

**MODERNITY, STATE-LED ISLAMISATION AND  
THE NON-MUSLIM RESPONSE: A CASE STUDY  
OF CHRISTIANS IN PENINSULAR MALAYSIA**

**by**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgement	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Tables	ix
Abstrak	x
Abstract	xii
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION: SECULARISATION, POLITICS AND RELIGION	1
1.1 Religion, Ethnicity and Politics in Contemporary Malaysian Society	3
1.2 Research Question and Methodology	7
1.3 Literature Review	9
1.3.1 Modernization, Secularization and the Death of Religion	10
1.3.1(a) Social differentiation	12
1.3.1(b) Privatisation	14
1.3.1(c) Rationalisation	15
1.3.2 Shattering the Orthodox Consensus	16
1.3.2(a) Rational choice theory	17
1.3.2(b) Strictness theory	18
1.3.2(c) Subcultural identity theory of religious strength	21
1.3.2(d) Religion in a postmodern world	22
1.3.2(e) Glifford Geertz and Karen Armstrong on the persistence of religion in the modern world	24
1.3.2(f) Casanova's post-secularization thesis	26
1.4 A Critique of the Current State of Knowledge	28
1.5 Religion and the Public Sphere in Post-colonial Societies	30

1.5.1 Theoretical Insights from Southeast Asian Studies	32
1.5.2 Religion and the Public Sphere in Southeast Asia	35
1.5.2(a) A brief history of the relationship between Islam and Christianity in Southeast Asia	36
1.5.2(b) The case of Singapore	40
1.6 Coda: Modernity, Religion, and the Public Sphere	46
CHAPTER 2 - MODERNITY, RELIGION AND THE STATE	48
2.1 Modernity, Religion and the Makings of a Plural Society in British Malaya	49
2.1.1 Islam and the British Colonial State	50
2.1.2 The Makings of a Plural Society and the Emergence of a non-Islamic Religious Sphere	53
2.2 Malaya on the Eve of Independence, 1946-1957: The emergence of ethnic politics	55
2.2.1 The Birth of the Alliance Party	59
2.3 Independence and the Crystallization of Ethnic Politics, 1957 – 1969	61
2.4 State led-modernization, Ethnicity and the Challenge of Islamic Revivalism, 1969-1980	64
2.4.1 <i>Dakwah</i> Movements as the Carriers of Islamic Revivalism in the Country	66
2.4.2 The Ethnic Dimension of Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia	70
2.4.3 Malay Politics and the Politicisation of Islam	71
2.5 State-led Islamisation Program during the Mahathir-Badawi Administrations between 1981 and 2009	75
2.6 Conclusion	82
CHAPTER 3 - The STATE, ISLAMISATION AND SOCIETY	85
3.1 Surveillance and Discipline among the Muslim Community	86
3.1.1 Surveillance and Discipline in the Public and Private Lives of Muslims	86

3.1.2	Surveillance and Discipline against “deviationist” Islamic Sects	91
3.1.3	Disciplining Apostasy: Muslim who wants out of Islam	96
3.2	The spill over to Non-Muslim Social and Religious Spheres	99
3.2.1	Administrative Interference of non-Muslim Places of Religious Worship	99
3.2.2	Banning of Literature and Words	103
3.2.3	Religious Status, Government Intervention and the Family	107
3.2.3(a)	Religion, courts and burial rites	107
3.2.3(b)	Conversion, divorce, child custody and the religion of the child	109
3.2.3(c)	Separating spouses because of different religions	111
3.2.3(d)	Religious status and MyKad	112
3.3	Response to Intrusion: Protest from civil society and Cabinet Memo	115
3.4	Increasing Tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims	118
3.5	Conclusion	120
CHAPTER 4 - A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE COLONIAL ERA		122
4.1	Imperialism and Missions in the Peninsula, 1511 - 1824	122
4.2	The British and Christianity in the Peninsula, 1824 - 1957	125
4.3	Mission Work among the non-Malays in Peninsular Malaysia	127
4.3.1	Evangelism	128
4.3.2	Mission schools	129
4.3.3	Social-welfare ministries	132
4.4	Eschewing Politics in Favour of Evangelism	134
4.5	Conclusion	137

CHAPTER 5 - CHRISTIANITY AND THE MIDDdle CLASS	138
5.1 Industrialisation and the Rise of the Middle Class	139
5.2 The Middle Class and the Emergence of “New Politics”	145
5.3 The Growth of Christianity and the Middle Class, 1960-2000	155
5.4 Empowering the Laity: Middle Class Participation in the Church	158
5.5 Social Activism and the Laity	163
5.5.1 Evangelical Churches and Social Activism	163
5.5.2 The Archdiocesan Office for Human Development Kuala Lumpur	168
5.5.3 The Bangsar Lutheran Church	171
5.6 Conclusion	172
CHAPTER 6 - MISSION SCHOOLS AND THE STATE: MARGINALISATION AND RESPONSE	177
6.1 The Post-colonial State and Education: Nationalization and Islamisation	178
6.1.1 Attempts at Consolidating the Educational System during the Waning Years of British Colonial Rule	179
6.1.2 Nationalizing Education in the Post-independence Era: The Razak Report 1956 and the Education Report 1960	181
6.1.3 Post-1960s Development in the Field of Education: Mahathir’s legacy	183
6.2 Mission Schools and the Government	185
6.2.1 Loss of Control over Mission Schools by Mission Authorities	188
6.2.2 Inadequate Public Funding	196
6.2.3 The Loss of Prestige: The transition from English-medium to Malay-medium in mission schools	200
6.3 Mission Authorities and Their Response to the Government	201
6.3.1 Reasserting Their Rights: Overcoming bureaucratic roadblocks	202

