rather than bad, Christian rather than non-Christian, rural and pre-industrial rather than urban and industrial, middle-class rather than working-class, feminine rather than masculine, and white Anglo-Saxon Protestant rather than, for example, black (or African American), Irish or Roman Catholic. This is to simplify enormously complex discourses which varied over time, country and region, but they were surprisingly common features within world Protestantism.

Secularisation, like religiosity itself, thus becomes a problematic requiring changes in scholarship.[19] The remainder of this section explores the impact of postmodernism on this work.

1. First, the poststructuralist agenda involves decoupling concepts of religiosity from social structures, and liberating the working classes from 'blame' in the decline of religion by a conscious effort of devaluing the class dialectics which have in the past dominated how historians understood the declining social significance of religion. The prominence previously given to working-class alienation from the churches as the long-run cause of secularisation in Britain from the late eighteenth century to the present has been under assault since the late 1970s from studies showing the relative strength of working-class involvement in church membership and worship,[20] and from the mid-1980s by a growing awareness from experiential sources concerning the continuities in, and strength of, proletarian religiosity.[21] This must continue.

2. Second, the simultaneous postmodernist agenda stresses the importance of understanding religious experience through individuals' subjectification of discourse in negotiation with their own economic and social experience. This

demands two main things: first, discourse analysis of the 'self' (in this case the religious self, as part of a wider construction of the individual), through study of circulating discourses in the dominant media (books, newspapers, popular song, sermons, and so on); and second, study of personal testimony (such as autobiography, oral history, and personal testimony reconstructed from third-party sources (such as judicial and ecclesiastical records)). An important and key criterion of analysis in recent years using these methods has been gender and religion – principally femininity and Christian piety.[22] Studies of England and North America in the eighteenth century have suggested that there was a complex feminisation of religion in which Protestantism especially came to play different roles in women's and men's identities in modern society.[23] Within evangelicalism, the increasing tendency to emotionalism alienated men, leading to them perceiving in the evangelical conversion a much less intimate relationship with God than was felt by women.[24] Evangelicalism focused religious discourse with increasing intensity upon the home and family, and upon the inculcation of religious and moral values in the next generation through the piety of mothers.[25] The way in which religion (specifically Protestantism) operated within personal identities, and the way in which men and women associated with the churches, diverged, and continued to diverge until well into the twentieth century.[26] Clearly, gender cannot be the only criterion for analysis in the study of the social history of religion in the way social class was for decades. To state the obvious, there are also the vital categories of race, ethnicity, geography and so on. But, I would argue that gender is emerging as possibly the single most important definer of the timing and content of long-term change to the Christian religion of Europe.

3. Third, secularisation as a concept (the decline of religion) has to be problematised as linked to the meta-narrative 'theory of secularisation' which emerged from the Enlightenment and modernity. This linkage has created particular ways of viewing religion (and irreligion and the decline of religion) which rely on social science method (principally either/or notions of religiosity, and the counting of heads). Now, the implication of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories and methods is that the historian of modern religion must contemplate the implications of 'the end of the social' in the social history of religion, and 'the rise of the self' or 'the personal'. A new twin-pronged agenda should be unfolding: a postmodernist discourse analysis of the conceptions of piety in Britain, and a poststructuralist approach to the role of religion in multifarious non-class identities. Secularisation as the decline of the *social* significance of religion thus becomes itself in need of deconstruction. It is a term which imputes change and which, in academic terms, urges scholars to the pursuit of revelation of that change; it does not tend to admit of the possibility of 'sameness' in religiosity over the long term. It even urges those (like the revisionists) who refute the timing of secularisation to the nineteenth century

to think again about using terms like religious 'growth' or 'adaptability' or 'survival' or 'revival'. The language spawned of the secularisation debate is loaded, and in need of linguistic turn.

