Secularization and the Impotence of Individualized Religion

Steve Bruce

The secularization paradigm combines two things: an assertion about changes in the presence and nature of religion, and a collection of related explanations of those changes. It is not a universally applicable scientific law, but a description and explanation of the past of European societies and their settler offspring. Contrary to often repeated caricatures, it is not a simple evolutionary model and does not imply a single uniform future—but it does suppose that there are “socio-logics” to societal changes. Some changes go together; others do not. For example, feudal societies can have effective state churches; culturally diverse liberal democracies cannot. And that is not an accident. As I show below, it can be explained by fundamental features of the latter sort of society.

A full elaboration of the secularization paradigm with sufficient data to convince the open-minded (some people are beyond persuasion) needs at least a book and it took me three. All I can do here is offer a few illustrative facts, elaborate one part of the explanation, examine in some detail one alternative to the secularization paradigm, and request that the reader make the charitable assumption that I will have dealt with the obvious criticisms in other places.


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Secularization

In 1851 about half the population of Britain attended church regularly. Now it is about 8 percent. Statistical data on religious beliefs are available only for the last fifty or so years, but they show a similar trajectory to that of church attendance. There has been a steady decline in the popularity of orthodox Christian beliefs. On the existence of God, Britons now divide pretty equally between four positions: belief in a personal creator God, belief in “a higher power or life-force,” the wonderfully vague “there is something there,” and atheism or agnosticism. Baptism was once universal and so widely held to be essential that in the Middle Ages midwives were taught a simple formula to baptize babies thought unlikely to survive until the arrival of a priest. Now fewer than one-third of babies are baptized. In 1971 over two-thirds of weddings were religious; now it is less than one-third.

There is no need to labor the point: anyone familiar with European societies will be aware of the drastic decline of organized religion. In Holland, the percentage of the adult population describing themselves as having no denomination rose from 14 percent in 1930 to 39 percent in 1997 and 42 percent in 2003. An overwhelming majority of Swedes (95 percent) seldom or never attend public worship, and Hamberg finds no evidence of revival in a situation that she describes as follows:

the share of the population who adhere to Christian beliefs or who devote themselves to such traditional religious activities as prayer and church attendance declined in Sweden during the twentieth century…data indicate a decline not only in the prevalence of religious beliefs but also in the saliency of these beliefs.

Even in the U.S., routinely held up as the great exception, churchgoing is now about 20 percent, down from about 50 percent in 1950. Equally important, those who still strongly associate with organized religion do so in a spirit markedly different than that of their grandparents. Most Christian churches have abandoned their supernatural focus, and the therapeutic benefits of faith (once firmly second place to placating God and ensuring salvation) are now advertised as the main point. The attitude of most believers has shifted: from being loyal followers to being selective consumers.

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The explanation of the decline of religion is necessarily complex; the diagram I often use to illustrate the secularization paradigm has 21 boxes! I will mention here only a few of them. First, the idea that science displaces religion in a zero-sum contest to explain the world is largely a red herring. Contrary to the expectation of liberal theologians and advocates of the “higher criticism” in the 1890s, modern people seem quite capable of believing all sorts of twaddle (witness the popularity of alien abduction stories or theories of racial superiority). Insofar as science does impact faith, it is through technology (rightly or wrongly) giving us a sense that we are masters of our fate. Medieval peasants quite reasonably saw themselves as being of no significance in the eyes of either their worldly masters or their Creator God. Modern Western consumers think rather highly of themselves: they choose their microwaves, they choose their governments, and they choose which God to believe in and in what manner.