6.3.2 Reclaiming the Christian Ethos	208
6.3.3 Staying Put or Opting Out of the Public Schooling System?	210
6.3.4 The Results of the Policy of Engagement	212
6.4 The Limits of the Policy of Engagement	213
6.4.1 A Brief History of Chinese-medium Schools	214
6.4.2 The Relationship between the Government and Chinese-medium Schools	216
6.4.3 Mission Schools by Comparison	219
6.5 Conclusion	221
CHAPTER 7 - ENGAGING THE GOVERNMENT: THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE TO ISLAMISATION	224
7.1 Government-Church Relationship in Malaysia, 1957-2001	225
7.1.1 Government-Church Relationship during the 1960s and 1970s	226
7.1.2 The Era of Islamisation, the 1980s onwards	229
7.2 The Christians' Response towards the State's Islamisation Policy	231
7.2.1 The Formation of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM)	232
7.2.2 CFM's Response to the Government	234
7.2.3 The Politics of Ecumenism: The relationship between CFM and its component members	238
7.3 Working with Other non-Islamic Religious Communities	239
7.4 The case of NECF and the Evangelicals	241
7.4.1 Evangelical churches Response to the Islamisation Project	241
7.4.2 National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF)	245
7.5 The Changing Response of Christians	250
7.5.1 The Islamic State Debate	251
7.5.2 Seeking Judicial Review: The Catholic Herald and Sidang Injil Borneo cases	254

7.5.3 Engaging in the Political Process: Run up to 2008 General Elections	256
7.5.4 Engaging Civil Society	259
7.5.5 Shifting Responses and a Divided Community	264
7.6 Conclusion	269
CHAPTER 8 - CONCLUSION	271
8.1 The Persistence of Religion in the Public Sphere: The Malaysian experience	272
8.2 Theoretical Implications of the Malaysian Case Study	276
REFERENCES	280



## LIST OF TABLES

		<b>Page</b>
Table 5.1	Malaysia – Gross Domestic Product by Industry, 1970-2005 (in percentages)	139
Table 5.2	Employment by Industry, 1970 – 2005 (in percentages)	140
Table 5.3	Employment by Major Occupational Group, 1970 – 2000 (in percentages)	141
Table 5.4	Peninsular Malaysia - Distribution of Employed Labour Force by Occupation and Ethnic Group, 1957 (in percentages)	142
Table 5.5	Peninsular Malaysia - Distribution of Employed Labour Force by Occupation and Ethnic Group, 1970, 1986 and 2000 (in percentages)	143
Table 5.6	Percentage of Votes for Opposition Parliamentary Candidates in Peninsular Malaysia, 2004 and 2008 General Elections	151
Table 5.7	Growth of Malaysian Population and Christian Adherents, 1960-1980	155
Table 5.8	Growth of Malaysian Population and Christian Adherents, 1980-2000	156
Table 5.9	Distribution of Population by Religion in 2000	156
Table 5.10	Christians in Malaysia by Ethnic Group, 2000	157
Table 6.1	Number of Mission Schools according to State and School Type as of 2008	185
Table 6.2	Number of Students in Missionary Schools according to State and School Type as of January 2008	186
Table 6.3	Number of candidates taking Bible Knowledge as examination subject	210
Table 7.1	Church activities attended by Evangelicals during the previous twelve months period prior to 2001	244

**MODERNITI, ISLAMISASI PIMPINAN NEGARA DAN RESPONS  
MASYARAKAT BUKAN-MUSLIM: SATU KAJIAN KES MASYARAKAT  
KRISTIAN DI SEMENANJUNG MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRAK**

Sebahagian besar daripada abad ke-20 telah menyaksikan para sarjana yang mengkaji agama berpendapat bahawa moderniti akan menyebabkan agama disingkirkan dari ruangan awam. Namun demikian, peristiwa-peristiwa seperti Revolusi Iran ke peranan agama Katolik dalam konflik-konflik politik di Amerika Latin yang tercetus dalam dekad 80an membuktikan bahawa agama masih memainkan peranan yang penting dalam ruangan awam. Tesis ini menghujahkan bahawa agama masih memainkan peranan dalam kehidupan awam dan politik masyarakat Asia Tenggara masakini. Dengan menggunakan kes Malaysia, tesis ini menghujahkan bahawa Malaysia tidak sahaja mengalami kebangkitan agama di kalangan pelbagai komuniti agama di negara ini walaupun mengalami proses modernisasi tetapi juga ia tidak berundur ke ruangan persendirian. Sebaliknya, proses modenisasi memudahkan agama masuk ke ruangan awam. Kebangkitan Islam di akhir dekad 70-an menyaksikan sesetengah pihak Muslim memanggil supaya kerajaan and masyarakat diIslamisasikan. Panggilan ini telah menyebabkan kerajaan Barisan Nasional yang diketuai UMNO melaksanakan dasar Islamisasi untuk mempertahankan hegemoninya atas masyarakat Melayu-Muslim. Dasar Islamisasi telah menyaksikan peningkatan campur tangan kerajaan bukan sahaja dalam bidang agama Islam tetapi juga dalam bidang keagamaan bukan-Islam. Akibatnya masyarakat bukan-Islam mula mengalami sekatan bukan sahaja dalam bidang agama mereka tetapi juga dalam kehidupan sehari-harian mereka. Tidak menghairankan mengapa masyarakat bukan-Islam mula beralih kepada agama mereka sebagai satu

sumber daya politik dalam usaha mengatasi masalah ini. Tesis ini akan menumpukan perhatian kepada masyarakat Kristian di Semenanjung Malaysia dalam usaha menyelidik cara-cara bagaimana komuniti ini menggunakan agama untuk mencipta ruang yang membolehkan mereka untuk membebaskan diri dari gangguan kerajaan dalam bidang agama dan kehidupan sehari-harian mereka. Tesis ini menghujahkan bahawa agama merupakan satu titik tumpuan untuk memobilisasi masyarakat bagi menghadapi keadaan sosial dan politik yang mereka hadapi. Sebagai kesimpulan, tesis ini mengutarakan hujah bahawa bertentangan/konflik berdasarkan agama dalam ruangan awam disebabkan oleh ketegangan yang timbul dari pengejaran moderniti.

