CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

Part I

Introduction

© in this web service Cambridge University Press

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

1

The Surprising (at Least to Some) Persistence of Religion

1.1 Introduction

For more than twenty-five years the theoretical physicist, John Polkinghorne, taught mathematical physics at the University of Cambridge, where he explored the finer details of quantum theory and played a role in discovering the quark (Polkinghorne 2002; Wikipedia 2016b). He also spent time at Princeton, Berkeley, Stanford, and the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN). In recognition of his work, in 1974 he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, commonly known as "The Royal Society" and probably the oldest and most prestigious scientific society in the world.[1] Then, in 1979 he stunned many of his scientific colleagues when he resigned his position in order to study theology. After he was ordained into the Anglican priesthood, he served as a curate (assistant pastor) in Bristol, a vicar (head pastor) in Blean (Canterbury), and finally as the Dean of Trinity Hall Chapel in Cambridge (Wikipedia 2016b). However, he is probably best known for his work as a theologian, specifically, his writings on the intersection of science and religion (Polkinghorne 1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1998, 2003, 2011).

Polkinghorne's religious faith may strike some as an anomaly, but it is not. Religious belief among scientists is greater than many realize (Iannaccone, Stark, and Finke 1998; Ecklund and Scheitle 2007; Gross and Solon 2009), a fact not lost on the late evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould, who once remarked, "Either half my colleagues are enormously stupid, or else the science of Darwinism is fully compatible with conventional religious beliefs – and equally compatible with atheism" (Gould 1992:118). Nevertheless, for years many social scientists believed that science and religion were incompatible and assumed that as societies become increasingly scientific (e.g., more education, technology,

[1] See https://royalsociety.org.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

democracy, etc.), they would become increasingly secularized and religious devotion would decline. Some, such as the anthropologist Anthony Wallace (1966), believed religion would disappear completely. Others, such as the sociologists Peter Berger (1967, 1969), a Lutheran, and Robert Bellah (1967), an Episcopalian, saw religion as declining in importance but not disappearing altogether. In particular, they saw more sectarian forms of religion (e.g., the beliefs and practices of groups such as evangelical Protestants, conservative Catholics, and Orthodox Jews) as only surviving in society's backwaters, far removed from the corrosive effects of Harvey Cox's secular city (1966), whereas more generalized and inclusive forms (e.g., mainline Protestantism, Reform Judaism) would become increasingly influential or at least hold their own.

That has not happened. Although mainline Protestantism is in decline (Kelley 1972; Campolo 1995; Finke and Stark 2005; Putnam and Campbell 2010), sectarian forms of religion continue to thrive (Smith et al. 1998; Johnson 2011), not only in rural areas, but also in cities (Neitz 1987; Smith et al. 1998). Moreover, although religious belief and practice has declined in the West (Franck and Iannaccone 2014), in other parts of the world it appears to be on the rise (Maoz and Henderson 2013; Stark 2015) and is unlikely to disappear any time soon (see, e.g., Berger 1999; Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009; Stark 1999; Atran 2010; Barrett 2011; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011; Fox 2015). Christianity is growing rapidly in the global South (Jenkins 2006), Russia has experienced a religious revival (Greeley 1994; Froese 2008), and Christians now outnumber communists in China (*The Economist* 2014). To be sure, Europe remains the poster child of secularization, and in recent years there has been an increase in the proportion of Americans who report no religious affiliation (religious "nones") (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012). However, it is unlikely that Europe was ever as religious as many assume it to have been (Strauss 1975; Thomas 1991 [1973]; Greeley 1993; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Butler 2010), and of the approximately 20 percent of Americans who in 2012 reported no religious affiliation, 18 percent considered themselves religious, 30 percent had a religious or mystical experience, 33 percent believed that religion was somewhat or very important, 37 percent considered themselves spiritual but not religious, 41 percent prayed weekly or more, and 68 percent believed in God. It may be difficult to categorize such individuals, but "irreligious" and "secular" they are not.[2] Unchurched is not the same as irreligious. Moreover, these numbers do not reflect religious nones who hold paranormal beliefs (Bader, Baker, and Mencken 2017). According to

[2] Baker and Smith (2015) break the religiously unaffiliated into three broad categories: nonaffiliated believers (11 percent), agnostics (6 percent), and atheists (3 percent). To this they add a fourth category: culturally religious (8 percent), namely those who claim a religious affiliation but rarely if ever attend religious services.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

the *2014 Chapman Survey of American Fears*,[3] 70.06 percent believe in at least one of the following: (1) fortune tellers can foresee the future, (2) astrology impacts their life and personality, (3) houses can be haunted, and (4) dreams can foretell the future.

