**Assess the view that religion is not in decline but simply changing as a result of changes in wider society (33 marks)**

Wilson defines secularisation as when “religious beliefs, practices and institutions lose social significance”. Secularisation theorists argue that religion is in decline. However, others have argued that religion is not in decline, but it is in fact changing. They believe it is changing in accordance to the changes within society such as greater individualism, consumerism, or a shift towards postmodern societies.

Grace Davie argues that religion isn’t declining but is taking a much more privatised form. She argues that we now have believing without belonging, where people hold religious beliefs but don’t necessarily go to church because they don’t feel they have to go to church. Therefore, the decline in traditional religion is matched by the growth of a new form of religion. Davie notes a trend towards vicarious religion, which is where a small number of professional clergy practice religion on behalf of a much larger group of people, who experience it at second hand. This pattern is typical in Britain where church attendance is low, but people still use the church for rites of passage (e.g. baptisms, weddings and funerals). She compares vicarious religion to the tip of an iceberg and sees it as evidence for believing without belonging. For example, people may not be able to attend church due to work commitments, they have children to look after or maybe they find it more comfortable to worship at home. According to Davie, the secularisation theory assumes that modernisation affects every society in the same way, causing decline in religion and replacement by science. She argues against this and says that there are multiple modernities: e.g. Britain and America are both modern societies, but have different patterns of religion in terms of church attendance, which is high in America, and low in Britain but accompanied by believing without belonging.

However, Voas and Crockett don’t accept the claim that there is more believing without belonging. They use evidence from the British Attitudes Survey from which shows both church attendance and belief in God are declining. Also, Bruce criticises Davie by saying that if people can’t be bothered to invest time in going to church, this just reflects the declining strength of their beliefs.

Similarly, Hervieu-Leger supports Davie’s idea of believing without belonging and personal choice. She argues that cultural amnesia (a loss of collective memory) has meant that people have lost religion that they used to hand down from generation to generation, because fewer parents now teach their children about religion. Also, a trend towards greater social equality has undermined traditional Church’s power to impose religion on people from above. Therefore, young people no longer inherit a fixed religious identity and they’re ignorant of traditional religion. However, religion still continues through individual consumerism as people have become ‘spiritual shoppers’. Religion is now more individualised as we now develop our own do-it-yourself beliefs that fit in with our inspirations and aspirations. This has meant that religion has become a personal spiritual journey and Hervieu-Leger argues that two religious types are emerging: pilgrims (follow their own path e.g. New Age) and converts (join religious groups with a strong sense of belonging e.g. evangelic churches). The increasing individualism and decline in traditional beliefs and institutions fits in with the idea of us living in a late modern society.

Lyon also agrees with Davie that believing without belonging is increasingly popular in wider society. He argues that the features of a postmodern society such as globalisation (growing interconnectedness of societies), the increased importance of media and consumerism are changing the nature of religion. He argues that there has been a relocation of religion, where religious ideas have been ‘disembedded’ as the media lift them out of their local contexts, and move them to a different time and place e.g. televangelism relocates religion to the internet and TV, allowing people to express their beliefs without actually going to church. Lyon describes the Harvest Day Crusade in Disneyland as an example of how the boundaries between different areas of social life have become blurred in postmodern society. This also links with the idea of religious consumerism, as we are ‘spiritual shoppers’ choosing religious beliefs and practices to meet our individual needs, from the vast range on offer in the religious marketplace. Lyon argues that religion has relocated to the sphere of consumption. While people have ceased to belong to religious organisations, they haven’t totally abandoned religion, instead they’ve become ‘religious consumers’. For example, Madonna is a ‘spiritual shopper’, ‘religious consumer’ and fits in with the notion of pick and mix, as she follows a range of beliefs stemming from Catholicism, Kabbalah (Judaism) and yoga (Buddhism).

However, Lyon criticises the evidence used by secularisation theorists, such as church attendance statistics, but the alternatives he puts forward such as the idea of televangelism are not based on extensive evidence. Also, Bruce argues that the consumerist religion Lyon describes is a weak religion; it has little effect on the lives of it believers. Bruce argues that the rise is in consumerist religions is evidence for secularisation and not the continuing vitality of religion.

Stark and Bainbridge criticise the secularisation theory for being Eurocentric; failing to explain religious vitality in the US. They also criticise it for its ‘distorted view’ of the past and future: they say there was no past ‘golden age’ and that it’s unlikely that everyone will become atheist in future. Instead, they offer the religious market theory (or rational choice theory). Their theory is based on two assumptions: people are naturally religious and religion meets human needs, and people make rational choices based on the costs and benefits of the available religious options. Living in a postmodern society, is like a huge supermarket where we shop for an identity that suits us. Religion is attractive because it provides supernatural compensators (e.g. immortality in unobtainable, but religion promises life after death). They argue that there is a historical cycle of religious decline, revival and renewal: as established churches decline, they leave a gap in the market for new cults and sects. There is also this idea of competition, which leads to improvements in the quality of religious ‘goods’ on offer; the churches that make their products attractive will attract the most ‘customers’.

However, Beckford criticises the religious market theory for being unsociological, because it assumes people are naturally religious and doesn’t explain why people make the choices they do. Also, Bruce criticises them for misinterpreting the secularisation theory; it claims that religion is in long-term decline and only applies to the USA and Europe. Norris and Inglehart show findings that contradict Stark and Bainbridge’s theory: high religious participation exists in countries where the church has a monopoly (Ireland and Venzuela), countries that have religious pluralism have low levels of participation (Austria and Netherlands).

In conclusion, I agree that religion isn’t declining but is in fact changing in accordance with the changes in wider society. I think that Grace Davie’s notion of believing without belonging is the strongest argument to support this because she is able to explain that although people are less likely to go to church due to the changes in society, they are still religious and believe in god. Also, the features of living in a late modern and postmodern society means that we have a wider choice in how we practice our religious beliefs and make them suit our individual needs.