**MODERNITY, STATE-LED ISLAMISATION AND THE NON-MUSLIM  
RESPONSE: A CASE STUDY OF CHRISTIANS IN PENINSULAR  
MALAYSIA**

**ABSTRACT**

For a better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars who studied religion held the opinion that religion would gradually lose its public significance in the face of modernisation. However, events in the past few decades have proved otherwise. From the Iranian Revolution to the role of Catholicism in political conflicts throughout Latin America in the 1980 have patently demonstrated religion still plays an important role in the public sphere. This thesis takes the position that religion still remains an important precinct in the public life and politics of contemporary Southeast Asian societies. Using the case of Malaysia, I argued that not only did the country experienced religious revivalism across the various faith communities despite the rapid modernisation that was taking place here but also it did not retreat to the private sphere. Indeed, it facilitated the entry of religion into the public sphere. Islamic revivalism in the late 1970s among the Malay-Muslim community witnessed the call by certain quarters of the community for the Islamisation of the state and society. This in turn has egged the UMNO-led Barisan Nasional government to implement its own Islamisation policy in order to maintain its hegemony over this critical group in society. The resultant policy has brought about an increasing intrusion of the government not only into the Muslim religious field but also into the non-Muslim religious field. As a result, non-Muslims began to experience a growing restriction not only of their religious spheres but also of their everyday lives. Not surprisingly, they began to turn to religion as a political resource in an attempt to find

some sort of political footing to negotiate this increasing restriction. Focusing on the Christian community in Peninsular Malaysia, this thesis seeks to study the ways in which this community used religion to create space that enable them to manoeuvre the increasing intrusion by the government into their religious sphere and everyday lives. This thesis takes the position that religion provides a focal point in mobilising people to respond to the social and political circumstances which they find themselves in. Indeed, the central theoretical position forwarded by this thesis is that religious based contestations/conflicts in the public sphere are due to the tensions that arise out of the pursuit of modernity.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Introduction: Secularisation, Politics and Religion**

Modernisation, it was once argued, would dislodge religion from its once prominent place in the public life of contemporary Southeast Asian societies. Religion would retreat to the private sphere leaving the public sphere to “secular” forces such as the nation-state and the market along with other cultural, institutional and ideological features of modernity (Casanova, 1994).

This thesis takes a different position. It argues that religion still remains an important precinct in the public life and politics of contemporary Southeast Asian societies despite the rapid modernisation that is taking place in this region. Any understanding why this is so must take into account the role of the state in the modernisation process.

In other words, individuals and communities find themselves drawn into the operations of state power. One of the forces that drive the state is the need to mould its diverse local population to a modern nation. This exercise together with its symbolic and material trappings invites boundary-making which rejects or exclude symbols and practices considered foreign to the wholeness that the state seeks to impose on society. Consequently, the national public discourse tends to focus on the wholeness of the nation at the expense of the fact that society is characterized by diversity. More often than not, such discourses on national wholeness tend to be grafted in ideologies that emphasize on exclusionary identity based on ethnicity, language and religion (George and Willford, 2005, pp. 13-14).

It is, however, a mistake to view the state as omnipotent in its intervention in society as if it is “guided ... by a single will ... or by a kind of uniform animating spirit with an overwhelming power to enforce its ideological vision or to construct knowledge as it sees fit” (Steadly, 1999, p. 443). It does well to remember that the nature of the state itself is complex, and often fragmented, which lead to contradictions, limits and failures not only in its intervention in society but also at the ideological level.

On the surface, the overwhelming presence of the state may obscure the fact that people have the capacity to respond to the social and political circumstances they find themselves in. Such capacity provides opportunities for individuals and communities to take advantage of – or succumb to – the state.

The question that guides this thesis is: In what ways do people use religion to create space to escape the state's intensifying reach into everyday life? Such activity does not mean that people are taking an oppositional or resistant stance against the state. Rather, as George and Willford (2005, p. 11) put it:

Individuals and groups can be quite calculating or complicit in using the state (and its internal contradictions) in advancing their interests, religious or otherwise, in an effort to find some kind of political footing in relation to the state.

## **1.1 Religion, Ethnicity and Politics in Contemporary Malaysian Society**

Malaysia offers an interesting case study for our purpose. As with many other post-colonial societies, the question of identity is deeply embedded in the nation's political discourse which had deeply affected the political, social and economic structures of the country.

Identity in the national political discourse takes the form of ethnicity as the country is characterized by a plural society. With the granting of independence by the British in 1957, the Malaysian post-colonial state had devoted much of its energy in trying to transform its diverse population into a modern nation.

However, as Geertz (1973a) had noted almost fifty years ago, the state's attempt at nation-building will inevitably run into the shoals of primordial sentiments (traditional identities and loyalties) that have a more concrete reality than that of the abstract notion of nation-state. What resulted from this encounter is a complex interplay between the state's nation-building project and these traditional identities and loyalties which would deeply affect the political, social and economic structures of Malaysian society.

Therefore, the Malaysian state's project that aimed at wholeness is mired with the contingencies of a plural society that reflect a basic division between the indigenous Malays and non-Malays.<sup>1</sup> One needs to look no further on this issue than at the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. As with other modern constitutions, it explicitly carries the modern notions of citizenships in the document.

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<sup>1</sup> See Cheah (2002).



Interestingly, the same document also defines who is a Malay. Such definition carries with it certain social and political privileges.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the constitution is silent on a definition of a non-Malay, presumably because it is the anti-thesis of the official definition of a Malay. And in so doing, the founding document of Malaysia has officially created two basic categories in which to place its citizens.

Consequently, ethnicity played an important component in forming social identities in Malaysia where social relationships are largely determined by “*kaum*” or “*bangsa*” (race, ethnicity). Apart from serving as an identity marker that helps one to identify oneself vis-à-vis others, ethnicity also served a political purpose, i.e. a tool of the state for the purpose of political control and resource allocation (Ackerman and Lee, 1990, p. 4).

Although modernisation has transformed the social and economic structures of the country, religion has remained deeply embedded in Malaysian society (Nagata, 1984; Ackerman and Lee, 1990). Like ethnicity, religion is deeply intertwined with the individual's sense of self which complicates the picture with the increase of potential for political mobilization (Ackerman and Lee, 1990, p. 4).

The joining of ethnicity and religion in the country has dichotomized the religious sphere into two separate fields, i.e. Muslim and non-Muslim. The Muslim field is principally a Malay domain since all Malays are by definition Muslim by birth. Those who voluntarily leave this field lose the social and political privileges as well as face state sanctions, implying that Malay-Muslim identity is materially and politically reinforced (Ackerman and Lee, 1990, p. 4).

