
Steve Bruce is Professor of Sociology at Aberdeen University, and a prolific writer of books on contemporary religion, especially on the connections between conservative Protestantism and politics. He is even better known for his consistent advocacy of the Secularisation Thesis, according to which processes of gradual secularisation have been central to the historical development of the Western world for several centuries and have been driven by “modernisation.” According to Bruce this process is “irreversible.” The thesis has been widely questioned both by other sociologists and by historians. Bruce is irritated by these doubts. In his view the fact of massive secularisation across the whole of Europe and North America is so obvious that no reasonable person can doubt it, and the Secularisation Thesis offers the most convincing explanation for these evident facts. In this book he presents the evidence, spells out the theory, and offers answers to many of the objections.

His starting point is medieval Europe, a society he contends, dominated by the church, where more or less everyone was a believer. At the present day, by contrast, religious believers are a minority—slightly more numerous in the United States than in Europe, admittedly—and the social significance of religion is very limited. Even the American Religious Right can only advance its agenda by using secular arguments. The fundamental reasons for this situation, he suggests, are sociological: beliefs owe their plausibility to social reinforcement, but shared beliefs are undermined by the diversity and individualism of modern societies. Faith in the supernatural has in any case been undermined by technological progress, bringing apparent human mastery over many areas of life. Furthermore, if a church reinterprets its teachings in a way that reduces the role of the supernatural (by for instance denying that everything in the Bible is “literally true”) that is defined as “internal secularisation.” His benchmark of Christian orthodoxy appears to be the beliefs and practices of conservative Protestants c. 1900. He rejects what the prominent British sociologist of religion, Grace Davie, has called “European exceptionalism”—secularisation is as much a reality in the United States (and Australia) as in Europe. But he is more cautious in interpreting the trends in Asia and Africa. He predicts that the current swing to Pentecostalism in Latin America will prepare the ground for later secularisation, but he accepts that the European example may offer a warning rather than an example to the rest of the world. He is not claiming that universal secularisation is inevitable.
The book is a pleasure to read. Bruce presents his arguments with admirable lucidity and sometimes mordant humour. One of his great strengths is the ability to find a telling illustration to give flesh and blood to his generalisations. The book is frankly a polemic: those wanting a balanced assessment of the secularisation debate will not find it here. Bruce delivers a remorseless attack on all those who have questioned the Secularisation Thesis. Some like the sociologists Davie and Lawrence Iannaccone or the historian Callum Brown are subjected to a detailed critique, while others are dealt with in more summary fashion. Bruce’s forceful style of advocacy will be appreciated by those already sympathetic to his case, but probably will not persuade the sceptical.

For myself, I enjoyed his demolition of the “supply-side” school of American sociologists, and more generally I found his analysis of the contemporary American situation broadly convincing. But there were also points which I found less persuasive. This is partly because I like nuance, whereas Bruce sees it as a distraction from the Big Picture. Thus he is unjustifyably dismissive of Davie’s observation that since more than 60% of contemporary Britons say they believe in God but fewer than 20% attend church, there is a situation of “believing without belonging.” Bruce objects that since both “believing” and “belonging” are declining, this observation obscures the reality of contemporary secularisation. But Davie is talking about the present situation, not the future (though she has in fact highlighted significant generational differences), and as a definition of the present this is quite pertinent. He is similarly dismissive of any attempt to redefine as “religious change” what he calls “internal secularisation.” Christian teaching and practice have been in constant development over the past two thousand years; but without some criteria for deciding which aspects of Christian doctrine and ethics are fundamental and which are open to reinterpretation in the light of social and intellectual change, new readings of the Bible, or other relevant factors, any attempt to define the changes as “secularising” seems quite arbitrary.

My other set of doubts arises from my perspective as a historian. Bruce is an authority on the contemporary religious situation, but his touch is less sure when he turns to history, and his treatment of the evidence is more cursory. While I would agree that there has been a long-term secularising trend in most parts of Europe, and in the United States too, I am struck by the different ways that this has happened in different countries, and by the very different chronologies. The claim that secularisation is an aspect of “modernisation” does not get us very far in explaining how and why this has come about. To demonstrate the link between secularisation and levels of “modernity” he draws heavily on the contemporary statistics of the American sociologists Norris and