

The idea of secularism is broader than the idea that religious belief should not affect how the State is run. Secular states, such as France and the United States, do exist in what are otherwise very religious countries. Within secularism, there are different approaches; those who simply believe that religion and State decisions should be separated (perhaps to avoid favouring one religion over another) and those who believe that the religious background should be entirely removed from anything to do with the State – from schools to public holidays. There are many Christians who support secularism in its milder sense because Christianity began as a religion that existed within society, not one that controlled society.

Secularisation is the process of making a society more secular, taking religion out of all aspects of State life. Those who support it would say that religion has caused more harm than good in society and also might point to declining church attendance.

**WHAT YOU
NEED TO KNOW**

Topic	Content	Key Knowledge
The challenge of secularism	<i>The rise of secularism and secularisation, and the views that:</i>	
	<i>God is an illusion and the result of wish fulfilment</i>	<i>The views of Freud and Dawkins that society would be happier without Christianity as it is infantile, repressive and causes conflict</i>
	<i>Christianity should play no part in public life</i>	<i>The views of secular humanists that Christian belief is personal and should play no part in public life, including: Education and schools Government and state</i>
	<i>Learners should have the opportunity to discuss issues related to the challenge of secularism, including: Whether or not spiritual values are just human values Whether or not there is evidence that Christianity is a major cause of personal and social problems Whether secularism and secularisation are opportunities for Christianity to develop new ways of thinking and acting Whether Christianity is, or should be, a significant contributor to society's culture and values</i>	

Key Words

Secularism – The idea that religious beliefs and institutions should not affect how the State is run; all belief systems are equal in the eyes of the law.

Secular – Worldly or non-religious

Secularisation – The process of making a society more secular by removing the influence of religious institutions

Infantile – Childish; for Freud, this referred to the earliest stage of a person's development

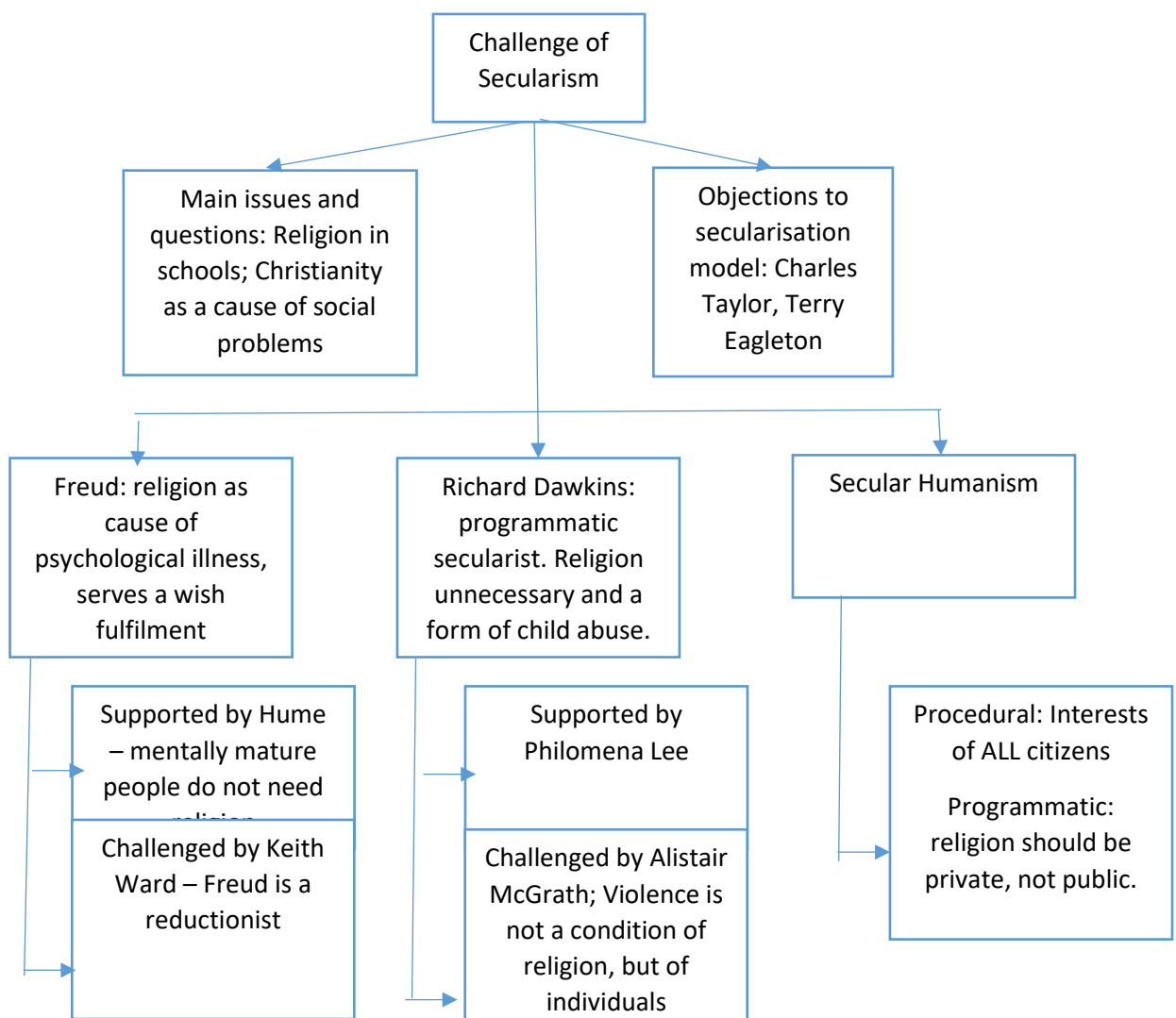
Neurosis – A mental illness with symptoms of stress, such as anxiety and obsessive behaviour