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<sup>2</sup> See Article 160 of the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.

The non-Muslim field, on the other hand, is basically a non-Malay domain where identity and ethnicity are more loosely defined, and more importantly, it is not undergirded by any political and material privileges. Non-Malays are free to associate themselves with any religion of their choosing although typically a Chinese is a Buddhist-Taoist while an Indian a Hindu.

However religions such as Christianity have attracted followers from non-Malays in general. Religious affiliation among non-Malays does not carry any material and political privileges. Although the connection between religion and ethnicity is loose in the non-Muslim field, “there is an undefined sense of solidarity among non-Malays that they are not Muslims” (Ackerman and Lee, 1990, p. 5).

The relationship between the Malays and non-Malays in the present period have assume a greater significance as the latter are confronting the Malays on the question of the rights of non-Islamic religions. The root of this conflict can be traced back to the mid-1970s when Islamic fundamentalism began to spread among urban Malay youths.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, this phenomenon can be partially attributed to the rising Islamic consciousness among Muslim societies worldwide as well as to the alienating effects of modernisation on the Malays (Nagata, 1984; Chandra, 1987; Shamsul, 1997).

More importantly, given heightened ethnic consciousness in the country after the May 13 racial riots, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism among Malay youths can be interpreted as an attempt by the Malays to use Islam as an ethnic boundary to distinguish themselves against the non-Malays (Nagata, 1984). The use of Islam is unsurprising, as

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<sup>3</sup> I'm aware that the term “Islamic fundamentalism” is a contentious term which some have interpreted in a pejorative sense. However, in this thesis, fundamentalism simply means revisiting its ‘cumulative body of ritual, behavior, and thought that reaches back to the time of origins’ (Ruthven, 2004, p. 15) as a response towards modernity.

it has served as a vehicle of political expression for the Malays in previous times. As Ackerman and Lee (1990, p. 6) pointed out: “Relatively speaking, the Malays – despite their factions and conflict – are more united politically under the banner of Islam ... The emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in the 1970s has revitalized Malay ethnicity”.

The growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism among the Malays egged on the state to respond by initiating its own Islamisation agenda that aimed at “moralizing economic and social policies through a modernist interpretation of Islam. One consequence of this moralizing Islamic discourse has been an increasing reification of ethnic and religious boundaries through their bureaucratic codification and materialization of political representation” (Willford, 2005, p. 45). This, in turn, has brought about the increasing encroachment of the state in the everyday life of not only the Malays but also the non-Malays.

Unsurprisingly, Islamic revivalism and the state’s Islamisation policy brought about a parallel religious revivalism among the non-Malays that is partially a response to the alienating effects of modernity and as an act of re-affirming one’s social identity in the face of what is happening in the Malay-Muslim religious field (Ramanathan, 1996; Loh, 2003). As a result, everyday interactions in contemporary Malaysia are mediated by cultural distinctions centred upon ethnicity and religion.

Religion has become an important political resource for individual and groups as they attempt to create space that enable them to manoeuvre the increasing encroachment of the government into their everyday lives (Nagata, 1984; Ramanathan, 1996; Lee and Ackerman, 1998; Loh, 2003; Willford, 2007).

## 1.2 Research Question and Methodology

This thesis is interested in looking at the ways in which non-Malays use religion in an attempt to create space that enable them to manoeuvre the increasing encroachment by the government into their everyday lives. More specifically, it will focus on the Christians in the country. The central question which this thesis seeks to answer is: How are the Christians responding to the state's Islamisation project which is increasingly encroaching on their religious and everyday life spheres?

It should be noted that Malaysia is geographically divided between the peninsula and Sabah together with Sarawak. This thesis focuses on the Christians in the peninsula rather than Sabah and Sarawak (where Christians make up for more than half of the total population of both states combined).

There are two reasons why Christians in the peninsula – who form a small proportion of the population in this geographical – are chosen as the focus of this study. Firstly, the emphasis on the ethno-religious marker in the politics of peninsula is markedly stronger than it is in Sabah and Sarawak. Such emphasis on the ethno-religious marker is most clearly seen in the recent high court ruling over the issue on the right of non-Muslims, i.e. Christians, to use the word “*Allah*.” On 31<sup>st</sup> December 2009, the high court ruled in favour of the Catholic newspaper, the Catholic Herald, that it had the right to use the word “*Allah*” in its *Bahasa Malaysia* section in spite of the ban by the government.

Immediately after the ruling, a few churches in the peninsula experienced a rash of attacks on its buildings all over the peninsula where the cause of the attack was the court's ruling. Some Muslim non-government organizations organized public protests against the ruling and in the blogosphere and traditional media; there were heated debates on the issue which highlighted the ethno-religious contradictions that have beset society in the peninsula. By focusing on the Christians in the peninsula, the thesis throws into sharp relief the research question at hand.

Secondly, modernisation in Malaysia has proceeded unevenly with the peninsula experiencing a rapid pace of urbanization and economic development as compared with Sabah and Sarawak. Urbanization and economic development coincide with the rise of the middle class in the peninsula. As I will point out in the next section, the rise of the middle class and its participation in religion highlights the role of the middle class in transforming lay participation in churches. In so doing, they have also transformed the way in which the community responds to the state's increasing encroachment into their religious sphere.

From a methodological standpoint, this thesis will utilize the qualitative approach in data collection.<sup>4</sup> The primary instrument which I used to collect the data for analysis is the interview. I interviewed Christians across the denominational line and those from the clergy and laity. In addition, some of the interviewees serve in institutions such as the Christian Federation of Malaysia, the Methodist Education Council, etc. The

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<sup>4</sup> This thesis does not bring any methodological innovation to the table. The methodology which I have employed in this thesis is based on the standard approach as expounded in standard methodological texts. For this thesis, I have consulted Blaikie (2000); Esterberg (2002); and Seale, et al (2006) on the standard methods of data collection in the qualitative methodology.

interviews were designed to elicit opinions as well as individual and institutional responses to the state's encroachment on their religious sphere.

In addition to the interview, I have also used the participant–observation method as another means towards data collection. My primary research site was a small evangelical Protestant church located in the heart of Kuala Lumpur which I have observed for the past two years. Apart from this primary research site, I have also participated in a few conferences organized by some Christian organizations to discuss issues that confront the community.