The postmodernist challenge to the social historian of religion is to turn on our terms (the linguistic turn), to examine discourses of religion (the social construction of religiosity as ideals and anti-ideals – their content, the manner of their circulation, and who benefited from them) and explore experiences of religion (through the rescue, commissioning, reconstruction and study of personal testimony), and thereby to reassess our accepted chronologies and understanding of the nature of change to religion, the churches, spirituality, piety and culture. This will leave secularisation under a three-pronged assault: as a 'false' theory (based on modelling by outmoded methods of sociology which do not match the empirical evidence), as a 'false' narrative (principally of the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which erroneously chronicled religious decline), and as a 'false' discourse (of the upward progress of the rational western mind evidenced in the false narrative).

4. The revelation that 'religious decline' and 'secularisation' are narratives to be discussed in the way I have attempted above, and in the way previously addressed by scholars like Jeff Cox, is a product of the postmodern condition. It is, in my view, more directly a product of the 1960s and the grievous wound inflicted by that decade upon western Europe's Christianity and culture. It may have taken time (a few decades) for scholarship to catch up with the spiritual turn of the people of that continent, but we are here now discussing the concept of religious change because 'decline' and 'secularisation' are now revealed as uncentred realities. The concept caused few problems to Christian clerics or atheist sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s (beyond some bizarre accusations that it was anti-Christian). We can see now that secularisation is a concept of Christian modernity, wholly produced to bolster the power of the salvation industry in the new rational intellectual economy thrown up by the Enlightenment, and attracting the subscription of those (like Marx and Engels) who wished the process well. The concept and theory of secularisation was intrinsic to the concept and theory of modernisation. It was intrinsic to social science itself – indeed, the latter was constructed upon the former. How can you conceive of social science without a notion of the death of revelatory premodern Christianity? How can you conceive of the concept of modernisation without a faith (yea, a faith) in the decline of a putative religiously inspired ignorance of the cosmos?

And so secularisation emerges to us now, after forty years of postmodern turning away from centred realities in white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, Eurocentric, gendered supremacies, as yet another centred reality that 'is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements'.[27]

5. This leaves unfinished business. The refashioning of the agenda in the 'post-secularisation-theory' age does not remove the issue of the *cause* of the

new age. For all that the theory, history and discourse of 'secularisation' may be fundamentally flawed on all three counts, secularisation may still plausibly and logically exist. The *theory* of secularisation may be a myth, but *secularisation* is not. Though the theory of secularisation may be wrong, and though the secularisation discourse neglects 'the personal' in piety, the falseness of the narrative history of secularisation should lead not to its *abandonment* but to its *correction*.

There is still an empirical task to be performed. The postmodernist agenda may rightly imply greater continuity in personal piety over the centuries than the structuralist social historian has thus far allowed. But by the same token it is entirely possible that personal piety itself can undergo and has undergone enormous change. It is vital that scholars are willing and able to recognise secularisation when we see it; and if it is to be seen anywhere in British history, it is to be seen most strikingly as starting in the 1960s and continuing in the last forty years of the twentieth century.

Statisticising secularisation

So, we are 'turned back' upon empiricism. There is no conceptual difficulty with this. The decline of religion since 1960 has disturbed the stability of meaning in 'secularisation'. The decline needs to be studied. But how it is done has to change as a result of the lessons of the 1960s.

The medium is the message,[28] and statistics of religion are a striking example of this aphorism. The collection and circulation of statistics of religion have virtually always been linked to a discourse of approval of 'the religious persons' and disapproval of 'the irreligious persons' counted, have implied that religiosity is reducable to an either/or choice, and signal the message that what is being measured is the moral as well as the religious state of the nation. It seems to be self-evident and inescapable that statistics of religion are moral messages. I want to approach that issue through a brief discussion of the problems of religious statistics.

In the first instance, there is the measurement problem: statistics of religion measure formal actions, some of them requiring commitment, some of them requiring very little commitment but merely conformity. Statistics of church membership may not necessarily show what people are doing for their faith (such as going to church), whilst statistics of church-going may not show what people are believing religiously in what they are doing by attending worship. So, the first problem is that such statistics are not necessarily measuring what it is we actually might want to measure. And what we actually want to measure is defined by the social constructions of religiosity employed by the historian. (For the latter, see the third instance below.)

