

Confronting a Secular Age

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Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford and New York, OUP, 2011. pp. 243. £16.99. ISBN: 978-0-19-958440-0).

Steve Bruce's *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*, as the title suggests, is an explicitly uncompromising exhortation to take up the secularization paradigm (i.e. 'secularization thesis') once and for all and without hesitation. A deeply interesting, well-written and well-informed book from a sociologist trained in statistics and qualitative evidence, Bruce admits up front that secularization is to be understood as an irreversible process whereby the loss of interest in religion, over the course of the last two centuries, has moved from marginal to preponderant in the modern west. But this theory, he emphatically highlights, cannot, in principle, bring to light the invariable essence of modernity's relationship to religion (the secularization thesis is not akin to the timelessness of Boyle's law). Nor does the secularization theory advance a blithely unreflective celebration of the decline of religion in absolutely linear terms, tidily tracing a line from the Reformation to present day that proceeds with downward momentum only to accelerate in stride sometime during the mid nineteenth-century as the uptick in industrialization leads straightaway to an uptick in secularization. Bruce is aware that the secularization, while quite obviously irreversible at this advanced stage, was not necessarily always inevitable (p. 59).

The book builds on and advances from, in part, Bruce's earlier work *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (2002), wherein he

argues that secularization does not inhabit an even trajectory. The present book is thus dedicated to reinforcing such a thesis by highlighting the varying speeds at which secularization takes hold in the west. Suffice it to say Bruce aspires to cover the complex story of modernity manifest in and through a vast range of historical, cultural, religious and economic factors measurable (for the most part) by statistics and made intelligible by tables and flow charts (see his table on p. 27 for example). The first three chapters, therefore, narrate secularization on three levels: describing, explaining and clarifying secularization as a concept. The most interesting, and illuminating, of these chapters is the third one which focuses on clarifying what secularization is, and is not. To this end, Bruce challenges those who are hasty in their characterization of the secularization thesis so evident in their reductive tendency to caricature what they do not fully understand. Upending one challenge after another, Bruce makes clear that the secularization thesis is, above all, at least in Britain (a paradigm for much of the west), a story of decline, abrupt and gradual, and one fully tied to the social instability of twentieth-century Europe. In the 1940s no one generally voiced their negative opinion about religion, even if one were a lifelong atheist. However, in 2009 and presumably more so in 2012, Bruce points to a popular online comment thread on the Guardian's website that proves that many are willing to say they are atheists but were unable to pinpoint with precision the moment they became 'atheists'—given that for a long time they were only going through the motions

to placate, say, a grandparent. Bruce presupposes that in twenty years there will no longer be a grandparent to placate if the trend continues. Generational drift, from the early twentieth-century up to the present, reveals the gradual decline not only in church attendance but also in belief, cultural identity, family stability and social homogeneity—all of which strengthen the tide of secularization as it gains momentum.

Even ‘new’ forms of spirituality and appropriations of eastern religious practices (chapter five) cannot hold secularization at bay, and thus, cannot make up the difference in light of the massive loss of interest in religion in the west. Secularization, in other words, is not in the least proved false by the upsurge in new forms of spirituality. But why? Bruce argues, rather bluntly, that such new forms of spirituality simply do not count as significant forms of religion in the modern west in terms of the number of followers, ideological coherence or psychological commitment. He gives a poignant statistical example. Take Kendal, a small town in the north-west of England. In 1851, 38% of the population attended church. If church attendance was as popular now as it was then (as detractors of the secularization theory tend to maintain), then in 2011, 14,500 churchgoers would be attending every Sunday rather than the present 3,000. This means secularization is continuing apace as Bruce predicts. Or is it? Many detractors, Bruce points out, argue that holistic spirituality throws secularization into doubt. They say that holistic spirituality and ‘non-institutional’ spirituality is taking the place of historic institutional Christianity—thereby rendering secularization an exaggerated reading of signs of decline at best and an obsolete theory at worst.

Let us return to Kendal. Bruce points out that in present-day Kendal there are about 11,000 people not attending church that should be if the percentage from 1851 were to hold even, which means, that if holistic spirituality were replacing traditional religion, then there should be, in theory, roughly 11,000 participants involved in

the holistic milieu to make up the difference; and yet, there are only 270 people involved today in such religious practices and services in Kendal. This means that there is only marginal interest in holistic spirituality, and as such, it cannot function as a substitute for traditional institutional religion. The fact remains, Bruce insists, all forms of religion are becoming less and less visible, whether institutional or holistic or even contemporary forms of superstition. In fact, holistic spirituality and superstition adamantly undermine religion precisely because they are so individualistic and eclectic in practice, for they constitute spiritual styles of privatization that support and nourish secularization (pp. 110-119).