In addition to the two instruments which I have used, data collection was further complemented by the use of secondary literature and primary documents which I have collected during my time in the field and in the library. Once the data had been collected, I analyzed the data to generate the answer to the research question which I have posed.

### **1.3 Literature Review**

This section serves two objectives. Firstly, it will review the major theoretical works on the relationship between religion and society. The aim here is to gain a broad overview of our current state of knowledge in this area, and therefore, provide us with an entry point into this thesis proper. Secondly, it will also construct a theoretical framework with which to frame the analysis of this thesis.

### *1.3.1 Modernisation, Secularisation and the Death of Religion*

Casanova (1994, p. 211) argued that secularisation theory has served as the “main theoretical and analytical framework through which the social sciences have viewed the relationship of religion and [society]” and “may be the only theory which was able to attain a truly paradigmatic status within the modern social sciences. ... indeed, [it] is so intrinsically interwoven with all the theories of the modern world that one cannot discard [it] without putting into question the entire web, including much of the self-understanding of the social sciences” (Casanova, 1994, p. 17).

This situation is unsurprising as this theory can trace its intellectual ancestry all the way back to the founding fathers of the social sciences where “[i]n one form or another, ... was shared by all the founding fathers: from Karl Marx to John Stuart Mill, from Auguste Comte to Herbert Spencer, ..., from Emile Durkheim to Max Weber, from Wilhelm Wundt to Sigmund Freud, ..., from Robert Park to George H. Mead” (Casanova, 1994, p. 17). As a result, the “consensus was such that not only did the theory remain uncontested but apparently it was not even necessary to test it, since everybody took it for granted. This means that [secularisation theory] often served as the unstated premise of many of the founding fathers’ theories, it itself was never either rigorously examined or even formulated explicitly and systematically” (Casanova, 1994, p. 17).

Nonetheless, the foundations for the latter formulation of this theory can be found in the works of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Both scholars shared

... the view that the old historical religions cannot survive the onslaught of the modern world. Both take for granted that, in Durkheim's worlds, 'the old gods are growing old or already dead' and that, in any case, they will not be able to compete with the new gods, which Durkheim believed modern societies would create for themselves, or the modern polytheism of values and its unceasing and irreconcilable struggle which, according to Weber, has resulted from the process of differentiation of the various secular spheres as they press to realize their own 'internal and lawful autonomy.' The old churches, for Weber, remain only as a refuge for those 'who cannot bear the fate of the times like a man' and are willing to make the inevitable 'intellectual sacrifice' (Casanova, 1994, p. 18).

It was through the works of such scholars such as Peter Berger (1969), Thomas Luckmann (1967) and Bryan Wilson (1982) among others – drawing on the insights of Weber and Durkheim – that this theory began to be systematically formulated.

However, it should be noted that one of the major difficulties in discussing the theory of secularisation is that there is no one accepted formulation of the theory as such. Rather, the so-called theory is but a plurality of formulations. This has led critics such as Hadden (1987, p. 598) to argue that secularisation theory is nothing more than “a hodgepodge of loosely employed ideas” rather than a formal theory as such.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Tschannen (1991) had demonstrated that there exists a sufficient consensus among the theorists that qualifies secularisation theory to be understood as a paradigm in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1970). The theory contains “a very broad set of assumptions and analytical categories” (Tschannen, 1991, p. 395) shared by all the theorists even though they may disagree in the details.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Shiner (1966).



Broadly speaking, all accounts of the theory of secularisation share a single narrative concerning the trajectory of religion in the modern world. According to Haynes (1997, p. 713), secularisation theory

... implies a unidirectional process, whereby societies move from a sacred condition to successively areligious states; the sacred becomes increasingly social and politically marginal. ... secularisation was an integral facet of modernisation, a global trend. Everywhere, ..., religion would become privatised losing its grip on culture, becoming a purely personal matter, no longer a collective force with mobilising potential for social change.”

At the core of this theory lies the proposition that *modernisation* is the key determinant that will ensure the long-term decline of the social significance of religion in the modern world. Herbert (2003, p. 35) puts it in the following statement:

‘Modernisation’ itself is a complex and contested concept that refers to a range of inter-related processes operating at economic, political, social and cultural levels and originating in Western Europe since the fifteenth century, ... at an economic level these developments include the expansion of the capitalist system and the spread of industrialization, enhanced in the second Industrial Revolution (from 1850) by the widespread application of scientific knowledge and possibly entering a new stage, with the emergence of increasingly service-oriented and information-based economies. Politically, they include the emergence of nation states and the development of bureaucracy to deepen their power, but also the development of representative institutions and concepts of individual rights. At a social level they include the breakdown of face-to-face communities (*Gemeinschaft*) by urbanization and increased mobility, leading to modern society (*Gesellschaft*) of strangers and *anomie* ..., but also unprecedented individual opportunities.

More specifically, modernisation brings with it three processes that will ensure the gradual decline of religion. We will now look at each of these processes separately in order to gain a fuller understanding of secularisation theory.

### 1.3.1(a) Social Differentiation

The central feature of modernisation is the process of *social differentiation* which Tschannen (1991, p.404) identified as “absolutely central to all the secularisation theories, without exception.” Briefly, social differentiation refers to “the increasing division and specialization not only of labour but also of many areas of human activity” (Herbert, 2003, p. 35).

Modernisation requires that society develops a series of social spheres, e.g., politics, economics, education, legal etc, where each sphere became *differentiated* from one another as each follows its own internal logic or what Weber calls as their “internal and lawful autonomy” (quoted in Casanova, 1994, p. 20).<sup>6</sup> What follows from this process was that

[some] of [these] spheres, particularly the emerging modern absolutist state and the emerging capitalist economy, were more lawful and more autonomous than the others. It would probably show as well that it was their differentiation from one another, their mutual dependence and their clashes, that more than anything else dictated the dynamics of the whole process. Actually, these two secular spheres, states and markets, now tended to dictate the very principles of classification which served to structure the new modern system (Casanova, 1994, pp. 20-21).