In the second instance, there are the statistical compilation problems: of reliability, comparability and continuity. Religious statistics are those compiled

by diverse sources – the churches themselves, government agencies, newspapers, evangelical organisations, and (in some cases) academics. These have diverse origins, and the means of measurement vary, and in very many cases time-series data involve important elements of discontinuity (in definitions of church membership, for instance) which require careful consideration during the compilation of datasets. Such problems are not insuperable in most cases, but they require careful preparation of data.

In the third instance, religious statistics deserve problematisation in a postmodernist sense. The way in which statistics operate is by demanding the imposition of structures upon the field of inquiry, dividing people into the categories needed for counting: church-goers and non-church-goers, church-members and non-members, weddings into church- and civil-solemnised occasions, and so on. In this field of inquiry, one can safely say that such structures induce considerable statistical inaccuracy because (i) those counted as church-goers on one occasion will be non-church-goers on others, and vice versa, and thus impose a false structure; because (ii) changes in the numerical balance between 'opposite' categories in a structure conceal other (sometimes unmeasurable) continuities; because (iii) many of the ways in which religiosity can be measured have rarely been counted; and because (iv) it is clear that we now understand religiosity (from modern cultural theory, if from nowhere else) as something that is composed of characteristics and categories which are not countable.

Domestic and personal religious rituals have rarely been measured in any depth over time, and even social surveys (asking about belief in God, for instance) require a binary structure (in this case, yes/no) which conceals rather than reveals the graduated, complex and often confused nature of faith. More fundamentally, postmodernist analysis of the sort undertaken by Sarah Williams reveals that religious statistics are measuring that which the churches (or clergymen) take to be the gauge of religiosity; they miss the highly gendered and class-based forms of religiosity – sometimes characterised as 'superstition' – which have been prevalent in industrial society, but yet little investigated by scholars of any discipline.[29]

Such examples show that statistics of religion are not 'neutral' measures. Statistics of religion (as of other, perhaps most, fields of inquiry, certainly in the social sciences) are discursively active. They are, in short, judgements which accrue power – faith-power – to those who collect and wield them. Those in use by historians, sociologists and churches since the eighteenth century are an element of a discourse, or series of discourses, on religiosity and secularisation. The churches – male-dominated institutions of a competitive capitalist society – developed categories to be counted because they could show denominational success against other denominations, organisational growth and prosperity, and success in evangelising 'the ungodly' (principally the working classes).

When national religious statistics were collected (by the state in its church-going census of 1851 for instance), it was to show the strength or weakness of Britain as a Christian nation in the midst of its imperial mission. Similar exercises by both individual churches and ecumenical groups in the twentieth century were concerned almost uniformly to display the *failure* of Christian Britain. Diverse discourses lie in these statistical series: a focus on change (in minute shifts in church membership from year to year); a preoccupation with denominational competition which seeks 'growth' in specific forms of measurement; an elite obsession with the scale of 'the lapsed masses' in the Victorian and Edwardian periods; and gendered and class-based approaches which fail to measure those forms of pious expression which were scorned or ignored by the self-appointed judges – the clergymen. Religious statistics, as one Edwardian compiler opined, are 'unimpeachable witnesses to vigour, progress and interest'.[30]

In short, religious statistics are invariably circulating discourses on ecclesiastical machismo, national righteousness, class commentary or moral judgement (sometimes all at once), and require to be treated as such. The social construction of religious statistics is thus an issue for the historian, as is the historian's employment of them. *The tendency and the danger implicit in that action lie in the perpetuation of that social construction – the discourses of religiosity – into scholarly understanding of the social history of religion*. This leaves the social scientist with the task of justifying the conceptual validity of statistical measurement. The range of measures of religiosity needs to display a number of things. First, there needs to be an awareness of structures (of gender, class and ethnicity, for instance). The on/off binary approach of religious statistics needs to be most carefully reassessed to expose the structures imposed so cavalierly upon the past and the present. Second, there needs to be awareness of the many different ways in which piety or religiosity may be expressed (now and in the past, in Britain and other places, in different branches of Christianity and other faiths, and, very importantly, in forms independent from conventional church traditions). Third, there must be an appreciation that valid expressions of personal faith may be beyond practical forms of measurement in society (whether now or in the past). And fourth, there needs to be an understanding that the implication of 'measurement' is an imposition of discontinuities (however graduated) upon the past; in other words, statistics may not only be impersonal, but take the personal out of the past, and treat it as 'another world' *which it may not be*.

