

WHAT HAS CAUSED EUROPE TO BE THE “EXCEPTIONAL CASE” REGARDING SECULARISATION?

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1 Introduction

European countries show a downward trend in religious indicators, and are seen by many sociologists to be “secularising”. However, a broader perspective shows that the rest of the world, including other advanced countries such as the US and Korea are “as furiously religious as ever”.¹ We evaluate sociological explanations for “exceptional” secularisation in Europe.

2 What is secularisation – what do the indicators show?

A first difficulty in addressing the question is that sociologists have varying definitions of “secularisation”. First, it can be a decline in political influence of the church that remains consistent with unchanged activity or faith indicators. Second, there may be focus on indicators of religious activity, such as church attendance. Third, researchers may study faith indicators such as belief in God and the supernatural. Differing indicators may give conflicting answers, and hence may blur the comparability of arguments for secularisation.

As regards outturns, it is clear that political influence of the church in Europe has declined. Furthermore, institutional indicators such as churchgoing also show a decline, while the more “numinous” faith indicators show a degree of resilience.² There remain, however, important differences across Europe, for example institutional indicators are at much higher levels in Catholic than mixed or Protestant countries. Equally, in each country, there is a lower level of both activity and faith for the young, for men and for working class people.

¹ Berger, ‘Desecularisation’, 2.

² Davie, ‘Exception’, 68. Bruce, ‘Demise’, 55 argues that there is also a decline in beliefs, at least in the UK, while the decline in activity has been much greater for liberal than conservative churches.

What constitutes the puzzle is that all three indicators are at high and often rising levels in the US.³ There is a strong political influence of the religious (“the moral majority”), while church attendance is high with no downtrend, and faith indicators show virtually unanimous belief in God.⁴ This is also true in developing countries and Korea. Furthermore, recent global movements such as resurgence of Catholicism, global Pentecostalism and Fundamentalism, apparent in the US, Korea and the developing countries, have not been evident in Europe.

3 Modernisation and secularisation

The traditional approach to explaining the European situation is that modernity, which developed first in Europe, is directly linked to secularisation. The rest of the world will catch up when it reaches Europe’s level of development.

Modernity, beginning at the time of the Reformation, engendered in particular individualism (linked to individuals’ freedom from mediation by the church, and later to democracy) and rationality (linked to innovative ways of thinking, and later industrial modes of production). The former “threatened the communal basis of religious belief” while the latter “removed many of the purposes of religion and made many of its beliefs implausible”.⁵ Toleration, required by individualism, entails relativism, which it is suggested leads people to reject the plausibility of all religious truth claims.⁶ Technological development enables modern man to understand and control the world without reference to a creator, also reducing social roles for the clergy (e.g. in ministering to the sick).

³ For example, 40% of Americans declare that they attend church weekly, and 90% believe in God (Davie, *Exceptional*, 28), compared to 21% and 77% in Europe (Davie, *Exceptional*, 6-7).

⁴ Stark and Iannacone, ‘Supply’, 249 quote a figure of 65% for membership of a specific church congregation. which is fairly stable.

⁵ Bruce, *Modern*, 230. Note the link to Weber’s view that rationalisation leads to a decline in religion since rational-bureaucratic structures do not need religious legitimation (Aldridge, *Contemporary*, 68).

⁶ Bruce, *Dead*, 30.

Due to all these factors, the so-called “sacred canopy” of shared religious belief was dissolved by modernity. In sociological terms, a “church” dominating the national life (as well as close-knit sects) ceased to be viable. Religious activity shifted to “denominations” with only relative truth claims, and unable to sustain member commitment in a modern environment, or “cults” such as the New Age movement which are typically seen as a transient consumerist phenomenon.⁷ Religious activity and belief declined as a consequence – many people today are indifferent to God.

Whereas this argument could explain the difference between Europe and developing countries, the difficulty for this approach is that the US and East Asia remain highly religious despite modernity and consequent individualism and rationality. In the US, Warner highlights a “zero order correlation between church membership and industrialisation”.⁸ Furthermore, it is the conservative religious communities that are most unwilling to adapt to the modern world (e.g. by dropping belief in miracles), that are most successful.⁹ The international highly-educated cultural elite may generalise their lack of faith to the rest of the population.¹⁰ US churches were flexible and better able to cope with urbanisation than European ones,¹¹ a factor not allowed for in modernisation theory.

