

No religionists: their growth and numbers internationally

Callum G Brown

Welcome to the second Royal Society of Edinburgh - sponsored research Workshop. The theme of the series of 4 Workshops is Humanism and Civil Society in Modern Scotland. Today we focus on **Scottish Humanism: growth, composition and objectives in international perspective**. Our talks today will look at this from a variety of perspectives, providing both international comparison, and a focus on Scotland. We will look at both the decline of popular religion as the backdrop, and the rise of humanist organisation and expressions of secular humanism in Scotland.

We welcome a variety of interesting speakers today, including our first international participant, Tina Block, who has flown from British Columbia to be with us. We will also have Steve Bruce, coming all the way from Aberdeen, plus Ivan Middleton and Gary McLelland.

I am starting with a brief outline of the historical trends.

The rising significance of humanism in the western world is undoubtedly fuelled by the even more spectacular decline of organised religion - the churches - fostered by a decline in churchgoing and church membership. Trailing some way behind that decline is the decline of religious identity and decline in religious belief. In this way, there is a staged process to religious change in the modern world, including in Scotland. Broadly speaking, the decline of religious practice is the first stage, followed by decline in church membership and the rituals of religious marriage and baptism, followed by decline of religious identity, and coming up last in the process is the decline of

religious funerals and of religious identity - of people calling themselves Christians.

These declines start in at different dates in different countries and parts of countries. Later on, Steve Bruce will talk about the differences in religious decline within Scotland. Sometimes the declines are fast and sometimes slow. It seems that the later declines becoming faster. So, for instance, churchgoing and religious adherences took perhaps 100 years to show significant falls in Scotland, but religious identity as I will show in a moment is happening very fast. This is creating the vacuum into which I believe a secular humanist outlook could thrive.

I want to take you quickly through some graphs that show these stages of religious decline, and the differences between and within nations.

The speakers

Since 2007, Tina Block has been a lecturer at Thompson River University in British Columbia. She has two first degrees, one in England and the second in History from the University of Calgary. She did her PhD at the University of Victoria in BC, completing in 2006 a study of secularism in postwar Pacific Northwest. She has research interest in the history of religion, gender and family in postwar North America, especially on the Pacific Northwest.

Steve Bruce is one of Britain's most prominent and prolific sociologists, and is a leading world figure of the sociology of religion. Since 1991 he has been professor of sociology at the University of Aberdeen, and before that he was at Queen's University Belfast. He has published over 20 books and scores of articles, including a sociological biography of Ian Paisley (2007), and *God is Dead* (2002).

Ivan Middleton was born and raised in Belfast, and trained as a social worker, but left the province in the late 1960s and became a social worker in Fife and in the 1970s became a senior figure with Lothian Regional Council. He was attracted to humanism whilst still in Belfast, and in Scotland became one of the leading lights of the humanist movement, ending up in the 1990s as the leader of the Humanist Society of Scotland, leading the campaign for legal recognition of Humanist weddings, and in 2005 concluding the negotiation of that change and conducting the first humanist legal wedding in Edinburgh Zoo in that year.

Gary McLelland is an organiser of various humanist activities in Scotland. He is an organiser for the Edinburgh Secular Society, is education officer for the Humanist society for Scotland, and is Scotland's leading humanist blogger. He is extremely active in campaigning, education work and debates both live and on radio. One of his ventures has been to try to introduce the Sunday Assembly in Scotland. He is going to talk to us about his work.

Programme

Room 230, St Andrews Building, Eldon Street ([building E14](#))

9.00-9.20am Coffee

9.50-10.20am **Callum Brown** (Univ. of Glasgow), "No religionists: their growth and numbers internationally"

10.20-11.20am KEYNOTE **Dr Tina Block** (Thompson River University, British Columbia): "Secular growth: the Canadian experience since 1945" (with discussion)

11.20-11.35am Coffee

11.35am-12.45pm KEYNOTE: **Professor Steve Bruce** (Univ. of Aberdeen) "Religion and the Exotic: compelling reasons why there is not likely to be a religious revival"

12.45-1.45pm Lunch

1.45-2.15pm **Ivan Middleton** (former chair, and celebrant HSS): "Changing contexts for humanism since the 1960s"

2.15-2.45pm **Gary McLelland** (organiser, Edinburgh Secular Society, & Sunday Assembly in Scotland): "The campaigning and celebration work: what works in Scotland?"

2.45-3.00pm Tea/coffee

3.00-4.00pm **Open Discussion:** How can Scottish secularist and humanist organisations grow? How do they fit in with international developments?

4.00pm Close