Advocates of secularisation theory in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s can be accused of failure in most if not all of the above points when they assessed the impact of industrialisation and city growth upon religion in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But by the same token, there is a real danger that the postmodernist awareness of the social construction of religious statistics

may lead to an overlooking of real historical change when it *did* occur. That remains the task.

Conclusion

The ways religion is studied in the periods of the 1960s, since the 1960s and before the 1960s need to coalesce. There needs to be a sharing of concept and method in the study of religion and society between historians of medieval, early modern and late modern periods, and between the historian, the anthropologist, the cultural- and religious-studies scholar. The postcolonial, the gender and the post-class perspectives of our age need to be brought to bear on all those familiar themes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British religious history. This means active deployment of reflexivity in our work, involving amongst other things a very keen re-examination of the vocabulary of our field. This in turn needs to feed into how social-science method and postmodernist method fuse together. In such ways, the 1960s not only marked an epoch change in the social history of the religious history of the nation (and of Europe). The sixties also changed the way in which we understand religion and secularisation across human history.

NOTES

1. H. McLeod, *Piety and Poverty: Working-Class Religion in Berlin, London and New York 1870–1914* (New York, 1996); C. G. Brown, 'A revisionist approach to religious change', in S. Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford, 1992), 37–58 and his 'The mechanism of religious growth in urban societies', in H. McLeod (ed.), *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities 1830–1930* (London, 1995), 239–62.
2. C. G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (London, 2001).
3. These estimates come from a variety of sources; see C. G. Brown, 'Religion', in R. Pope (ed.), *Atlas of British Social and Economic History* (London, 1989), 213.
4. Discussion of Sunday school data is to be found in C. G. Brown, 'The Sunday-school movement in Scotland, 1780–1914', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 21 (1981), 3–26.
5. A fuller discussion of the crisis in youth recruitment methods to the churches is contained in C. G. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh, 1997), chapter 7.
6. S. Wiltshire, 'Spirit of our age: dimensions of religiosity amongst Scottish youth', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2001.
7. A full denominationally divided version of this graph appears in Brown, *Religion and Society*, 62–3.
8. C. D. Field, ' "The Haemorrhage of Faith?": opinion polls as sources for religious practices, beliefs and attitudes in Scotland since the 1970s', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 16 (2001), 157–75.