Religion's surprising persistence has led many social scientists of religion to rethink much of the received wisdom concerning religion's demise, and this chapter provides an overview of some (but not all) of the current thinking regarding the role of religion in modern society. It begins with a summary of recent challenges to the standard secularization story. It then discusses three theoretical traditions that have emerged out of this new paradigm: religion as rational choice, the religious economies model, and subcultural identity theory. These, of course, do not exhaust all current social scientific theorizing about religious belief and practice. However, they have proven to be fairly influential, and as we will see in later chapters, they often draw on social network theories to explain religious outcomes. It is also important to note that they are not necessarily incompatible with one another. Social scientists often draw on more than one in explaining and exploring religious phenomena. Thus, while some of the advocates of these three theoretical traditions might be reluctant to admit it, the concepts and explanations of these theories are sometimes quite similar.

1.2 Empirical Anomalies

Western Europe's low religious attendance rates are often held up as evidence in support of increasing secularization. This, however, assumes that European attendance rates are substantially lower now than they were several centuries ago, a proposition that is highly debatable. Scholars are increasingly challenging the belief that medieval Europe was characterized by widespread religious devotion (Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Consider, for example, the fact that the Roman Catholic Church's Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 passed a series of reforms that sought to require that the laity confess and receive communion once a year. Not once a week. Not once a month. *But once a year*. It is unlikely that the Church would have passed such reforms if at the time Western Europe had been characterized by widespread piety (Greeley 1993). It was this lack of piety, in fact, that was one of the motivating forces lying behind the Protestant Reformation. However, in spite of the best efforts of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, and others, it appears that the Protestant Reformation had a limited impact. Sixty years after Luther

[3] The data are available for download at the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA): www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/CSAF2014.asp.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg door, visitations (i.e., inspections) of Lutheran parishes found that church attendance was poor and morals were worse. As one inspector reported:

> Those who do come to church walk out as the pastor begins his sermon. Parents withhold their children from catechism classes and refuse to pay school fees. Domestic servants leave their jobs rather than let themselves be sent to service. No wonder that blasphemy, fornication, adultery, drunkenness and gambling abounded . . . Churches are half empty while taverns are full.
>
> (Strauss 1975:49)

One pastor reported that he often left church without having preached the catechism because no one showed up to hear him, and in another village only 20 out of 150 parishioners regularly attended church (Strauss 1975:49). In Saxony there was such widespread contempt for the church that groups of men would gather just outside the church "to drink brandy and sing bawdy songs," while people, what there were of them, worshipped inside (Strauss 1975:50). Similarly, the parish of Liebe "could not produce a single parishioner who could correctly answer the question, 'Who is our redeemer?'" and when criticized, the local pastor denied he was to blame: "It's the people's fault . . . They don't go to church" (Strauss 1975:53). Other visitation reports "suggest that standards were little better in some Calvinist areas of Germany and in the Dutch Republic, as well as in much of rural England, Scotland, and Ireland" (Parker 1992: 45–46). The lack of devotion is even more stunning considering that many Lutheran countries passed laws making worship attendance mandatory (Stark 2017a).

