

God is Dead

Steve Bruce, *University of Aberdeen* (2002) 260 pages

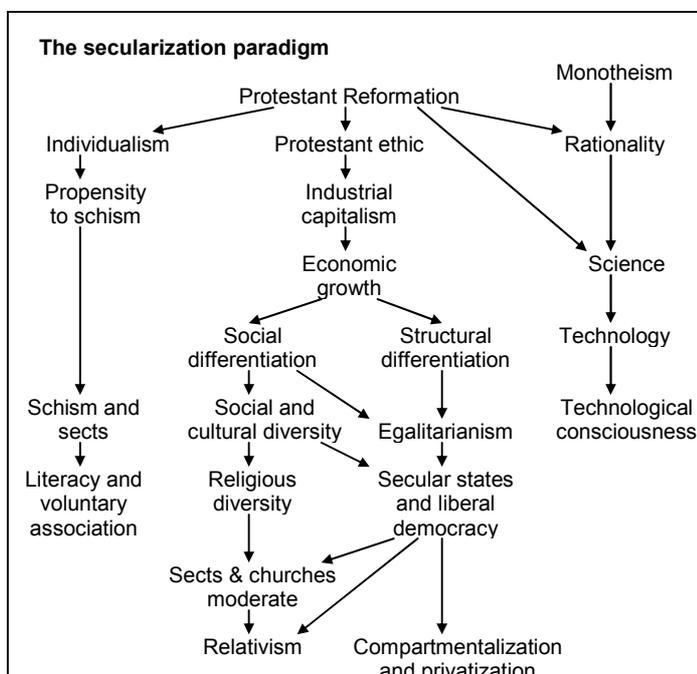
If the purpose of books is to get you thinking, then this one certainly served its purpose. It's the kind of book at which you shout 'of course that's wrong!' but then have to think through why you disagree with it and sort out prejudice from reason.

What counts as religion?

Bruce begins with a definition of religion: 'Beliefs, actions and institutions predicated on the existence of entities with powers of agency (that is, gods) or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose (the Hindu notion of Karma, for example), which can set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs'. Unfortunately he did not stick to it. By the end of the book religion meant a set of beliefs which would lead to the salvation of believers and the damnation of everyone else.

This new definition has its uses. It shows, for example, how Catholicism is more cohesive than Protestantism, because one of the beliefs of Catholicism is that salvation is attained within the church. For the Protestant, on the other hand, everyone is capable of coming to God themselves: this creates great potential for disagreement with others who also claim to have come to God themselves.

It also has problems in that it makes tolerance and religion incompatible: 'liberal' religion is watered-down proper religion and has no future of its own: 'So long as sectarian religion was popular, the liberal alternative had a pool from which it could recruit. For the ever-larger number of people who have not been socialized in a sectarian version of the Christian faith, the liberal alternative has very little support.' I didn't feel this bore any relation to the sort of 'radical orthodoxy' of the Christian circles I inhabit. Either Bruce has misunderstood religion, or my Christianity is sociologically insignificant.



The importance of relativism

Bruce summarises his argument in a diagram. In the central column, industrialisation has separated economic and domestic activity, so that whereas the mediaeval serf occupied one role in a single hierarchy, the oppressed workman could in the evening become a respected baptist lay preacher. The separation of players from their parts fosters egalitarianism, which undermines authority and nurtures relativism. But why should this undermine religion?

Meanwhile, on the right, science and technology have quietly displaced religion. If we are sick, or pregnant, or the crops fail, or we are choosing a new car, or setting out on a journey,

whereas in the past we would have turned to God for protection, deliverance and guidance, now we find a doctor or climatologist or *Which* magazine or an insurance company much more reliable. 'Science and technology do not create atheists: they just reduce the frequency and seriousness with which people attend to religion.' But is it science or wealth which gives us the confidence not to bother with God? Mathematics,

astronomy, biology can flourish amongst relative poverty, but healthcare, cars, and insurance companies are attributes of wealth.