9. See, for instance, S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire 1870–1920* (Cambridge, 1996); M. Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society: Oldham and Saddleworth 1740–1865* (Oxford, 1994); J. Morris, *Religion and Urban Change: Croydon 1840–1914* (Woodbridge, 1992).
10. B. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (Harmondsworth, 1966); D. Martin, *A General Theory of Secularisation* (Oxford, 1978).
11. A notable exception is Steve Bruce. See for instance Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization*.
12. R. Finke and R. Stark, 'Religious economies and sacred canopies: religious mobilisation in American cities, 1906', *American Sociological Review*, 53 (1988), 41–9.
13. Brown, 'A revisionist approach'.
14. An impressive broad-brush account is Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe 1789–1970* (Oxford, 1981).
15. J. Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870–1930* (Oxford, 1981); C. G. Brown, 'Did urbanisation secularise Britain?', *Urban History Yearbook* 1987, 1–15.
16. The most recent advocate of the first is Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford, 1994), and G. Davie, 'Religion in post-war Britain: a sociological viewpoint', in J. Obelkevich and P. Catterall (eds.), *Understanding Post-War British Society* (London and New York, 1994), 165–78.
17. Steve Bruce, 'Religion in Britain at the close of the twentieth century: a challenge to the silver lining perspective', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 11 (1996), 261–75.
18. They are most powerfully to be found in E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London, 1957); K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London, 1963); and A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change 1740–1914* (London, 1976).
19. Sarah Williams, 'Urban popular religion and the rites of passage', in McLeod (ed.), *European Religion*, 216–36; S. Williams, 'The problem of belief: the place of oral history in the study of popular religion', *Oral History*, 24 (1996), 27–34; S. Williams, 'The language of belief: an alternative agenda for the study of Victorian working-class religion', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 1 (1996), 303–16; S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c. 1880–1939* (Oxford, 1999).
20. C. D. Field, 'The social structure of English Methodism, eighteenth–twentieth centuries', *British Journal of Sociology*, 28 (1977), 199–225; P. Hillis, 'Presbyterianism and social class in mid-nineteenth-century Glasgow: a study of nine churches', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 32 (1981), 47–64.
21. As well as the work of S. Williams, see H. McLeod, 'New perspectives on Victorian working-class religion: the oral evidence', *Oral History*, 14 (1986), 31–49, and C. G. Brown and J. D. Stephenson, ' "Sprouting wings"? Women and religion in Scotland c.1890–c.1950', in E. Gordon and E. Breitenbach (eds.), *Out of Bounds: Women and Religion in Scotland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Edinburgh, 1992), 95–120.
22. For the medieval period, see for instance P. Ranft, *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe* (Basingstoke, 1996). For the early modern period, see P. Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500–1720* (London, 1993). For the late modern period, see Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*.

23. Crawford, *Women and Religion*, 204–8; A. Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven and London, 1995), 347–63; S. Gill, *Women and the Church of England from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London, 1994), 83–98; H. McLeod, *Religion and Society in England 1850–1914* (Basingstoke, 1996), 156–68.
24. B. L. Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, CT, 1981), 45–66.
25. J. Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States 1780–1860* (London, 1985), 73–107.
26. Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*; Brown, *Religion and Society*, chapter 8.
27. J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, 1979; 2nd edition 1984), p. xxiv.
28. M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA, 1964; 2nd edition 1994), p. 15.
29. Williams, 'Urban popular religion and the rites of passage'.
30. R. Mudie-Smith (ed.), *The Religious Life of London* (London, 1904), 6–7.

3 Christendom in decline: the Swedish case

Eva M. Hamberg

Available data indicate that the share of the population who adhere to Christian beliefs or who devote themselves to such traditional religious activities as prayer and church attendance declined in Sweden during the twentieth century. The decline in church attendance can easily be documented. Information on religious beliefs is available only for comparatively recent times; hence, we may run the risk of overestimating the former prevalence of such beliefs.[1] The same is true of information on prayer habits.

It should also be borne in mind that certain forms of religious practice that in the contemporary Swedish situation may be regarded as expressions of religious commitment, e.g. church attendance, formerly were part of a social and cultural pattern to which individuals were expected to conform. While nowadays the share of the population who attend public worship is considerably lower than the share who believe in God, the reverse may have been true in times when church attendance was the prevailing social norm.[2]

Available data indicate a decline not only in the prevalence of religious beliefs, but also in the saliency of these beliefs. A smaller share of the population adhere to the Christian faith, and among those who still do hold on to this faith (or to certain parts of it) many seem to do so with a low degree of personal commitment.[3]

According to the European Values Studies which were carried out in 1981 and 1990, Sweden is one of the most secularised countries in western Europe, in the sense that very low percentages of the population adhere to the Christian faith or attend public worship. In 1990, only 15 per cent of the adult Swedish population (aged 16–74 years) said that they believed in the existence of a personal God, 27 per cent believed in heaven, and 19 per cent in the resurrection of the dead. Only 4 per cent attended church weekly, while another 6 per cent did so monthly. A similar pattern can be found for prayer and Bible reading. In 1990 only 10 per cent of adult Swedes said that they often prayed, while 49 per cent never prayed and 10 per cent hardly ever did so. Bible reading is even less common: according to a Swedish survey undertaken in the mid-1980s, only 8 per cent of the adult population read the Bible at least once a month. Moreover, a comparison of the results of the second European Values Study, undertaken in