Background

The role of religion in Western Europe has changed and is changing. Christianity in Britain has been in decline – seen in Church attendance and solemnisation of fewer marriages. This reduction has led to questions from psychology and sociology about the role of religious institutions in public life and culture. It has been suggested that religion should be seen as part of the 'private' rather than the 'public' sphere, while the relationship between Christianity and British culture is diminishing.

Structure of Thought



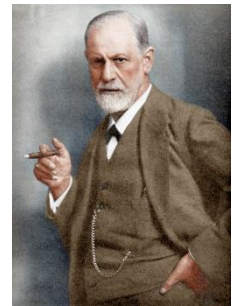
The rise of secularism and secularisation

- Reasons for the rise of secularism and secularisation and the views that God is an illusion and the result of wish fulfilment
- The views of Freud and Dawkins that society would be happier without Christianity as it is infantile, repressive and causes conflict



The view that society would be happier without Christianity

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as **Richard Dawkins** in modern times, argued that the idea of God is an illusion and the result of wish fulfilment; Christianity is infantile, repressive and causes conflict. Both thinkers would advocate secularisation and the development of society towards the removal of religion and the promotion of reason through scientific methods.



Sigmund Freud

Freud was an atheist psychoanalyst who believed that religion is the cause of neuroses and that at some point in the future, science will be able to answer all key questions because psychoanalysis will 'cure' people of religious belief.

- Religion is wish-fulfilment because it is a reflection of our subconscious projecting into our conscious minds – just like a daydream
- It is an infantile result of the Oedipus Complex (the last stage of a young child's psychological development) because at this stage a boy learns he cannot sexually possess his mother and feels jealousy towards his father; this resentment is repressed into the subconscious mind and projected onto the idea of God, the ultimate father-figure (Freud's analysis of the first was underdeveloped).
- This was expressed in primitive cultures through the totem pole – the phallic symbol of maleness in societies where one went to seek forgiveness; in modern society, this is the male God that we seek comfort from through religious ritual.
- The repetition of this worship is obsessional and found in all parts of society: Freud's famous phrase is that religion is a 'universal obsessional neurosis'.
- Religion is unhealthy and this leads to negativity within society – religion has been the cause of many society's conflicts.

Freud was supported by **Hume**. He argued that mentally mature people do not need religion – it is practised by the uneducated. Freud went further to say that religion was a sickness and could be proven as such by his use of psychoanalysis. When instinctual life wins and religion ends, humans will be content.



Arguing against Freud

However, **Keith Ward** challenges Freud. He labels Freud as a reductionist because he appears to reduce everything to material terms. This is an inadequate explanation for the spiritual experience of existence. Truth claims about religion cannot be disproved (think back to your Philosophy unit on religion language!).