It is assumed that a relativistic religion will disappear because it has no reason to evangelize, but this is not argued convincingly. Bruce accuses his opponents of amplifying a vague survey response about the meaning of life into a real concern for theological questions, but he commits the same mistake a few pages later. He quotes a survey which found little agreement amongst churchgoing adolescents to the statement 'Christianity is the one true religion and everybody should be converted to it', from which the researchers concluded that these people 'do not claim any universal validity for the Christian beliefs they hold and have no zeal for the conversion of non-Christians'. This is a leap of reasoning which would misrepresent many people's beliefs.

Bruce suggests that we have become 'Bhuddist by default', by which he means we hold vague, generalist positions which do not have much effect on our lives. This sounds strikingly like the 'country Pelagianism' which 17th-century Puritans criticised in the common people, who showed no inclination to be 'saved', but instead continued to assume that good people would be rewarded and bad people punished (which is not an orthodox Roman Catholic belief either). How different are we?

Change or decay?

Should we be talking about 'secularization' at all, or about a shift from one belief-system (labelled 'Christianity') to another labelled, perhaps, 'western values'? Bruce does not doubt that people are still looking for a 'meaning of life' and finding answers: 'serving your country or community, succeeding in your chosen profession, enjoying a hedonistic lifestyle, finding a cure for cancer, raising your children to be good citizens'.

The interesting question is not whether we are simply losing religion (about which sociologists try and fail to avoid revealing their personal feelings), but how shared beliefs and values are changing. We are losing comforting certainty, infant mortality, racism, close-knit communities, oppressive expectations of family, class prejudice; we are gaining women and gay rights, ecological catastrophe, the information revolution, teenage delinquency, obesity, freedom of thought, consumerism. These are concepts which can be quantified, discussed and judged with much more clarity and less prejudice than 'religion' but include all the concepts encompassed under its vague umbrella. Maybe we are losing *all* shared beliefs and values: but that is a different question.



Perhaps shared beliefs could be conceived as an animated weather map where highs and lows form, grow and disappear, while the climate slowly changes. In the short-term, as weather is different in Edinburgh and Glasgow, so religion is different in the US and Britain, although both are affluent democracies. Bruce notes that small, centralised Britain, although tolerant, tends to absorb sub-cultures because they inevitably interact with the surrounding society; whereas large, federal America allows groups such as the Amish to remain completely separate from the society which tolerates their presence. Meanwhile, the religious climate changes over centuries from paganism to Emperor worship to Roman Catholicism to Protestantism to 'western values'.

Wealth

Bruce concludes that societies displaying 'the characteristics of egalitarianism, diversity, liberal democracy' will conform to the secularization paradigm, and although he says that peace and prosperity are essential preconditions for this kind of society, he does not give

a special place to prosperity itself as a cause of secularization. This makes me uncomfortable, as it is wealth, and not egalitarianism or diversity, which seems to me to be irreconcilable with the religion of Jesus; and as I noted above, I am sceptical about the importance of relativism and science.

He does point out that, for example, the radicalism of the Pentecostal movement was undermined by the increasing wealth of its followers. Whereas at first ‘out there “in the world” you are worthless but here in the assembly you are a healer or a prophet’, for the modern charismatics, ‘being filled with the Holy Spirit is proof that they are actually pretty marvellous, divine confirmation of the very positive image they already have of themselves’ – but no longer making much difference to their lifestyle. However, this is an aside rather than a central argument.

Whither the trajectory?

I found myself wondering what would happen next – and what the church can learn from Bruce’s analysis. He sees our society as on a trajectory towards an increasingly liberal, wealthy, secular society, with little prospect of changing direction, but I prefer the multi-layered fractal pattern of the weather map to the one-way trajectory. It seems impossible to me, for instance, that we can continue for many decades to increase the wealth on which our peace and tolerance is built, when we are using the earth’s resources so unsustainably. And when the oil runs out, the climate changes, the superbugs take hold, and we rediscover poverty and war, I suspect a prophet will arise, and say something new that resonates with people who having lost their wealth and control have no convincing answers to the question ‘why am I here?’ Maybe the best we can do, like Simeon and Zacchaeus and Nicodemus, is to keep holy and watchful for the new stuff that God might do – as soon as money, not relativism, gets out of the way.

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