

*Department of Politics*

## COURSEWORK COVER SHEET

Student Number: 12704161
Programme of Study: Nationalism & Ethnic Conflict
Module Code/ Title of Module: Nationalism and Ethnoreligious conflict
Essay Title: Which is the most widespread trend of our time, secularisation or religious revival
Word Count: 3040

*For official use only*

Mark:
Tutor signature:
Date:

Which is the most widespread trend of our time, secularisation or religious revival?

The decline in the social and political importance of religion in the West is a theme well grounded in the social science theories of figures such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. The classical sociological theorists rationalistic view of religion led them to insist that such decline was integral to the processes of modernization. The decline of religion and its replacement by other social institutions preoccupied their work. However by the 1980s it would appear that the pronouncement of the 'death of God' was somewhat premature. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, in which a modernizing government was replaced by a religious establishment, dealt a serious blow to such conventional wisdom. In the 1980s it became apparent that religious activism was not just an Islamic phenomenon, 'politicized religious movements were occurring in virtually every major religious tradition'.<sup>1</sup> The rise of the New Christian Right, and the visible growth of evangelical and fundamentalist churches across the United States led to one of secularization theory's greatest exponents, Peter Berger, to admit that serious intellectual difficulties had been created for those who had thought that modernization and secularization were an inexorably linked phenomena.<sup>2</sup> Berger himself states that 'the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today...is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.'<sup>3</sup> While modernity does carry with it certain secularizing tendencies, secularization is not the most dominant or widespread trend of our time, in fact the secularization theory itself has many flaws. The recent revival of religion indicates a complex interplay between secularization and desecularization in the modernized world. From a global perspective religious revival would constitute the most widespread trend of our time as it has manifested itself in parts of the globe where secularizing tendencies have not taken hold, and within secular societies themselves, notably in forms of resistance to the secularizing tendencies.

The legacy of classical theorizing to contemporary sociology of religion is certainly worth acknowledgment as their work has laid the foundation for the contemporary secularization thesis. The majority of the classical sociologists were atheists and professionally preoccupied with the decline of religion. Not only that they were rationalists, reason being the only source of knowledge meant denying knowledge can

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruthven(2004) pp.195

<sup>2</sup> ibid. pp.197

<sup>3</sup> Aldridge (2007) pp.100

come through divine revelation. Auguste Comte set out a theory of the evolution of society and human understanding, 'the law of three stages'. In the *theological* stage, phenomena are explained as the actions of supernatural beings with societal power in the priesthood and military. The *metaphysical* stage is transitional, however religion as it is conventionally known is gradually displaced. The *positive* stage, explanations are liberated from religion and metaphysics to become truly scientific. For Comte religion fails as a system for understanding the world. Karl Marx, who was an atheist, famously declared 'religion is the opium of the people'. For Marx religion acts as a painkiller. The ruling classes cynically promote religion to keep the masses in order, and the masses turn to religion to relieve their burden. Religion will whither away when the conditions that give rise to it are eliminated. Emile Durkheim stressed religion's positive impact on the individual and its function in building social cohesion. Durkheim was looking for a middle way. He believed society would always need religion, and that religion in the future would celebrate individualism. Religion might therefore retain its symbolic role leaving the understanding of the world to science. For Max Weber, the process of modernization, including rationalization, makes traditional authority structures obsolete and pushes charismatic systems of domination to the margins of society. Weber proposes a link between Calvinism and capitalism that also implies that contemporary societies have moved beyond the stage of dependence on religion. Like Durkheim who wishes to see a future for religion, Weber's diagnosis of contemporary society without religion is rather pessimistic.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the ideas of the classical theorists can be found in elements of contemporary secularization theory. The major themes of secularization theory include: the decline of the community; the marginalisation of charisma; pluralisation; relativism and consumer choice and reason, rationality and science. All of which have resulted in the declining importance of religion within Western societies. Wilson defines secularization as 'the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance'<sup>5</sup> Debates about secularization tend to focus on the evidence for and against the social process to which it refers rather than on the meaning of the term itself.