At the same time, religion “came fully into its own, specializing in ‘its own religious’ function and either dropping or losing many other ‘nonreligious’ functions it had accumulated and could no longer meet efficiently” (Casanova, 1994, p. 21).

What resulted from this process was the declining importance of religion in different aspects of social life. For example, medieval Christianity opposes the practice of usury – charging interest for monetary loans – which it considered as “sinful.” With the advent of modern capitalism, such behaviour is considered as part of the normal economic practice in modern society which has discarded the dictates of religious logic of such behaviour in favour of its own “internal and lawful autonomy,” i.e., maximizing profit.

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<sup>6</sup> Italics in the original.

To sum up, social differentiation brought about a condition where religion gradually loses control over various aspects of social life which became increasingly “secularized” which the Oxford Dictionary defined as “not concerned with religion.” This definition, perhaps, gives the best encapsulation of the fate of religion in the modern world.

#### 1.3.1(b) Privatisation

The next feature associated with modernisation is that of “societalization” which refers to the process of “human life [becoming] increasingly enmeshed and organized, not locally but societally (that society being most evidently, but not uniquely, the nation state)” (Wilson, 1982, p. 154). More specifically, it refers to the breakup of small rural communities that follows from industrialization where religion had served to bind such communities together.

With industrialization came urbanization which resulted in the disengagement of religion from the larger urban communities. Religion could no longer function as the integrative force, in the Durkheimian sense, of society. The process of social differentiation witnessed the emergence of new social spheres that began to supplant the governing religious sphere by fragmenting daily social life into the public and the private spheres. Whereas in pre-modern society, religion had governed the conduct of daily life ranging from the marketplace to everyday behaviour, now it finds itself relegated to the realm of the private that is irrelevant to the conduct of the public sphere, which is based on the criteria of instrumental logic (Wilson, 1982).

Conversely this situation that takes place in the objective realm of the social world is also replicated in the subjective realm of the individual consciousness. Religion could no longer provide a plausible structure (that is provide a meaningful universe for the individual), to borrow a concept from Berger (1969), to support a religious worldview. In its place is the rational worldview with its utilitarian conception of the world.

What is significant about this process is that the quest “[for] subjective meanings is a strictly personal affair. The primary ‘public’ institutions (state, economy) no longer need or are interested in maintaining a sacred cosmos or public religious worldview” (Casanova, 1994, p. 37). This was because each sphere operates under its own “internal and lawful autonomy” based on rationality rather than the dictates of theology.<sup>7</sup> In the end, religion became a matter of private faith which is of no concern to the political life of modern societies.

### 1.3.1(c) Rationalisation

The final aspect which is associated with modernisation is “rationalisation.” This process refers to the abandonment of the religious worldview which emphasises the supernatural and the adoption of a rational worldview which emphasize natural causes in understanding the workings of the world around the individuals (Weber, 1958; Berger, 1969; Wilson, 1982). As a result, religion becomes increasingly anachronistic in a world where the rational worldview takes hold of the mind of people.

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<sup>7</sup> See Weber (1958) for a classic treatment of this theme.

Given these three processes of modernisation, it is unsurprising that secularisation theory maintains that religion would lose its hold over social life and gradually retreat from the public sphere (Shelley, 2004, p. 150). Herbert (2003, p. 35) puts it more succinctly when he said: “[m]odernization is at the heart of secularisation theory: it is the deep structure leading to the long-term decline of the social significance of religion.”

Unsurprisingly then, social scientists – before the 1980s – do not generally consider religion as a substantive area of research. Greatly influenced by secularisation theory, they “[perceive] the process of modernisation ... as one of fundamental change from a traditional socio-political order to a modern one. [They argued] that modernisation generates new integrative symbols and structures and fosters the process of secularisation; in short, religion and religious values are destined to lose their place with the advent of modernisation” (Verma, 2002, p. 89).<sup>8</sup>

### *1.3.2 Shattering the Orthodox Consensus*

For almost a century since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, secularisation theory reigned supreme in the study of religion in the modern world. It was considered the orthodox consensus among social scientists on the fate of religion in the modern world.

However, beginning with the 1980s, the orthodox consensus was irrevocably shattered when religions worldwide, rather than withdrawing, began to actively participate in society socially as well as politically with events such as the rise of the religious right in America as a political force, the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence in Islamic societies, the political agitation of the Solidarity movement in Poland, and the

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<sup>8</sup> See Almond and Powell (1966) for a classical statement of secularisation theory in political science.

involvement of the Catholic Church in political conflicts in Latin America (Casanova, 1994, p.3).<sup>9</sup>

In this section, I will be reviewing some of the key alternative theories that have emerged in this area in order to give us a broad understanding of the current theoretical understanding among social scientists on the fate of religion in the modern world.

### 1.3.2(a) Rational Choice Theory

One recent challenge mounted against the theory of secularisation was by a group of American sociologists (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; Iannaccone, 1992a; Finke and Iannaccone, 1993; and Warner, 1993). They argued that modernisation is irrelevant to the survival of religion in the modern world. Instead it was argued that the “rates of religious beliefs and practice follow cycles over long period of time (hundreds of years) and are largely determined by market conditions” (Herbert, 2003, p. 43).

Known as the “supply-side” or “religious economy” theory – based on the rational choice theory found in economics – its basic insight is that

... religious regulation and monopolies create lethargic religions ... but that capable religions thrive in pluralistic, competitive environments. Capable religions thrive because their religious ‘entrepreneurs’ capitalize on unregulated religious environment to aggressively market their religions to new ‘consumers’; in these environments religious ‘firms’ (denominations and traditions) that possess superior organizational structures (denominational polities), sales representatives (evangelists and clergy), products (religious message), and marketing (evangelistic) techniques flourish. Those that do not cannot successfully compete and so decline numerically. Nonetheless, with pluralism and competition, at the aggregate level, the total amount of religious participation in the society increases, since more and more religious consumers are induced into participation by the variety of religious products that satisfy their needs and wants (Smith, 1998, p. 73).

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<sup>9</sup> For a sample of the burgeoning literature on the vitality of religion in the modern world, see Tamney (1979), Marty and Appleby (1991), Casanova (1994), Martin (1996), Smith (1998), Berger (1999), Kim (2000), and Jenkins (2002).