Freud emphasises the destructive nature of religion, but for others, religion is an aid rather than a harm. It can assist understanding and acceptance of life. Religion can help to form communities rather than to divide them.

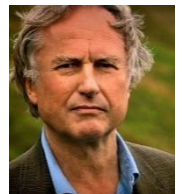


Freud generalises religions – while some are hierarchical and controlling, not all are, and therefore not all religions can be seen to perpetuate guilt.

Wish fulfilment might not always lead to illusion – it can lead to creativity such as the creativity seen in dreams and daydreams.

Richard Dawkins

“There is something infantile in the presumption that somebody else (parents in the case of children; God in the case of adults) has a responsibility to give your life meaning and point.” (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*)



In 'The God Delusion', Dawkins makes the case for:

- Imagining a world without religion
- Accepting that the God hypothesis is weak
- Realising that religion is a form of child abuse
- Accepting atheism with pride

Dawkins (1941-) is an evolutionary biologist known for his rejection of a need for a creator God, given the evidence for evolution and the increased understanding of scientific principles. This argument has also been offered when discussing the existence of the soul – scientific progress has removed the need to speak of a divine spark or soul in people and unanswered questions should not be filled with an unsubstantiated belief in God, but should be filled with trust that science is on the way to finding answers.

However, Dawkins also thinks that religious belief is problematic for society. It:

- Causes war and conflict
- Holds back children – it is a form of child abuse because parents label their children before they can think for themselves

Problematic are those Christians who believe that evolution and the Big Bang did not happen and that the world was created literally as in the account of the book of Genesis: 6000 years ago, in six days and with species in their current form. There is so much evidence against this that for Dawkins it demonstrates their ignorance.

Dawkins argues that life can be meaningful without reference to religion. The processes of nature can be most clearly explained by Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution. Belief in God is deluded and unnecessary. Religion is delusional since it represents a persistent false belief going against the main body of evidence. The supernatural world cannot be subject to empirical study and therefore, Dawkins rejects Stephen Jay Gould's attempts to argue that religion and science are 'non-overlapping magisteria'. For Dawkins, all things must be able to be studied empirically. (Link this with verificationism in religious language)

Dawkins used the example of Catholicism as a form of long-term psychological abuse. He gave the example of the Catholic women who had experienced sexual abuse, who found the fear of hell to be greater than the abuse itself. Another example was the 'hell house' thought of by a pastor in Colorado. Here, the children were terrified by actors role-playing the sins of abortion and homosexuality, followed by the torture of Hell. Dawkins suggests that the power of belief in religion becomes greater than the physical abuse suffered.

Example - Philomena Lee

Philomena had her child, born out of wedlock, taken from her by the Catholic Church. She stayed with her boy for three years at the Sean Ross Abbey in Roscrea – a place for unwed mothers. Philomena's boy was then sold, to be adopted by a Catholic family.



Responding to Dawkins – Alister McGrath

"The Dawkins Delusion" – Many Christians think that faith is not irrational. Furthermore, religion and science are not necessarily in conflict. Science can explain the intelligible universe and so Dawkins is right to criticise the 'God of the gaps'. However, the intelligible universe could still point to an intelligent designer.



The relationship between science and religion can be complementary, reflecting different aspects of human experience. Dawkins' limited positivist view that 'metaphysical questions outside of scientific enquiry are therefore meaningless' is criticised by many scientists. Science, theology and philosophy can provide useful insights.

McGrath also criticised Dawkins' claim that violence was a necessary condition of religion. Jesus taught against violence – "turn the other cheek". Violence is a condition of

certain individuals, not religion as a whole. McGrath also notes that atheism has also been part of violence and repression, e.g. in communist regimes.

Questions:

1. What did Freud and Dawkins both argue about secularisation?
2. According to Freud, what causes neuroses?
3. Why is religion wish-fulfilment?
4. Explain the idea that religion is an infantile result of the Oedipus Complex.
5. How was the Oedipus Complex expressed in primitive cultures?
6. What was Freud's famous phrase?
7. According to Freud, what is religion the cause of?
8. What is Dawkins' evidence for rejecting the religious idea of a creator-God?
9. According to Dawkins, where should we look for answers?
10. Why is religion problematic for society, in Dawkins' view?

