



New Beliefs in a Secular Society

The word 'secular' means non-religious. It is believed by many that religious beliefs are becoming less believable and less appealing to those who might once have believed, and religion is therefore of declining importance both in society and for the individual. Secularisation is an extremely contested concept – what is it, how is it measured and is it actually occurring?

Data on traditional religious beliefs and religious behaviour was collected by the British Social Attitudes (BSA) 2015 survey. It focused on religious affiliation, religion of upbringing and religious attendance. The table shows how these have changed over time:

Affiliation	1983 (%)	2015 (%)
Church of England	40	17
Roman Catholic	10	9
Other Christian	17	17
Other religion	2	8
No religion	31	49
Religion of upbringing	1991 (%)	2015 (%)
Church of England	55	29
Roman Catholic	14	14
Other Christian	22	28
Other religion	3	9
No religion	6	20
Attendance	1983 (%)	2015 (%)
Once a month or more often	21	18
Less often than once a month	22	17
Never attends	56	65

Source: BSA 1983 and 2015 surveys
(Percentages have been rounded and may not add up to 100)

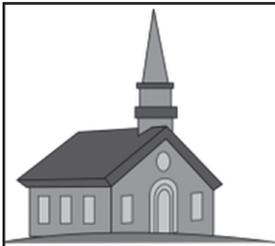
Activity: Analyse the data above. Summarise, using examples, of what it shows about religious beliefs and behaviour. Can you explain the patterns you have identified?

Key Term: Secularisation Defined by Wilson as 'the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance.'

The information in this Factsheet will be useful for answering questions on religion and secularisation as well as using the statistics as evidence when studying research methods.

Are traditional religious beliefs in decline?

It appears that traditional religion is in decline for a number of reasons:

<p>The church has less power in society today</p> 	<p>In the past, the church was very powerful, being a major employer, teaching people to read, providing information, teaching crafts, etc. Today, the power, prestige and the influence of religious bodies have shrunk. The role of the church has now been taken over by other institutions, e.g. education, media, welfare state, etc.</p>				
<p>There has been a decline in religious beliefs</p>	<p>People's thinking and attitudes are no longer based on religious beliefs due to the development of scientific explanations.</p>				
<p>Religious practices</p> 	<p>Religious practices have declined, Church membership, church attendance, church marriages, funerals and christenings have all declined.</p> <p>UK church membersip:</p> <table style="margin-left: auto; margin-right: auto;"> <tr> <td>1930</td> <td>2010</td> </tr> <tr> <td>10.6 million</td> <td>5.5 million</td> </tr> </table>	1930	2010	10.6 million	5.5 million
1930	2010				
10.6 million	5.5 million				
<p>Changes in society</p>	<p>Over the last decade, it has been increasingly possible to shop and buy alcohol on Sundays – something that was inconceivable in the 19th century.</p>				

However, there are various problems with measuring religious beliefs and behaviour:

- Historical records about the strength of religion in the past are sparse.
- Data collection methods weren't as reliable and didn't use sophisticated survey methods that would be used today.
- There were no opinion polls or interviewers carrying out surveys about whether people believed in God or not.
- Statistics on religious practice are difficult to interpret – what counts as practicing a religion?
- Different denominations use different criteria of membership – statistics may be showing different things.
- Are people always honest about their religious beliefs and behaviour?

184. New Beliefs in a Secular Society

Activity: Statistics are produced for many different areas of society from church attendance to crime rates to birth and death rates. Complete the activity below:

1. Make a list of different areas of society that are measured by statistics
2. List the advantages and disadvantages of using statistics in sociology

Advantages	Disadvantages

Exam Hint: It is important to know the advantages and disadvantages of using statistics because these can be used as a way of evaluating statistics within different topic areas such as secularisation. You can also use them as evidence when answering questions on research methods.

Despite statistics showing that traditional religious beliefs are in decline, there does seem to be evidence that non-traditional beliefs are still important in the lives of many people. Are non-traditional beliefs – such as believing in telepathy, ghosts, horoscopes and superstitions becoming more commonly accepted?



Clements (2014) used survey data for non-traditional beliefs from the 1940s up to the twenty-first century and tracked the changes in these beliefs over time.

Percentages of people holding non-traditional beliefs:

Belief	1940s-50s	1970s	1980s	1990s
Foretelling the future	-	48	54	47
Horoscopes	-	23	26	26
Ghosts	15	19	28	32
Lucky charms	-	17	19	18
Black magic	-	11	13	10
Contacting the dead	15	11	14	14

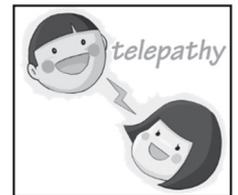
Source: Gill (2003)
(averaged figures across surveys undertaken in each decade or pair of decades)

It is clear that, across time, belief has been highest in foretelling the future. Belief in ghosts has also risen over time, whereas the other beliefs have remained reasonably consistent.

Activity: What else does the table above show about non-traditional beliefs across time?

Is there a relationship between traditional religious beliefs and these non-traditional beliefs?

- The 2008 British Social Attitudes survey asked about beliefs in the supernatural powers of ancestors. It found that 19% of those surveyed believed in supernatural powers.
- Interestingly, Catholics (26%) and those belonging to non-Christian religions (27%) were more likely to express this belief, while those with no religion were least likely to express this belief (17%).
- In the 1999 European Values Study, a question was asked about belief in telepathy. It was found that there was some variation in belief in telepathy across social and religious groups.
- Anglicans (39%) and members of non-Christian faiths (36%) were most likely to believe in telepathy; the 'other Christian' groupings were least likely (29%).
- Interestingly, for both telepathy and supernatural powers of ancestors there was a consistent pattern. Those holding religious beliefs were more likely to express a belief in telepathy and believe in supernatural powers.



Belief	Response	British Attitude Survey 2008 Supernatural Powers (%)	European Values Study 1999 Telepathy (%)
Heaven	Yes	31	40
	No	10	33
Hell	Yes	33	42
	No	14	33
Life after death	Yes	34	49
	No	5	23

Activity: Summarise what these statistics show about the relationship between traditional and non-traditional beliefs.

Research into religion and spirituality in early post-war Britain documented the co-existence of both traditional and non-traditional beliefs within individual belief systems. This certainly still seems to be the case. Rice (2003) quotes 'in modern societies where individuals are less likely to be socialised into and shaped during their lives by traditional religious structures and precepts, and are more willing and able to pick and mix from an eclectic range of beliefs 'cafeteria style.' There has been both change and continuity in levels of non-traditional religious belief within an increasingly secular society. Religious people seem to be more likely to believe in supernatural powers and telepathy than religious non-believers.

Exam Focus: You need to be aware of the secularisation debate to answer short questions in the exam as well as essay questions. An example of an essay question could be:

"Critically examine the nature and extent of secularisation in the world today."

This would give you the opportunity to discuss the secularisation debate, but within this you could use the information in this Factsheet to show the continued importance of non-traditional religion in people's lives.

Acknowledgements: This Sociology Factsheet was researched and written by Rosie Owens and published in September 2017 by Curriculum Press. ISSN 1351-5136