Secularization theorists look to certain tendencies with regard to the role, power and popularity of religious beliefs and institutions. The differentiation of religion and politics, as well as a functional overlap in which politics provides a functional alternative to religion, have seen a transition from society of religion to that of politics. According to

---

<sup>4</sup> Aldridge (2007)

<sup>5</sup> ibid. pp.81

David Martin, 'Differentiation is much accelerated in modern industrial societies...it denoted the process whereby each social sector becomes specialized ...in the case of family and religion the effect of specialization is sometimes regarded as a loss of function'<sup>6</sup> Similarly Wilson, following the line of thought emanating from Durkheim , argues that religion draws its strength from the community. As the society rather than the community has become the locus of the individual's life, religion has lost its function.

Others point to the persuasive power of science and technology. This is not necessarily a direct clash of factual claims, rather assumptions about the orderliness of the world and our mastery over it. As Berger and Kellener would argue 'modern technology brings with it a "technological consciousness", a certain style of thought that is difficult to reconcile with a sense of the sacred'<sup>7</sup>According Steve Bruce, one of the most potent and neglected parts of the secularization paradigm is relativism. The tolerance that is necessary in diverse egalitarian societies weakens religion as it weakens other forms of knowledge and codes of behaviour. Religion is undermined by the general relativism that supposes that all ideals are true. According to Bruce 'the bottom line is this: individualism, diversity and egalitarianism in the context of liberal democracy undermine the authority of religious beliefs'.<sup>8</sup> The church itself has retired to the level of culture, European church attendance levels are undeniably in decline. The parish has been reconstructed and the role of the priest or minister has been adapted in many ways perspectives have been infiltrated by a variety of humanistic personalism.<sup>9</sup>

Aside from analysing church attendance figures, the degree of secularization within society can be somewhat difficult to Asses. One critique of the secularization thesis often follows this line of argument. Grace Davie is one such sociologist who argues for the persistence of the sacred despite declining numbers of churchgoers coining the perhaps overused term 'believing without belonging'. However critics of Davie argue that that belief itself is becoming more diffuse and individualistic.

Modernity and post-enlightenment thought patterns may have led to a decline in religious observance across Europe. However social development and religious history are far more complex as the above arguments and their counter arguments demonstrate. Secularization theorists themselves have admitted the there are counter trends that can prevent secularization. Steve Bruce, a secularization theorist himself,

---

<sup>6</sup> Martin (2007)pp.69

<sup>7</sup> Bruce (2002) pp.28

<sup>8</sup> ibid. pp.30

<sup>9</sup> Martin (2007) pp.171

notes that 'the secularizing impact of diversity depends to a very great extent on an egalitarian culture and democratic polity' and that,

'the secularization story is an attempt to explain an historical and geographically specific cluster of changes, it is an account of what has happened to religion in Western Europe... the secularization paradigm does not imply that the changes it describes and explains are inevitable'.<sup>10</sup>

The Paradigm was not intended as a universal model, a point that Bruce believes many critics of the secularization paradigm have missed. The fact that the secularization trend in many ways has only really taken hold in Western Europe leads me to conclude that religious revivalism is a more widespread trend of our time. Not only is there evidence of a global religious revival, there is also significant evidence of religious revival within the context of modernization and in Western societies. According to Samuel Huntington,

'In the first half of the twentieth century intellectual elites generally assumed that economic and social modernization was leading to the withering away of religion as a significant element in human existence. This assumption was shared by both those who welcomed and those who deplored this trend...The second half of the twentieth century proved these hopes and fears to be unfounded. Economic and social modernization became global in scale, and at the same time a global revival of religion occurred...This revival, has pervaded every continent, every civilization, and virtually every country.'<sup>11</sup>

One particular problem that the secularization theorists have to contend with is that theories that seem to work well in Europe perform badly when tested in the United States. The religiosity of the United States certainly presents a problem for those who would argue that secularization is the most widespread trend of our time, given its size, socio-economic, and international political importance. The vitality of religion in the United States has not been brushed aside by secularization theorists such as David Martin, instead Martin points to the fact that 'it represents a very high degree of differentiation in that church is formally separated from the state... and yet over all social order is legitimated by a pervasive civil religion' and that 'this explicit separation of church from state enables a pluralistic religion-in-general',<sup>12</sup> that leads to higher levels of legitimization that have taken on a modern character. While Martin may try paint the United States as an anomaly, others such as Hadden and Shuppe have pointed to the