The view that Christian belief should play no part in public life

Secular humanism is a term used for those who think that humans can live positive, good lives without religion. While not necessarily as organised group, humanists have come together to declare common values; those who are humanist hold the full range of views about secularism and secularisation. Ultimately, however, most believe that Christian belief is personal and should pay no part in public life.



Education and schools

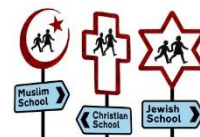
Approximately one-third of schools in the UK are faith schools, mainly with Church of England or Roman Catholic foundations. Dawkins is a clear opponent of faith education and believes that it is time for them to be replaced.

Arguments for faith schools	Arguments against faith schools
Only one-third of schools are faith schools so families still have choice.	Is it labelling children from a young age.
Church attendance might be dropping but many more people still consider themselves a Christian and should be allowed to reflect this in their educational choices.	The teaching of some areas, such as RE and science, might be subject to bias, especially in fundamentalist schools, possibly even leading to a risk of radicalisation.
All schools have mission statements and value systems of one sort or another, so faith schools are no different from other schools.	Children in faith schools are not fully aware of the rest of secular society.
It reflects diversity and tolerance – fundamental British values.	Faith schools might reflect some people's narrow views of what religious people are like.

Pupils in faith schools are as diverse as the societies they exist in; they are not necessarily made up only of their faith background.	Faith should be something only taught by parents and religious communities.
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Government and State

The UK historically has close ties between Christianity and the State. The Church of England is a national Church and the Queen is its Supreme Governor. Some bishops have automatic seats in the House of Lords. Some argue that these historic links should be separated because it would reflect the reality of twenty-first century Britain. Others believe that this is still representative of how the country is made up, and representatives from faith traditions outside the Church of England are not represented in the House of Lords as well.



The United States and France entirely separate Church and State.

It has been argued that secularisation of State can lead to the censorship of certain approaches in favour of a different, non-religious ideology, which is still itself an ideology: it could be argued that this led to fascism and communism. A more balanced approach to secularism can celebrate all perspectives, including religious ones.

Some Christians would argue that the religion that Jesus founded was one where Christians spoke from within their secular context and worked together to promote the common good and to care for those in need.

“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”
(Romans 13:1)

Questions:

1. What is 'secular humanism'?
2. What do most secular humanists believe?
3. How many UK schools are faith schools?
4. Give three arguments for faith schools.
5. Give three arguments against faith schools.
6. What are the 'close ties' that Christianity has with the state?
7. Why should historic links be supported?
8. Why should these historic links be abandoned?
9. Which two countries have entirely separate Church and state?
10. What does Romans 13:1 say?

Is Christianity a major cause of personal and social problems?

Some accusations:

- o Christianity has been the cause of warfare when it has tried to gain supremacy over other traditions, such as in the Crusades

- Christianity rejects the indisputable advances of science, and holds society back – for example, in its beliefs about the soul
- Some ethical stances of Christians do not match with modern society, such as views about homosexuality
- Any absolutist approach to life is intolerant of the views of others and damaging to society; for example, in Christian views on euthanasia, which so not allow people the freedom to make their own choices about their lives
- Christians can radicalise converts as much as any other religion
- Christianity is patriarchal and oppresses women
- Christianity promoted beliefs in things that hold people back from reality and stop personal development – for example, in beliefs about life after death



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- Christianity (along with other institutions) has suffered from the child abuse scandal and has not reacted appropriately to accusations, suggesting that it thinks it untouchable in some way

- Christians place their trust in a Bible that is outdated and which seems to condone practices like slavery
- Differing beliefs can divide families, perhaps when one member converts to Christianity
- Some Christians evangelists do so to earn money, not to preach a faith

Some responses:

Christians would emphasise that they are a community that is always seeking the ideal way to live, perhaps based on Jesus' commandment to love, but that it is a community that is made up of humans who fall short of God's ways and perfection. It is wrong to judge the redeeming work of Jesus Christ against human beings.

Some Christians would reject denominations other than their own and say that the divided Church might be the cause of problems, but their own denomination would not cause these issues. They might suggest that a society where their denomination has more control would be more harmonious.