Using this theory, Finke and Stark (1992) argued that American churches were able to increase their membership from the end of the eighteenth century to the present day because it has never established a state religion, i.e., religious monopoly, while the opposite can be observed from the Western European experience. Church membership has declined exactly because state churches there struggled to maintain their position as a religious monopoly where choice is restricted.

### 1.3.2(b) Strictness Theory

A variation of rational choice theory, the “strictness theory” looks at the “micro-level normative demands and expectations that different religious groups impose on their members” (Smith, 1998, p. 71) as an explanation for religious vitality. Briefly, this theory argues that “strict” religious groups will thrive while “lenient” religious groups suffer decline in membership. The two most important proponents of this theory are Dean Kelley (1972) and Laurence Iannaccone (1992b; 1994).

Using statistics and graphs, Kelly (1972) demonstrated that since the 1960s mainline-liberal Protestant churches in the United States have faced numerical decline while at the same time conservative churches are experiencing growth. The reason suggested was that the former are lenient while the latter are strict.

According to Kelly (1972), the business of religion is to provide its adherents with meaning and a religious group can only thrive if it can deliver on its promise (Kelly, 1972, p. 36-46). As a caveat, he pointed out that such meanings are not merely religious ideas and concepts which “do not require anything of those who espouse them” (Kelly, 1972, p. 52). Rather religious ideas and concepts demand commitment in terms of lifestyle and value system.

As Kelly (1972, pp. 52-53) puts it:

We want something more than a smooth, articulate verbal interpretation of what life is all about. Words are cheap; we want explanations that are validated by the commitment for the other persons. ... What costs nothing accomplishes nothing. If it costs nothing to belong to a community, it can't be worth much. So the quality that enables religious meanings to take hold is not their rationality, their logic, their surface credibility, but rather the demand they make upon their adherents and the degree to which that demand is met by commitment.<sup>10</sup>

Unsurprisingly, mainline-liberal Protestant churches are faltering exactly because they are “lenient,” i.e., espousing relativistic beliefs and values together with an appreciation for a plurality of lifestyles and views. Apparently, such leniency has produced a membership that is characterized by “lukewarmness (indecisiveness and reluctance to sacrifice for the group), individualism (personal autonomy, resistance to discipline, readiness to leave the group), and reserve (reluctance to share faith with others or insights and convictions with the group)” (Smith, 1998, p. 72).

By contrast, the conservative wing of Christianity in America is “strict,” i.e., demand high levels of conformity in terms of beliefs and lifestyles. It has produced a membership that is characterized by “high levels of commitment (willingness to sacrifice for the religious group), discipline (willingness to obey leaders and accept discipline) and missionary zeal (eagerness to spread the faith)” (Smith, 1998, p.72).

As a result, “lenient groups, by making few demands, fail to authenticate for their followers the meanings their faith espouses, they tend over time to weaken and decline. Strict religious groups, on the other hand, successfully generate satisfying meaning and so thrive and grow” (Smith, 1998, p. 72).

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<sup>10</sup> Italics in the original.



Iannaccone (1992b; 1994) also contends for the “strictness” thesis but from a different point of view. He argued that certain religious groups grow and thrive in modern society not because it offers richer meanings for its adherents but rather they screen out free riders – people who want to enjoy the benefits of the religious group while contributing little to the group.

He argued that it is not possible in a strict and demanding religious group for a member to enjoy religious benefits, e.g., worship services, pastoral care and counselling as well as wedding and funeral services without at the same time contributing a proportionate amount of time, energy and money back to the church.

Such “investments” are necessary for the group to generate such “collective goods” in the first place. As a result, such groups that screen out free riders are able to enjoy a high degree of commitment, solidarity and investment among its members. In turn, this enables such religious organizations to grow and thrive in modern societies. By contrast, lenient religious groups that do not screen out free riders will generate fewer religious benefits as too many free riders take more than what they give thereby creating an environment of apathy and disinterest among its members which will lead to the decline of such religious organizations (Iannaccone, 1994).

Although rational choice theory and strictness theory do not directly address the issue of the relationship between religion and politics, it would seem that both theories share the fundamental assumption made by secularisation theory, namely politics is demarcated from personal faith.

### 1.3.2(c) Subcultural Identity Theory of Religious Strength

Smith (1998) in his study of religious vitality in America noted that “[c]ontemporary American Evangelicalism is thriving. It is more than alive and well. ... it appears to be the strongest of the major Christian traditions in the United States” (Smith, 1998, p. 20).<sup>11</sup> The question is why this traditional religious movement is thriving in a society that epitomizes modernity when conventional wisdom in the sociology of religion has argued the decline of religion in modern society.

Using the following dimensions as indicators for religious vitality:

(1) faithfully adhere to essential Christian beliefs; (2) consider their faith a highly salient aspect of their lives; (3) reflect great confidence and assurance in their Christian beliefs; (4) participate regularly in a variety of church activities and programs; (5) are committed in both belief and action to accomplishing the mission of the church; and (6) sustain high rates of membership retention by maintaining members' association with the tradition over long periods of time, effectively socializing new members into that tradition, and winning new converts to that tradition (Smith, 1998, p. 21).

Smith (1998) discovered that evangelical Christians scored high in all the dimensions above.<sup>12</sup> This discovery begs the question stated above. Offering what he calls a “Subcultural Identity Theory of Religious Strength,” and contrary to the secularisation theory, he argued that

American evangelicalism...is strong not because it is shielded against, but because it is—or at least perceives itself to be—embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it. Indeed, evangelicalism...thrives on distinction, engagement, conflict, and threat. Without these, evangelicalism would lose its identity and purpose and grow languid and aimless. Thus ... the evangelical movement's vitality is not a product of its protected isolation from, but of its vigorous engagement with pluralistic modernity (Smith, 1998, p. 121).

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<sup>11</sup> Evangelicals are a subgroup within Protestant Christianity which is essentially conservative. They cut across denominational lines and sometimes are founded outside of denominations.