The traditional approach’s response is to suggest that Europe’s “exceptionality” at present is an illusion caused by special factors in the US such as ongoing waves of immigration, that have boosted religious activity,¹² or that in the US, religious activity is a social duty not accompanied by religious faith.¹³ Alternatively, the data are reinterpreted to minimise the

⁷ Bruce, ‘Demise’, 58.

⁸ Warner, *Work*, 1050.

⁹ Berger, ‘Desecularisation’, 4. He notes that one explanation could be that fundamentalism gives answers to the uncertainty generated by modernity. Possibly this point can help explain “exceptionalism” if on average European churches are more liberal than US ones, as is plausible.

¹⁰ Berger, ‘Desecularisation’, 10.

¹¹ Davie, *Exceptional*, 142.

¹² Aldridge, *Contemporary*, 84-85.

¹³ Wilson, *Secular*, 126.

differences between Europe and the US. Or, the paradigm is changed in the light of evidence of ongoing religious belief in Europe to redefine secularisation as purely relating to religious activity.¹⁴

4 Rational choice theory (RCT)

RCT uses a variant on the economics of market supply and demand to characterise social behaviour. Individuals seek to maximise the excess of benefit over cost from any activity including religion. Firms (i.e. churches) seek to attract and retain adherents.

According to this view, the traditional approach summarised above asserts that secularisation reflects declining *demand* for religion (in Europe) owing to modernisation. However, RCT's proponents deny that demand is highly variable; the demand for answers to fundamental questions of life and eternity are basic to the human condition, and this is supported by surveys showing a continuing interest in these, and indeed belief in God, even in Europe.¹⁵

Accordingly, the approach focuses on the *supply* side, and maintains that in Europe the churches have typically been in a monopoly position,¹⁶ with little competition either due to suppression (in the past) or subsidies for the dominant church (in the present). A monopoly position makes a church indolent and unwilling actively to seek adherents.

In contrast, the US is considered to have a highly competitive religious market, owing to lack of special support for any individual church or denomination. This makes for intense competition and vigorous marketing among suppliers of religious services, which attracts adherents. Furthermore, it makes for a wide variety of types of service, which allows each

¹⁴ Stark and Finke, *Acts*, 60-61.

¹⁵ See for example, Davie, *Exceptional*, 7.

¹⁶ Chaves and Cann, 'Regulation', 280.

individual to find one attractive to them, which would not be the case with a single “standard” service more typical of a monopoly church. Note that this suggests pluralism is positive for religion, in contrast to the traditional view that it weakens it.

Even where a monopoly is ended, there may be a lag between deregulation of the monopoly church, so-called desacralisation, and sufficient pluralism to increase participation, and RCT suggests this helps explain low participation in Europe. This may be due for example to cultural inertia – as in Spain where full deregulation of Protestant churches only occurred in 1992.¹⁷ Some countries such as Sweden remain relatively monopolised, owing to the prevalence of church taxes to finance the Lutheran church.¹⁸

In testing the approach, its proponents use regression techniques as well as verbal arguments. Iannacone¹⁹ shows that for 14 European countries, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, there is a close statistical fit between church attendance and “market concentration”, i.e. the degree of dominance by one church, with the US being close to the regression line. Other results were that regulation favouring a dominant church is inversely related to attendance, while the commitment of Catholics is inversely linked to the share of Catholics in the population (reflecting its dominant position). All of these lend support to the argument that supply-side factors cause Europe to be an “exceptional case”.

A weakness is that RCT does not appear to “fit” the high level of religious faith in Europe in pre-modern times, when there was no free market in ideas. This underpins the traditional approach. RCT proponents argue that the decline is an illusion caused by exaggerating past

¹⁷ Stark and Iannacone, ‘Supply’, 235-6.

¹⁸ Despite this, the minority free churches are active, and despite having only 10% of the population as members has the majority of churchgoers on most Sundays, in line with RCT (Stark and Iannacone, ‘Supply’, 238).