The book then takes an interesting detour through the supply-side alternative (popular in sociology of religion in the last decade) that invokes economic theory in order to link up diverse societies to religious prosperity and growth. Current economic theory maintains the rather banal fact that the more choice and selection the more vibrant the customer base is, and so, with any religiously heterogeneous society there would be more religious adherents: Bruce shows this to be demonstrably false. The more diverse a society is the less vibrant its religious culture is. And besides, and I heartily concur with Bruce here as a theologian, market and economic theory cannot impose a framework of calculus and utility on religion. Religious practitioners, and certainly theological discourse, typically defies the urge to adopt economic language: religion cannot be relegated to a more basic economic structure, ordered by production paradigms that employ rational-choice language about ‘maximizing utility’ and ‘measuring costs and rewards.’

But what about America? This highly industrialized, technologically advanced country, the most wealthy by far in a vast global market, is nevertheless without doubt one of the most religious societies in the west. Certainly this combination of modernization and widespread religious adherence exempts it from Bruce’s secularization paradigm. Or does it? Bruce

confronts such a challenge directly, showing how ‘unexceptional’ America is when viewed from the vantage of the secularization paradigm. For ‘there is clear evidence of Christianity in the USA losing power, prestige, and popularity’ (p. 157). Even though church attendance may easily surpass that of Europe, there is demonstrable evidence that it is in steep decline since the 1950s. What is perhaps the most interesting claim of this chapter, at least for theologians and scholars of religion, is Bruce’s suggestion that the nature of US religion is essentially idolatrous, namely, it ‘secularizes their churches.’ American religion used to be concerned with worshipping and glorifying a personal and transcendent God but now it occupies less orthodox territory, shifting its attention away from traditional theological mores to more a therapeutic applicability and an anthropomorphic starting point. Earth’s other five billion or so inhabitants living in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America are certainly trending in the secular direction too, and some countries, like Brazil, may only be a few generations away from an utterly modern and industrial way of life—and Brazil’s modernization is, in large part, due to contact with the west. Globalization undoubtedly accelerates modernization (and thus secularization) in many parts of the world.

Bruce completes his book with a fascinating reprisal to Jurgen Habermas’s claim that Europe is quickly becoming ‘post-secular.’¹ While the influx of Muslims continues apace in Europe, and may initiate a renewal of religion there, Bruce sees the opposite just as likely to materialize: the longer Muslims live in Europe the more likely they are to become modernized and thus ‘secularize’ their faith. Where does Bruce go from here? What conclusions does draw from such an analysis? He does consider the possibility that secularism could be reversed but such a phenomenon would be plausible only if unforeseeable circumstance were to overtake the present situation.

The value that Bruce’s illuminating sociological study holds for theologians is clear: secularization shall probably continue and statistics shall probably continue bear out the facts on the ground: in the west, church attendance and the public presence of religion is on the decline and there is no indication that it is slowing. The increasingly global context in which we find ourselves may challenge the sometimes tidy narrative of the secularization theory, but Bruce’s tentative conjectures that modernization shall also lead to secularization in much of the rest of the world is interesting—if an overreaching generalization and an overly confident act of prescience. Nevertheless, for theologians in the west, contemporary theological discourse must take seriously the phenomenon of atheism, secularism and modernity, all historically tied to the European Enlightenment and Industrialization of society. Attending to the historical phenomenon of the Enlightenment, and its contemporary manifestation, has certainly led to what Charles Taylor calls a ‘Secular Age.’ How might a reflective theologian undertake the task of ‘doing theology’ in a secular age? As Taylor rightly observes, ‘Everyone can see that there have been declines in practice and declared belief in many countries, particularly in recent decades; that God is not present in public space as in past centuries, and so on for a host of other changes. But how to understand and interpret these changes may not be evident.’² Bruce may provide valuable statistical analysis and insightful cultural observation combined with a definitive storyline. But the real task is a philosophical and theological one: to understand, confront, expose, and interpret the ideological and theological substrates implicit in our contemporary age.

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¹ See Habermas, ‘Notes on Post-Secular Society,’ *New Perspectives Quarterly* (2008): 17-29.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 426.