<sup>12</sup> In this study, Smith (1998) together with a team of researchers conducted 130 two-hour interviews in the summer of 1995 which was then followed by a telephone survey of 2,591 respondents between January and March of 1996 where 2,087 identified themselves as Protestant Christians. Then, in the summer of 1996, follow-up face-to-face interviews were conducted with 96 respondents who identified themselves as evangelicals from the phone interviews after which an additional 85 evangelicals from local evangelical churches were also interviewed. Finally, a phone interview was conducted with eight people who identified themselves as fundamentalists and six who had identified themselves as liberal Christians, Smith (1998)

His theory, in a nutshell, can be stated in the following propositions.

*Religion survives and can thrive in pluralistic, modern society by embedding itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities which provide adherents meaning and belonging. ... In a pluralistic society, those religious groups will be relatively stronger which better possess and employ the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural (Smith, 1998, pp. 118-119).<sup>13</sup>*

In other words, he is simply saying that evangelicals are thriving because they draw their group identity by identifying an out-group or groups (often menacing) where they then draw real and symbolic boundaries between themselves and such groups. As a result, religious vitality is maintained in the face of modernisation.

#### 1.3.2(d) Religion in a Postmodern World

One word that has gained increasing currency within social-scientific discourse in recent years is “postmodern.” At the risk of simplifying the concept, postmodern denotes a condition of scepticism towards what Lyotard (1986) calls “metanarratives” or background stories that give justification to the quest for truth or certainty (e.g., science and religion). Unsurprisingly, some social scientists offer an explanation on religious vitality based on the postmodern perspective.

Using empirical data derived from the World Values Surveys (1981 and 1991) – a comparative study of 43 societies around the world – Inglehart (in Herbert 2003, p. 45) relates the process of modernisation to cultural changes (which include religious changes). He argued that modernisation theory as expounded by secularisation theorists is roughly correct for one phase of modernisation, but that it fails to capture the changes that occur as populations in advanced industrial societies reach a point where increases in material wealth no longer convert into perceptions of an increased quality of life

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<sup>13</sup> Italics in the original.

(Herbert, 2003, p. 45). At this stage, issues such as the environment, spirituality, etc, become more important as it has an impact on the quality of life.

Here, we are witnessing a shift from “materialist values” to what he calls as “postmaterialist values”:

The term ‘Postmaterialist’ denotes a set of goals that are emphasized after people have attained material security and because they have attained material security ... The emergence of postmaterialism does not reflect a reversal of polarities but a change of priorities: Postmaterialists do not place a negative value on economic and physical security – they value it positively, like everyone else; but, unlike materialists, they give even higher priority to self-expression and to quality of life (Inglehart, 1997 cited in Herbert, 2003, p. 45).

Inglehart calls this process “postmodernisation” which have various features that are associated with cultural postmodernism, i.e., “a revalorization of tradition, a renewed emphasis on culture, a decline in ‘metanarratives’ (certainty-giving stories), whether in science, religion or the nation, which proceed from the earlier process of modernisation which have succeeded in bringing about economic growth but at the expense of quality of life” (Herbert, 2003, p. 45). As a result,

Postmodernisation represents a shift in survival strategies, from maximizing economic growth to maximizing survival and well-being. ... [N]o strategy is optimal for all conditions. Modernisation ... probably also increased psychological stress. ... Postmodernisation, on the other hand, has a mildly negative linkage with economic growth, but a strong positive linkage with subjective well-being. With the transition from Modernisation to Postmodernisation, the trajectory of change seems to have shifted from maximizing economic growth to maximizing the quality of life (Inglehart, 1997 cited in Herbert, 2003, p. 46).

Such a context, he goes on to suggest, may be fertile grounds for religions that can accommodate such *zeitgeist* which usually means newer forms of religions such as the New Age movement, new religious movement and new styles of traditional religions rather than the traditional authoritarian religions, e.g., Roman Catholicism (Herbert, 2003: 46). Religion then, as this theory seems to imply, is becoming a personal choice which carries no public significance.

### 1.3.2(e) Clifford Geertz and Karen Armstrong on the Persistence of Religion in the Modern World

Geertz (1973b) begins by pointing out that humanity is by nature a creature that seeks to find meaning for his existence through religion. The function of religion is “to synthesise a people’s ethos – the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer reality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order” (Geertz, 1973b: 89).

In other words, religion provides people with a narrative frame from which to make sense of the world around them and thereby finding their place in the world. By fulfilling this function, religion is able to persist in the modern world despite the rise of the modern rational mindset.

Karen Armstrong (2000) in her book “The Battle for God” extended Geertz’s insight by forwarding the political implications of the global resurgence of religion. Religion provides a narrative frame for the individual to find meaning and thereby orienting him/her to the world in which they live.

Modernisation did not relegate religion either in the dustbin of history or into the private sphere of beliefs. Rather religion had entered into the public sphere making it heard and not ignored by the state. The persistence of religion in the modern world was due to the fact that it essentially provides people with what she calls “*mythos*” which “provided people with a context that made sense of their day-to-day lives” (Armstrong, 2000, p. xv).

Modernisation with its overemphasis on rationality displaced *mythos* in the modern world. This left people bereft of a resource which can help them make sense of their everyday lives. Disoriented, some have chosen to return to religion to access *mythos* to overcome the sterile world of rationality. However, this turn is not a return towards pre-modern forms of religion but was rather “modern forms of faith that was often highly innovative, ready to jettison centuries of tradition” (Armstrong, 2000, p. 279).

This turn towards religion is not a matter of personal conversion alone but carries with it political overtones that had drawn a battle line in society between the religious and the secular. The former, feeling embattled, have decided that they must take the battle of bringing God back into history from which he had been excluded by the secularist in an attempt to preserve their vision of the world from being destroyed by modernisation. It is ironic to note that while the religious rejected the spirit of modernity, they did not reject the modern tools provided by modernity in achieving their aims (Armstrong, 2000).

More importantly, she argued this turn towards religion is not a throwback to the pre-modern forms of faith but rather a specific modern response to the pitfalls of modernity which threatens to bring nihilism. Such response is not just a personal conversion of the individual towards a private faith but an active faith that seeks to participate in the political sphere in the name of God in order to preserve what is perceived as an attempt to exclude the sacred from the rest of society, and hence, a threat to their worldview. In so doing, religion has entered back into the political arena against the prediction of secularisation theory (Armstrong, 2000).