¹⁹ Iannacone, ‘Structure’, cited in Stark and Iannacone, ‘Supply’, 239.

piety.²⁰ Furthermore, Bruce argues that in Britain there has been religious competition since the Reformation, which has since the 19th century not been obstructed by subsidy or suppression.²¹ There have long been alternatives to the state church, and also active attempts by state church clergy to seek adherents. He argues that this evidence of an active supply side invalidates RCT, and favours the demand side explanation based on modernisation cited in Section 3.

5 Vicarious religion in Europe

A third approach sees religion as a specific mode of believing, in the context of a community and a historical tradition. Secularisation implies becoming less and less able to retain the “collective memory” of such beliefs.²² In this context, Europe is special owing to its history of state-church linkage, in a manner that persists even though the traditional linkages are weakened today. The US has, of course, no such tradition, with state and church being separated from the outset of independence. The consequence of this history is a different attitude to religion, whereby Europeans regard their churches as a form of “public utility” like the health service, to be available in time of personal and national need²³ but not to be patronised on a regular basis. The population at large nevertheless considers it a “good thing” that some people attend church, to maintain the “collective memory” for such times of need and to ground the society in biblical morality, which Davie calls “vicarious religion”. This is akin to the monopoly concept of RCT, but allows for declining activity also due to modernisation and a form of historical path dependence.

²⁰ See the debate on data in Bruce, ‘Truth’, 421-422 and Stark and Iannacone, ‘Supply’, 243.

²¹ Bruce, ‘Truth’, 426-427.

²² Davie, *Exceptional*, 18.

²³ Davie, ‘Exception’, 68.

These suggestions are consistent with survey evidence showing Europeans to continue to believe in God despite low levels of church attendance,²⁴ leading to an “unchurched” rather than “secularised” society, contrary to modernisation theory. Equally, as noted, Europeans do not appear to choose in the way Americans do, contrary to predictions of RCT.

The theory explains European exceptionalism in terms of historical development of vicarious religion. Given American history with no state-church links, faith in God is expressed there in attending church. Americans cannot see churches as public utilities as they are all congregation- rather than state-supported, and “voluntarism” and choice are hence essential features.

6 Did European churches become “historically discredited”?

Casanova argues that the modernity hypothesis is put in excessively general terms. Empirically, cross country studies show that modernity does entail a decline in church influence in the sense of “emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions”²⁵ but not a decline in adherence or belief or even a public role for churches. For example the church led the Solidarity revolution in Poland, while Protestant fundamentalism is an ongoing force in US politics, in what he calls “deprivatisation”. Casanova attributes (Western) European exceptionalism to the resistance of state churches to the structural differentiation of church and state. For example the resistance of the Spanish church to modern economic and political life have triggered public disenchantment and a decline in religious practice there.

²⁴ Davie, *Exceptional*, 5.

²⁵ Casanova, *Public*, 212.

Complementing this, Martin²⁶ highlights the markedly different patterns even in European countries, implying there is nothing inevitable about secularisation. The Europe/US difference is again seen as a consequence of different histories. The European churches that were discredited during the struggles between churches and secular forces in the early modern era, that are not paralleled elsewhere. Furthermore, the state churches, unlike those in the US, were not adapted to the industrial cities that grew in the 19th century. US experience shows that religion separated from the state becomes popular and adaptable.

7 Conclusion

In explaining European “exceptionalism”, we contend that the most convincing sociological resolution is in the form of vicarious religion and historical path dependence of countries (or Continents). There may be “multiple modernities” with countries on different, parallel trajectories and hence levels of secularisation, but leaving in all cases space for religion and religious innovation.²⁷ That said, insights of RCT (regarding religious competition) and modernisation theory (on the impact of individualism and rationality) are also relevant. We would also suggest that secularisation is more likely in societies where economic and political uncertainty are minimised, for example by an extensive welfare state, present in Europe but not elsewhere. This strand seems to be relatively neglected by the existing theories and could merit further consideration, not least given the upcoming threat to welfare states from “ageing of the population”.

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²⁶ Cited in Hamilton, *Sociology*, 182.

²⁷ Davie, *Exceptional*, 158-159.

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