---

<sup>10</sup> Bruce (2002) pp.37

<sup>11</sup> Huntington (1997) pp.95-96

<sup>12</sup> Martin (2004) pp.70

fact that religious diversity and pluralism have created a religious market place, and that competition has benefited religion as the supply side. Hadden and Shupe look at the impact of television evangelism and the counterculture of Asian faiths as evidence that the competitive market place in the United States has led to high levels of rank-and-file participation in religious organisations. Rather than painting the United States as the anomaly Aldridge suggests 'contra to the secularization thesis, a similar revival of religious participation would happen in Europe if the state withdrew its subsidies, forcing religious organizations into competition for customers.'<sup>13</sup>

Aside from the evidence of a booming religiosity in the United States sociologists, such as Philip Jenkins, have suggested that the religious landscape even within Europe casts doubt on the secularization thesis. Jenkins assesses the impact that the spread of Islam throughout Europe, as a result of immigration, is having on the religious landscape. Jenkins states that 'in fact both Christianity and Islam face real difficulties in surviving within Europe's secular cultural ambience. But instead of fading away, both have adopted to eurosecularity (to use Peter Berger's term), and they are continuing to adapt.'<sup>14</sup> Jenkins suggests that since the fall of Communism Christianity within Eastern Europe is showing signs of a revival. Similarly Jenkins makes the point that many of those accounts of the collapse of religiosity in Europe have neglected the growth of immigrant churches, not only has immigration resulted in the growth of Islam in Western Europe, Christianity has benefited from an upsurge in religiously active immigrants. Jenkins also makes the point that Christian churches have 'learned to accommodate themselves to the world of post Christendom...they are coming to appreciate the virtues of minority status'<sup>15</sup>, Christian movements have through their adaption process begun to confront the forces driving secularization and using those forces for evangelistic purposes. Political leaders who are more often unwilling to recognize the existence of religion in Europe, have through attempts to accommodate Islam, unwittingly revived a series of issues that will affect Christianity as well. Religion in Europe is not fading away and settling down to a happy accommodation with secularism.

One of the most significant arguments to support the claim that religious revival is the most widespread trends of our time is that of the Islamic Resurgence. Sammuel Huntington notes that the Islamic Resurgence is so significant a feature of the

---

<sup>13</sup> Aldridge (2007) pp.116

<sup>14</sup> Jenkins (2007) pp.3

<sup>15</sup> ibid. pp.69

contemporary world that 'Resurgence' should be capitalized in the same way that 'Revolution' and 'Reformation' have been historically.<sup>16</sup> Ernest Gellner stated that 'no secularisation has taken place in the world of Islam... Islam is secularization-resistant'<sup>17</sup>. renewed vitality of Islam is one of the most important forces in even the most modernized society. This being so Modernization has not inevitably led to the end of religion as a major force. Many commentators have discussed the renewed vitality of Islam not just across the Islamic world but also throughout the world, where Islam has taken the shape of an ethnic Identity marker. Obert Voll discusses how in the decade following the Iranian Revolution revival of activist Islam moved from the periphery into the political mainstream. Voll also points to the globalisation of the 'return to religion', how the Islamic religious resurgence has normalized, and how it is not an isolated phenomenon but a global one. The global Islamic resurgence is in many ways a dynamic response to the modern historic transformations. As such the resurgence of Islam casts serious doubt on assumptions that modernity involves the decline of religion. Attempts at secularism across the Muslim world, such as Arab nationalism or Arab Socialism, failed. Within that failure Islamic movements burgeoned, as the cultural reaction to alien theories that failed took hold. Many such movements became militant in their Islamic activism. Islamic Fundamentalism, for want of a better and less value-ladden term, became a significant feature of the contemporary world, globally.