Crucial to the marginalization of religion has been the combination of egalitarianism, individualism, and diversity. Any belief system is at its most plausible when it is entirely consensual. If everyone believes the same things, they are not beliefs; they are merely an accurate account of how things are. Using the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger drew our attention to the impact of the “pluralization of life-worlds” on the plausibility of religious belief systems:

Our situation is characterized by a market of world views, simultaneously in competition with each other. In this situation the maintenance of certitudes that go much beyond the empirical necessities of the society and the individual to function is very difficult indeed. Inasmuch as religion essentially rests upon supernatural certitudes, the pluralistic situation is a secularizing one and, ipso facto, plunges religion into a crisis of credibility.4

Diversity, of course, need not provoke doubt. The first response to such a cognitive threat is usually martial: the deviants are murdered, expelled, or forcibly converted. This is where egalitarianism becomes relevant. In the modernizing industrial societies of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, it became increasingly accepted that, despite obvious differences of birth, status, and talents, we were all in some sense much-of-a-muchness. People became reluctant to enforce religious conformity and ruling classes came to see social harmony as more important than religious orthodoxy. The Reformation insistence on the responsibilities of the individual gradually became a demand for the rights of the individual and rights gradually became separated from religious identities.

Unless it is prepared to accept high levels of social conflict (and none were), the modernizing state, if it has to encompass diversity, must become increasingly religiously neutral. The public square is gradually evacuated. This not only removes formal state

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support for a particular religion; more importantly—and this is where Berger’s concern with “taken-for grantedness” is vital—it removes a whole range of opportunities for the religious tradition to be reinforced in day-to-day interaction. Where a community shares a common faith, big events such as births, deaths, and marriages can be glossed by the shared religion. The passing of the seasons can be similarly treated. And everyday conversation can reinforce the shared beliefs as people gloss even mundane matters such as the weather and crop yields in religious terms. The fragmentation of the religious culture into a range of competing alternatives drastically curtails the routine low-level social reinforcement of beliefs. When we can no longer be sure that those we meet share our faith, we tend to keep it to ourselves.

At the societal level, the long-term result is a shift to ever-more liberal and tolerant forms of religion and eventually to benign indifference. When all faiths are in some sense equally valid, parents lack an incentive to indoctrinate their children, and the environment proves stony ground for such seeds of faith as are planted.

In the terms of the classic typology of religious forms derived from Weber and Troeltsch, the church form of religion (with a single shared culture and institution providing a single plausibility structure for an entire society) becomes rare: it survives only in situations (Poland until 1990, Ireland until the 1960s) where the Church acts as a guarantor of national identity and integrity. And when that role becomes redundant, rates of adherence drop rapidly as the Church comes to be seen as just another pressure group.

Here I will add a brief aside. Recent concern about Islamic fundamentalism in the West and about the reaction of some Western Muslims to such foreign policy matters as the war in Iraq and the Palestinian problem has led some commentators to consider that the church form of religion might enjoy a revival. The idea is that Islamic challenges to Western liberalism and secularity might stimulate a Christian revival, as Europeans with a nominal commitment to their previously dominant Christian traditions feel moved to explore their heritage faith and then acquire a real commitment to it. A revival of concerns about the public presence of one religion might encourage a revival in the more conventional sense. This seems a forlorn hope. Beyond the observation that those people who described themselves as “Christian” in England and Wales in the 2001 census is vastly greater than the number who ever trouble a Christian church, there is as yet no empirical evidence for revival. Insofar as fears of militant Islam are having any effect on secularization in Europe, it seems the opposite of that hoped for by church leaders. Because most Britons lack any acquaintance with Christianity (let alone a commitment to it) they see Islamic militancy not as proof that Islam is a bad religion, but as confirmation that any religion taken too seriously is a bad thing.

To return to the typology of forms, the sect can survive if it can insulate itself from the wider society (possible in parts of the U.S., impossible in European societies), but this
comes at the cost of considerable sacrifice by its members. The denomination gradually declines because its members lack powerful incentives to indoctrinate their children. Which brings us to the cult. The term is often casually used to mean any small new religion we do not like. I use it to mean a diffuse, extremely tolerant form of religion that stresses private experience and grants to the individual the primary authority to decide what he or she will believe. This form of religion exists not in large formal organizations but in a milieu: a world of overlapping outlets and expressions through which individual consumers chart their own paths of preference. It is the future of this form of religion that I want to consider in the rest of this essay.

**Diffuse Spirituality**

Many of the counters to the secularization paradigm are based on the belief that people are essentially religious. Religion is not seen as a social accomplishment (like, for example, speaking French) but as an expression of an innate biological need. The twin facts that we all die and that we can distinguish the self from the body cause us all to ask what the theologian Paul Tillich called “ultimate questions.”

If it is the case that we all have a need for religion, then long-term secularization is impossible. If specific religions decline in popularity, then others must arise to fill the gap. For a brief time in the 1970s it looked as if a variety of usually Eastern-inspired new religious movements (NRMs) were going to fill the space left by the decline of the Christian churches, but it quickly became obvious that the scale was wrong. When the Moonies could never muster more than one thousand members in Britain and all the NRMs together did not come close to the numbers lost by the main churches in a month, hoping that these innovations could restore the religious capital of 1900 or 1950 was like setting a toy train engine to pull real freight wagons.

A more plausible candidate is the highly personalized individualistic “New Age” spirituality of the cultic milieu. Regis Debray made the point elegantly in saying that the twilight of the gods was the “morning of the magicians.” The two are certainly related on the supply side. The decline of the Christian churches has negated their power to stigmatize alternatives as foreign and dangerous. In 2005, a serving naval officer managed to establish paganism as a legitimate religion that the British armed services should accommodate. As Partridge notes, there has been a vast increase in the range of spiritual revelations and therapies on offer in the West. But we should not confuse supply and demand measures. What matters for testing the secularization thesis is not the range of spiritual offerings being purveyed but the numbers who take them up and the spirit in which they do so.

In 2001, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey asked a representative sample if they had ever tried a variety of arguably New Age activities such as tarot cards, fortune telling, astrology, yoga or meditation, alternative medicines or therapies, and horoscopes; and if they had, how important were these in their lives. Table 1 summarizes the replies.

Most Scots have not tried these things, particularly those that represent a significant commitment, and of those who have tried them, most do not think them very important. The questions are perhaps too blunt to make much of the answers, but there is a clear pattern that fits well with what colleagues at the University of Lancaster have found in their study of New Age providers and consumers in Kendal, a small town in the northwest of England. Led by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, the research team used a wide variety of techniques to identify everything (from organized yoga classes to one-to-one therapies) that could be seen as New Age activity, and through detailed interviewing and surveying compiled a reasonable estimate. They concluded that between one and two percent of the population are involved in the holistic milieu in a typical week.

But it is worth looking more closely at the activities they survey. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of holistic milieu activities under nine headings.

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Table 1. Experience and Salience of the New Age, Scotland 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Horoscopes(a)</th>
<th>Divination(b)</th>
<th>Yoga or Meditation</th>
<th>Alternative Medicine(c)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite important</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all important</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never tried</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sample size for this table was 1,605. Percentage totals vary from 100 because of rounding.
\(a\) Consulting horoscopes in newspapers and magazines.
\(b\) Consulting a tarot card reader, fortune teller, or astrologer (excluding horoscopes in papers and magazines).
\(c\) Alternative or complementary medicine such as herbal remedies, homeopathy, or aromatherapy.

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9 I am grateful to friend and collaborator David Voas, of the University of Manchester, for preparing these summaries of the Kendal data. The original data is publicly available at <www.kendalproject.org.uk>.
It is hard not to be struck by how few activities listed are obviously spiritual. Over half of all involvement is in what most people would view as leisure or recreation: yoga, tai chi, dance, singing, art. Add in pampering (massage, bodywork) and you have covered nearly two-thirds. Not all the “healing and complementary health groups” are obviously spiritual or even unconventional; CancerCare, winner of the Queen’s Jubilee Award for Voluntary Service in the Community, is one of the larger ones. A fair proportion of the healing activities are based on distinctive beliefs, but even these (for example, homeopathy, reiki) seem pseudoscientific rather than necessarily spiritual.

Fortunately, we do not have to argue about the nature of the activity or its significance for those involved because Heelas and Woodhead asked their respondents whether they saw their activities as spiritual. Only 51 percent of respondents saw their yoga classes as spiritual; for the massage category, the percentage spiritual was only 28 percent; for osteopathy only 10 percent; for “foot massage” (which involved typically 48 people) the figure was 25 percent. Only some 45 percent of those engaged in holistic milieu activities think of them as spiritual. Fewer than half of the respondents said that their participation had anything whatsoever to do with spiritual growth.

In their defense of all this activity as a “spiritual revolution,” Heelas and Woodhead assert that “the figure we have arrived at for the holistic milieu…shows that Bruce…is wrong when he claims that ‘the number of people [in Britain] who have shown any interest in alternative religions is minute.’”

It would be unproductive to argue over what is or is not “minute,” but the implications of their own work seem very clear. Taking New Age spirituality at its narrowest, it is trivial. In order to get over 1 percent

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10 Heelas and Woodhead 54–5.
of the population, we need to encompass a variety of imported recreational activities, miscellaneous methods of relaxation, and diverse forms of alternative medicine, all practiced mainly by people who do not even pretend to see them as spiritual. Rather than seeing the New Age as compensating for a decline in Christianity, we should see it as an extension of the surgery, the clinic, the gym, or the beauty salon. It is primarily concerned with physical and psychological wellbeing.

**The Future of the New Age**

To strengthen the proposition that what we are seeing is the decline of one form of religion rather than secularization per se, Heelas and Woodhead predict that the holistic milieu will double in size over the next forty to fifty years.\(^{11}\) This seems highly unlikely. They admit that at present holistic spirituality has a rather narrow socio-demographic appeal, and that the relevant section of the population (educated, middle-aged white women in people-orientated professions) may be approaching saturation point. Far from growing, it is not even clear that the holistic milieu can reproduce itself. Asked if their children were interested in the activity, two-thirds of respondents with offspring said “no.” Heelas is more struck by the fact that 32 percent said “yes,” but this level of transmission is disastrous.\(^{12}\) In a society where parents have only two children on average, 100 percent of them must be socialized into a practice for it to survive in the long term. Intergenerational transmission of Christian affiliation, attendance, and belief currently stands at about 50 percent, which is widely regarded as a major problem for churches.\(^{13}\) On the face of it the New Age has an even higher mountain to climb, not least because women with spiritual interests are more likely than average to be childless.

In summary, an extremely detailed community study conducted by commentators sympathetic to New Age spirituality fails to convince us that this milieu comes close to providing a viable substitute for the decline of the Christian churches. Back to our toy train metaphor: the scale is wrong.

**Self and Other Religions**

Not only is the New Age world very small, but there are good reasons to describe it as fragile. The weakness of community in the New Age is not an accident but an inevitable consequence of its solipsistic basis of authority. In the New Age, the self is the

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\(^{11}\) Heelas and Woodhead 137.


final arbiter of truth and utility. If it works for you, it is true. There is no legitimate basis for imposing on others or even arguing. This makes any sort of concerted activity remarkably difficult. If two people disagree, there is no basis for settling the dispute. This explains why, for all the talk of counter-cultural and alternative community, New Age spirituality has not produced its alternative schools and communes.

Although they do not appreciate the significance of their own examples (they want to describe New Agers as a “tribe”), Prince and Riches’s study of New Age in Glastonbury provides glaring examples of an inability to cooperate. In one example, a primary school collapsed because parents could not agree on how or what they wanted their children taught. In another, a small group of New Agers decided to meet regularly on Sunday mornings for some sort of collective act of “worship.” At the first meeting they talked about what they would do but could not agree. Fewer attended the second meeting and the initiative petered out.

The Glastonbury ethnography raises an interesting general problem that first occurred to me while lecturing to students about the social reforms pioneered by British evangelicals in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that the civilization of industrial society owes a great deal to committed Christians. The ending of slavery, limitations on the use of women and children in factories, controls on exploitation of workers, the construction of decent housing for workers, improvements in prisons, penny savings banks, mutual insurance, workers’ educational institutes, public schooling for the poor—all of these were the results of philanthropic activity by people who were driven by the related ideas that we could hardly expect the poor to be concerned about their souls when their bodies were sore oppressed and that a society that claimed to be Christian could not also be barbarous. Against that example, the social impact of New Agers seems trivial, and I take two points from the comparison.

First, only a religion that has an authoritative reference point outside the individual is capable of providing a challenge to any status quo. Left to our own devices a combination of sloth and self-interest will always make sacrifice unlikely. Although New Agers are fond of talking of their revelations and therapies as life-changing, in practice mostly what changes is merely attitudes to their circumstances. The anxious repressed merchant banker who takes up yoga or meditation does not cease to be a banker; he may acquire a certain detachment from his work role and become a more contented holistic banker, but he continues in the mainstream. A very small number will “downsize.”

They sell the expensive house in London and retreat to a cottage in Wales or Cumbria to make pottery and run weekend workshops in reiki healing. But the significance for the wider society is negligible. Worse, in many cases the change is no more than the acquisition of a new language to defend old patterns of behavior. Consider the example of sexual exploitation. In reading a number of accounts of Findhorn, Europe’s oldest New Age center, I am struck by how often male New Agers manage to seduce younger women by persuading them that getting in touch with their true feelings, discovering the angel within, coming into their power, or creating authentic relationships means having sex. To use the formal language of Max Weber, world-rejecting religion seems only possible if there is a shared external authoritative source of revelation: the God who punishes those who step out of line. If the only source of authority is the self—as in the classic New Age slogan, “to your own self be true”—any new perspective or revelation is more likely to be assimilated to our current circumstances than to provoke change.

Second, whereas the Victorian evangelical movement was more than the sum of its parts because it was made up of individuals who were bound together by a shared faith, the New Age movement is always less than the sum of its parts because even the highly motivated and genuinely counter-cultural core is not united by common beliefs and values. Or to be more precise, it is united only in highly abstract operating and epistemological principles such as, “No one has the right to tell anyone else what to do.”

My purpose here is not to criticize New Age spirituality (though that is hard to resist); it is to explain why it fails to resist co-option and bastardization. Since the 1960s elements of the entire world’s religious repertoire have been imported to Britain, but instead of secular Britons being transformed by Chinese necromancy, Native American sweat lodges, and Hindu notions of karma, the innovations have been stripped of their religious content. In its original context, feng su is a serious matter of relating to the spirits of the dead. In Britain, it is a decorating style. Yoga is no longer a spiritual discipline; it is an exercise program. Meditation is not about attaining enlightenment; it is about relaxing. And ayurvedic medicine is just another cosmetics line from the Body Shop chain.

Conclusion

I have concentrated on New Age spirituality because it encourages us to move part of the secularization debate forward. In Britain the Christian churches have shrunk to a point where reproduction is threatened, the major non-Christian religions brought to

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16 Bruce, God Is Dead, 118–39.
Britain by migrants since 1945 have not recruited beyond their original ethnic bases, and 1970s NRMs have failed to make any headway. We now have a society that is very largely secular, not just in the formal operations of major social institutions but also in popular culture. We are in a historically novel position. Over the next thirty or so years, we may be able to see if societies are religious because people are religious, or vice versa. If it is the case that people are in some sense enduringly interested in the religious and the spiritual (and thus our current secularity is temporary), then we should soon see evidence for this. New Age spirituality would seem to be a strong candidate for the future of religion because its individualistic consumerist ethos fits well with the spirit of the age.

What is needed is serious research directed to assessing the spread, significance, and impact of alternative forms of spirituality. To date, little work has gone beyond being impressed by the growth of the supply of spiritual innovations. Such work as has attempted to measure demand suggests that alternative spiritualities will not refute the secularization paradigm.