Late medieval Britain is especially instructive. The British historian Keith Thomas (1991 [1973]:189) once noted "that the hold of orthodox religion upon the English people" was never complete:

> Indeed, it is problematical as to whether certain sections of the population at this time had any religion at all. Although complete statistics will never be obtainable, it can be confidently said that not all Tudor or Stuart Englishmen went to some kind of church, that many of those who did went with considerable reluctance, and that a certain proportion remained throughout their lives utterly ignorant of the elementary tenets of Christian dogma.
>
> (Thomas 1991 [1973]:189)

When people did show up, they often "jostled for pews, nudged their neighbors, hawked and spat, knitted, made coarse remarks, told jokes, fell asleep, and even let off guns" (Thomas 1991 [1973]:191). In Cambridge, a man "was charged with indecent behavior in church in 1598 after 'his most loathsome farting, striking, and scoffing speeches' had occasioned in

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

'the great offense of the good and the great rejoicing of the bad'" (Thomas 1991 [1973]:192). And although preaching was popular among the educated, it was not among the poor who, according to one report, headed straight for the alehouse when the preacher headed for the pulpit (Thomas 1991 [1973]:191). In fact, it is likely that the poorest classes never became regular church attendees (Thomas 1991 [1973]:190).

Eighteenth-century English church attendance rates tell a similar story. One visitation report indicates that in 1738, thirty parishes in Oxfordshire drew a combined total of 911 people at the four major Christian festivals – Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Christmas – less than 5 percent of the total population in those thirty parishes (Stark and Iannaccone 1994:243). Since it is likely that some parishioners attended more than a single festival, the actual attendance rate was probably even lower. Moreover, Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone (1994:243) found that although British church membership rate was lower in 1980 (15.2 percent) than it was in 1900 (18.6 percent), it was higher in 1980 than it was in 1800 (11.5 percent). To be sure, these rates are low when compared to current rates in the United States (discussed later in this chapter), but they are hardly evidence of a decline in British religious belief from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[4] Instead, they suggest a more nuanced story, one that recognizes that religious participation appears to fluctuate from time to time and place to place, and the task of social scientists is to uncover the underlying causes of these fluctuations.

Germany and England were not unique among European countries. Many medieval Europeans found Christian belief and practice unappealing (Greeley 1993). As the Yale historian, Jon Butler, notes:

> The European laity did not need the American wilderness to elicit waves of spiritual indifference. A third of Antwerp's adults failed to claim any religion in 1584; in France, if 90 percent of adults took Easter communion, only 2 to 5 percent attended mass weekly; in Hertfordshire in 1572, a reformer complained that on Sunday, "a man may find the churches empty, saving the minister and two or four lame, and old folke: for the rest are gone to follow the Devil's daunce."
>
> (Butler 2010:205)

[4] In September 2017, Britain's National Centre for Social Research reported that 53 percent of Britons claimed no religious affiliation. Some seized upon this to claim that unbelievers constituted more than half of the British population (see, e.g., Turner 2017). However, as in the American case, the absence of religious affiliation does not necessarily indicate someone is an unbeliever. In fact, a study released earlier in 2017 found that about 25 percent of Britain's religious nones say they pray, a similar percentage claims to be somewhat religious, and around 20 percent say they are open to the existence of God (*The Economist* 2017).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

Indeed, "surviving evidence indicates a widespread inability on the part of the reformers – not just in one, but in several different countries – to create an acceptably pious laity within the first century of the Reformation" (Parker 1992:51).

This is not to suggest that medieval Europeans were irreligious. They almost certainly were religious. Both Gerald Strauss (1975) and Keith Thomas (1991 [1973]) note that at different times and places, one could find pockets of individuals deeply committed to the Christian faith. Moreover, as the philosopher Charles Taylor (2007) has argued, they lived in an "enchanted" world that was populated by spirits, demons, and moral forces, and it is likely that the Christian God functioned as a unifying factor of those beliefs. However, "by the standards of orthodoxy and devotion we take for granted today . . . medieval Christians were not paragons of either orthodoxy or devotion" (Greeley 1993:15).