It is possible to challenge some of the concerns about Christian ethics by asking the question of whether something becomes right if society begins to accept it. If the majority of society began to accept the torture of children, would that make it right? Some Christians hold fast to their beliefs about homosexuality, abortion, capital punishment and other contentious issues because they believe that they are wrong for all time.

Christians would point to all the good that the Church has offered the world: educating the poor, working abroad supporting the civil rights movement (for example, Martin Luther King), food banks – as well as the work churches do on a local level. Christians are called to work for the good of society and also to be distinctive within society – to challenge where injustice is seen.



"Let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone." (John 8:7)

Questions:

1. State some accusations for Christianity being a major cause of personal and social problems.
2. How do Christians respond to the accusation of being a cause of personal and social problems?
3. What does John 8:7 state?

Are secularism and secularisation opportunities for Christianity?

Over the course of Christianity's history, it has had to adapt to different ways of thinking and it might be argued that, with the speed of change over the last generation, it is important that Christianity is open to changing again. The pace of change in scientific understanding, the results of the brutalities of the twentieth-century violence and twenty-first century extremism have all moved people away from organised religion.

However, some Christians would argue that now, more than ever, it is time for Christians to stand up for the truth revealed through Christ and the Bible and to resist this move towards change. They might argue that if Christianity is side-lined, it might lead to the religion being able to affect the lives of far fewer people.

Some might use the opportunity to analyse why society is attracted to this change and to try to look for opportunities for evangelism or education about Christianity. Others, reflecting fear by many in society over the pace of change, might focus on the traditional aspects of Christianity, especially its focus on spiritual things over material ones.

The earliest Christian community saw itself as living within the secular State, not opposed to it; modern Christians might be inspired by this when thinking about their place in society.

If society moves towards full secularisation, some Christians would choose to embrace this as an opportunity to speak without fear of being side-lined as a minority view among many. It could start to be distinctive, separate from the State. However, others would say that this would make Christians more likely to be left on one side and the conflicting ideologies that place science, materialism and perhaps capitalism at the centre of life would undermine the purpose of life, which is found and fully understood within Christianity.



In terms of the UK Government in particular, some might suggest that removing the Christian influence would be more tolerant towards non-Christian members. It might be argued that the Christian elements of the Houses of Parliament (such as starting each sitting with Christian prayers) are ritualistic only and are not necessary to the smooth running of government.

Some might argue that an elected house of Lords would be more democratic than the current system, thus removing religious representation from the upper chamber. However,

others might suggest that the UK as an entity exists because of its history and traditions and do it would be wrong to lose this. Christians might say that having representation in the House of Lords helps to safeguard against immoral legislation.

Questions:

1. With the speed of change in society, what is important to Christianity?
2. What do some Christians argue it is important to do now?
3. What might happen if religion is side-lined?
4. What are two different reactions to this change in society?
5. How did the earliest Christian community see itself as living?
6. What might happen if society moves towards full secularism?
7. What might removing Christian influence in the Government lead to?
8. State an argument for and against the answer to the above question.

Secular Humanism

There are two types of secularism:

1. **Procedural**: the interests of ALL citizens – religious and non-religious, should be considered by the state. Religion should be treated equally to other institutions but not with preference.
2. **Programmatic**: in a plural society, the state should be solely secular. This means religious views and practices should be kept apart from public institutions – schools, universities, public holiday and governments.

The main aims of modern humanism were set out in the **Amsterdam Declaration of 1952** (updated in 2002):

- Humanism is ethical: all humans are of worth, have dignity and autonomy
- Humanism is rational: Science should be used imaginatively and as a basis for solving human difficulties
- Humanism supports democracy and human rights; the best way in which humans can develop their potential
- Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility: no dogmatic beliefs, the autonomous person has a responsibility to society and the natural world
- Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion: continuous observation will build our reliable understanding of the world and revision of scientific understanding
- Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination: enhancing human existence. Novelist **E. M. Forster** defined the humanist as someone with “*curiosity, a free mind, belief in good taste, and belief in the human race.*”
- Humanism is a **life-stance** aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment: creative and ethical living can help us to achieve the challenges of the present.



Questions:

1. What are the two types of secularism? Explain them.
2. State some of the aims as set out in the Amsterdam Declaration of 1952: