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Review: Is God really dead, or is he/she just periodically ailing? To understand the background of this question is to know about the transatlantic feud which is being fought over predictions on the future development of religion. While Steve Bruce, professor of sociology at the University of Aberdeen, is one of the main protagonists defending the secularization paradigm, he and his party have come under harsh attack by a group of American sociologists who deny the process of secularization, most notably Rodney Stark. In a debate which is not always led in fairness it is a relief to read Bruce's well-balanced, well-informed and clear account of what sociologists since Max Weber have meant by secularization.

There is not a single one secularization theory, however, but a cluster of theses with some coherence. Bruce therefore prefers to talk about a secularization paradigm, the bottom line of which he sums up thus: "...individualism, diversity and egalitarianism in the context of liberal democracy undermine the authority of religious beliefs." "...religion diminishes in social significance, becomes increasingly privatized, and loses personal salience except where it finds work to do other than relating individuals to the supernatural." (p.30) Such other work constitutes the two main counter tendencies to secularization, i.e. cultural defence, as in ethnic conflicts, and cultural transition, which can provide a role for religion as a socializing agent in times of rapid social change.

Very helpful indeed is Bruce's overview of what the secularization paradigm does not assert, since many attacks against secularization theory have been based on such wrong interpretations. Neither does the paradigm promote secularism, nor does it predict secularization to be universal (Bruce explicitly limits his argument to the West), to be inevitable, to progress evenly, or to result in atheism. According to Bruce, secularization rather leads to indifference. In an interesting chapter on methodical problems in measuring latent religion, Bruce sees considerable overreporting here due to overinterpretation of vague questions as well as to assumptions on the inevitability of religion, for instance within the framework of functional definitions of religion.

Bruce is able to give a wealth of empirical data in support of his argument, and does not hesitate to discuss tricky issues. The role of science in secularization has been an indirect one rather than a direct clash with religion, so apparently paradoxical findings such as religious natural scientists do

not speak against secularization. Equally, American religiousness, which is higher than that of other industrialized countries, can be accounted for. Bruce calls to mind high immigration as well as the existence of local religious homogeneity, with resulting closed subcultural systems. Unfortunately, Bruce does not discuss the future stability of such closed subcultures. This would be an interesting issue with view to Britain as well. Here Bruce is right to assert that the numbers of religious minorities are too small to challenge the secularization paradigm. People with immigrant background, however, are not evenly distributed throughout Britain but tend to gather in certain places, thus forming local majorities. The question now is if religion might play a role beyond what Bruce has termed cultural transition, that is, if stable closed subcultural systems might newly develop. While this is certainly a phenomenon on a small scale, it would still be important to find out more about the causal mechanisms constituting secularization. Bruce gives a fairly complex diagram of the secularization paradigm the various items of which he claims to be causally connected, but he concedes at the same time that these connections are neither sufficient nor necessary. This makes for a nice orientation but leaves a lot to be explained.

Explanation of some key arguments is also insufficient. Max Weber has left us with an abundance of fascinating ideas about rationalization, but he has not left us a clear definition. Bruce flatly states that rationalization changes the way people think, without explaining which psychological mechanisms might account for this. It flies in the face of all cross-cultural cognitive psychology research, which has failed to unearth any such differences. In several other instances as well Bruce relies on highly problematic psychologistic concepts such as cognitive styles or technological consciousness instead of focussing on a purely sociological argument. Another problematic inheritance from Weber is Bruce's reliance on Protestant ethics as the central factor in modernization. While Weber's narrative is rich and detailed and, it has to be noted, was written at a time when historicism was en vogue, Bruce's line of argument is extremely simple and in consequence brings him to a number of strange conclusions. To make a case for Jewish-Protestant exceptionalism, Bruce tries to argue that the ancient Greek and Roman beliefs in hordes of gods or spirits who were whimsical erratic despots often behaving in an arbitrary fashion and - *horribile dictu* - even mated with humans must somehow have impaired Greek and Roman rationality (p.6). This would be just amusing if it wasn't such an obvious violation of Bruce's own standards to give not only value-neutral, but value-free sociological descriptions and explanations. Still some improvement springs to mind, since this passage is almost verbatim identical with p.13f. in his earlier book *Choice and Religion*, but leaves out some of the even wilder assertions stated there. Bruce's decision to limit his discussion to the West and to focus on that society he knows best, i.e. his own, would have been wise if it had made him refrain from such excursions. This would also have saved the reader from a good deal of Orientalism in his chapter on the Easternization of the West.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, *God is Dead* is an important contribution on the topic of secularization, because it provides the reader with very useful resources. Bruce does not only present his own stance, but he discusses all major contributions on the issue in a fair manner, including those of his critics.

References:

Bruce, Steve: *Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice Theory*. Oxford University Press
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