Medieval Europe is not the only piece of evidence that calls into question the standard secularization story. As noted earlier, worldwide religion appears to be on the upswing (Maoz and Henderson 2013; Stark 2015), and contemporary Russia and China are experiencing religious revivals (Greeley 1994; Froese 2008; *The Economist* 2014). What is perhaps more striking is that in the United States, a higher percentage of people are affiliated with communities of faith today than 200 years ago. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (2005:23) have documented that in 1776 the church adherence rate was approximately 17 percent, but by the mid-nineteenth century it had doubled, and by the late twentieth century (1980) it had risen to about 60 percent, a level at which it remained at least until 2000 (see Figure 1.1).[5]

Finke and Stark's findings are consistent with the Middletown (i.e., Muncie, Indiana) studies of the 1970s, which followed up on the early twentieth-century studies of Robert and Helen Lynd (1929, 1937).[6] Researchers discovered that religion had not declined, but

[5] Adherence rates differ from affiliation rates in that the latter includes anyone who claims affiliation with a particular church, mosque, synagogue, etc., while the former includes only members of faith communities. In calculating the adherence rate, Finke and Stark (2005) adjusted for denominations, such as Baptists, whose youth are not considered members until they make a profession of faith (often around the age of twelve). Readers may be curious about the "gap" between the reported affiliation rate (approximately 80 percent) and the adherence rate calculated by Finke and Stark (approximately 60 percent). The gap may capture the proportion of individuals who claim an affiliation but seldom, if ever, attend religious services. The fact that the gap has decreased in recent years (in 1990 it was closer to 30 percent – see Hout and Fischer 2014) may simply reflect the fact that individuals who rarely attend religious services are increasingly telling pollsters that they have no religious affiliation.

[6] The Lynds concluded that religious life in Muncie was "less pervasive than it was a generation before" (Lynd and Lynd 1929:407, cited in Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 2016:61) although "neither they nor anyone else had done research on the community's religious life a generation previously" (Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 2016:61).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

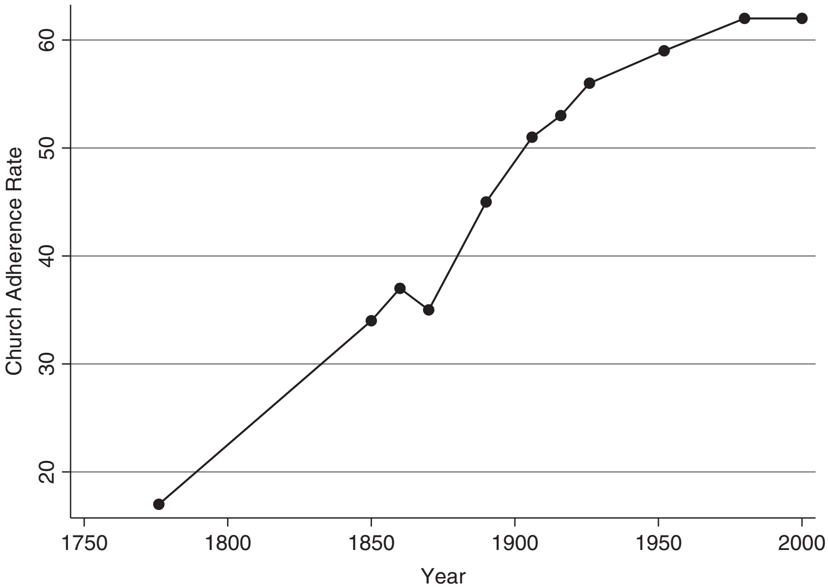

Figure 1.1 Religious adherence rate, 1776–2000 (adapted from Finke and Stark 2005:23)

had risen. They plotted the data of fifteen types of religious behavior from 1924 and 1978, and "only two pointed downward (which would indicate a secularization effect). Three more showed no trend, while the remaining ten ... displayed an upward curve, showing *greater religiosity* in Middletown in the 1970s than in the 1920s (Caplow 1982; Caplow, Bahr and Chadwick 1983)" (Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 2016:61).

To be sure, in recent years it appears there has been a decline in religious belief and practice in the United States. Church affiliation rates are on the wane (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012), as are attendance rates and levels of belief in God (Voas and Chaves 2016). However, it is unclear how we should interpret this decline. Robert Wuthnow (2007) argues that we can understand it as the result of a historically specific (and probably short-term) failure on the part of religious institutions to adapt to a changing life course trajectory by providing ministries relevant to contemporary young adults, suggesting that the decline could be temporary. And Michael Hout and Claude Fischer (2014) attribute the decline to a combination of a backlash against the political alignment of religious and political conservatives and an increased sense of autonomy among younger generations (but they did not, however, attribute the