The Islamic Resurgence and the rise of religious fundamentalisms are certainly to some extent linked, although religious fundamentalism is not an entirely Islamic phenomenon. Fundamentalisms, according the M Ruthven, are a distinctly modern phenomenon, and as such are an integral part of the recent revival of religion<sup>18</sup>. The Secularization thesis has failed. Secular forces contained the seeds of a reaction that brings religion back as dominant force in society. That reaction has manifested itself in the phenomenon of 'global fundamentalism', 'now manifested on a truly global scale, the astonishing power of religious fundamentalism became undeniable, even within the policymaking circles accustomed to formulating secular explanations for a range of actions'.<sup>19</sup> What is particularly damaging to the secularization theory is the fact that fundamentalisms have emerged in the wake of the success of modernization and the scientific revolution. One key observation regarding the globalisation and the tenacity of fundamentalism as a counter reaction to secularization is that 'while understandings of, and reactions

---

<sup>16</sup> Huntington (1997) pp.109

<sup>17</sup> Vol (1994) pp.290

<sup>18</sup> Ruthven. (2004)

<sup>19</sup> Almond, Appleby & Sivan (2003) pp.2

against, secularization may vary, however, fundamentalists across religious traditions and regions of the world share an animus against political cultures that would deny religion what they feel to be its central place in ordering society.<sup>20</sup>

Several of the critiques of secularization theory itself can be used to argue the case that religious revival is the most widespread trend of our time. However it is not solely the apparent flaws in the secularization theory that show this to be the case, many other observable global trends compliment and embolden such a statement. The secularization theory has in many respects been found wanting. The theorists themselves admit to the ethnocentricity of the secularization theory. The fact that secularization may in fact only be the dominant trend in a relatively small region of the world is evidence on its own to suggest that secularization is not the most widespread trend. The strong religiosity in the United States, is another key feature that casts doubt on the secularization theory, modernization has not inevitably led to the decline of religion. In the Islamic world the 'Islamic Resurgence' is a strong indicator that religious revival is a widespread trend. The revival within Islam has stretched out across the globe and in many places has sparked a counter reaction within other religious traditions that it encounters. This strongly links into the point that some commentators have made with regard to the prominence of religion, or even the revival of religion as an ethnic identity marker. Religion can potentially be revived as a tool for mobilization or for community cohesion purposes. Religious resurgence is not purely an Islamic phenomenon the growth of the Pentecostal movement in Latin America, Evangelical churches in the United States, or the Alpha course in the United Kingdom are all possible example of how Christianity too has produced a counter reaction to the secularizing forces. Religious resurgence or revival is on a global scale, whereas secularization is largely ethnocentric. Even within the secularized world there are significant indications that religion has staying power. As Islam is making a significant impact on Western societies, Christianity is arguably showing signs of resurrection. Religious revival is the most widespread trend of our time, the causes of most aspects of the revival being precisely what is supposed to have caused its death, modernization. Religion is meeting the needs of the disruption to identity and authority that followed modernization. Like the advent of religious Fundamentalism the contemporary religious revival of all guises is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Unlike Secularization however religious revival is not dependent on modernization and is therefore also a phenomenon taking hold

---

<sup>20</sup> ibid pp.19

outside of the modernized world. God is not necessarily dead, perhaps however the secularization theory is.

### Bibliography

Aldridge, Alan. (2007) 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 'Religion in the Contemporary World' (UK-USA: Polity Press)

Almond, Gabriel. A. & Appleby, R. Scott & Sivan, Emmanuel (2003) 'Strong Religion: the rise of fundamentalisms around the world' (Chicago:Chicago University Press)

Ayubi, N. (1980) 'The Political Revival of Islam- The Case of Egypt', International journal of Middle East Studies, Vol.12, No.4, pp.481-499

Bruce, Steve. (2002) 'God is Dead' (Oxford:Blackwell)

Huntington, Samuel.P. (1997) 'The Clash of Civilizations And The Remaking Of World Order' (Great Britain: Simon & Schuster)

Jenkins, Philip. (2007) 'God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's religious crisis' (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press)

Kepel, Gilles (2008), 'Jihad: the trail of political Islam' (UK: Tauris & Co. Ltd.)

Lawrence, Bruce, B. (1990) 'Defenders of God: the fundamentalist revolt against the modern age' (UK:Tauris)

Martin, David. (1993) 'A General Theory of Secularization' (Aldershot: Gregg Revivals)

Ruthven, Malise (2004) 'Fundamentalism: the search for meaning' (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Vol, John, Obert (1994) 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn. 'Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World' (New York: Syracuse University Press)