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

decline to secularization) (see also Putnam and Campbell 2010; Zuckerman 2014):[7]

> Once the American public began connecting organized religion to the conservative political agenda – a connection that Republican politicians, abortion activists, and religious leaders all encouraged (Domke and Coe 2008) – many political liberals and moderates who seldom or never attended services quit expressing a religious preference when survey interviewers asked about it.
>
> For sixty years now, young people have been raised to think for themselves; parents emphasize obedience less (Alwin 1990). The young people who emerge from that kind of socialization may evince a fair amount of conformity, but they put the individual in the center and leave little margin for any authority – scientific, religious, judicial, political – to dictate a worldview.
>
> (Hout and Fischer 2014:443, 444)

Moreover, we should not equate low levels of adherence rates with low levels in belief (Stark 2017a). Just because people no longer affiliate with conventional forms of religion, it does not mean they have ceased to believe. As we saw earlier, many of America's "religious nones" still pray, consider themselves religious, and believe in God. Moreover, some people simply trade in their old beliefs for new ones. This is illustrated in Table 1.1, which reports, by several Western European countries, levels of belief of religious nones in phenomena that, at least in the West, many would consider unconventional.[8] More precisely, it presents the percentage of respondents who either strongly agreed or agreed with the following statements:[9]

- I have my own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services.
- I believe in life after death.
- I believe in reincarnation – being reborn in this world again and again.
- I believe in the supernatural power of deceased ancestors.
- Good luck charms sometimes do bring good luck.
- Some fortune tellers really can foresee the future.

[7] Another possibility, suggested by an anonymous reviewer, is that we are in a period of social disorganization, which can have contradictory effects on religious belief and practice, eroding some traditional institutions while providing opportunities for new forms of organization. Put differently, social disorganization on the large scale can stimulate social organization on the small scale (Thrasher 1927). This could help explain the apparent growth of the emerging church movement (Marti and Ganiel 2014).

[8] Data are from the 2008 International Social Survey Program, which can be downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA): www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/ISSP08.asp.

[9] Unfortunately, not all of the questions were asked in all of the countries.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41670-2 — Networks and Religion
Sean F. Everton
Excerpt
More Information

Table 1.1 *Unconventional beliefs of religious nones*

	Percent of Religious Nones Who								
Country	Connect with God Outside of Church	Believe There Is Life after Death	Believe in Reincarnation	Believe in Supernatural Power of Ancestors	Believe in Power of Good Luck Charms	Believe in Fortune Tellers	Believe Faith Healers Channel God's Power	Believe in Astrology	Agree with One or More Statements
Austria	30.00	37.50	32.50	22.50	27.50	25.00	40.00	42.50	60.00
Belgium	14.85	21.78	15.84	7.92	—	—	—	—	31.68
Denmark	24.00	18.80	14.40	9.20	13.20	14.00	12.80	14.00	42.00
Finland	27.78	18.52	9.26	5.56	11.11	14.81	9.26	9.26	42.59
France	22.92	20.27	14.62	11.30	16.61	18.27	13.95	21.59	49.83
Germany	10.00	12.78	10.83	13.06	27.50	13.89	18.61	16.67	43.89
Ireland	27.59	34.48	27.59	17.24	44.83	44.83	24.14	37.93	75.86
Italy	17.14	2.86	14.29	5.71	—	—	—	—	22.86
Netherlands	35.45	42.73	21.36	21.14	19.55	25.23	22.05	16.82	69.55
Norway	12.21	25.95	19.08	12.21	12.21	20.61	4.58	11.45	44.27
Portugal	31.25	18.75	18.75	6.25	—	—	—	—	43.75
Spain	45.71	21.43	14.29	24.29	—	—	—	—	55.71
Sweden	22.32	21.43	8.93	11.61	—	—	—	—	38.39
Switzerland	54.39	43.86	29.82	15.79	36.84	28.07	26.32	36.84	85.96
United Kingdom	17.48	34.62	23.78	22.38	—	—	—	—	44.76
Average	23.49	26.29	17.22	15.07	20.16	19.55	17.27	18.23	53.85/50.48

Source: International Social Survey Program, 2008.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org