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Chapter 1

THE DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WEST

What follows is not a wide-ranging introduction to the debated themes and history of secularization. The aim of this chapter is simply to introduce readers to key aspects of the general thesis. Whilst this discussion makes use of several accounts of secularization, one in particular should be noted, namely that of Steve Bruce, particularly as discussed in his recent book *God is Dead*.¹ Bruce's work is important because (1) it is persuasive, (2) over the past decade it has increasingly raised the principal issues with which this chapter is concerned, and (3) it has most clearly articulated the interpretations of alternative religion in the West with which I have come to disagree.

Types of Secularization

Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas have provided a useful fourfold typology of secularization theories:² the disappearance thesis; the differentiation thesis; the de-intensification theory; and the co-existence theory. The former two are the dominant models, the latter two are less common. The *disappearance thesis*, which reflects nineteenth-century theories, claims that religious understandings of the world will effectively disappear in the West. The *differentiation thesis* is more cautious in that it argues that religion will become privatized and socially insignificant: 'religion gets pushed out of social domains whilst remaining (of some) significance in private life'.³ The *de-intensification theory* claims that religion will remain in society, but only in a de-intensified, weak and insubstantial form. The *co-existence theory* is more positive in that, 'whilst secularization takes place in particular circumstances, in other contexts religions retain their vitality, even grow'.⁴ Whatever the merits or demerits of this typology it does highlight the fact that there is no one model of secularization, just as, we will see, there is no one theory of the processes involved.

Max Weber and the Disenchantment of the World

Max Weber's (1864–1920) influential theory of 'the disenchantment of the world' (*die Entzauberung der Welt* – a phrase which he borrowed from Friedrich Schiller) describes a network of social and intellectual forces, the origins of which can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation. Weber's thought, which has its roots in Enlightenment rationalism, claims – as does, arguably, much

subsequent secularization theorizing – that disenchantment is a progressive unilinear process – not unlike Friedrich Nietzsche's pessimistic narrative of the West, which begins with primal myth and ends with the 'death of God'.⁵ As Gerth and Mills have argued, 'Weber's view of "disenchantment" embodies an element of liberalism and of the enlightenment philosophy that construed man's history as a unilinear "progress" towards moral perfection (sublimation), or towards cumulative technological rationalization'.⁶ That said, as we will see, whilst some theorists might welcome the projected outcome, Weber did not. (Indeed, although Nietzsche looked forward to a world in which *Übermenschen* will overcome their 'human all too human' selves, celebrate 'life', create values, and live happily in a godless world, he too was concerned about how people would cope in the disenchanted world toward which the West was inevitably heading.) The driving force of rationalization – the dominance of bureaucracy which underlies the declining significance of religion in the modern world – is famously described by Weber as an 'iron cage'.

Again, although I do not intend to provide an overview of the various histories posited by secularization theorists,⁷ it is worth noting that, while the Reformation is an important historical watershed for understanding secularization, and was of course absolutely central to Weber's thought,⁸ Weber, Peter Berger, Alan Gilbert and others have traced the roots of the process back to the emergence of Jewish monotheism. In Gilbert's words,

the seeds of secularization were implanted at the very genesis of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Christianity inherited the radical theological and cosmological insights of an ancient Semitic people, a people with a grand yet precarious vision of a monotheistic universe. Monotheism was a potent, creative cultural force, but its impact on religious consciousness was two-sided. The sublime religiosity it produced, enriched first Hebrew and later Christian consciousness; but by setting up a dichotomy between 'sacred' and 'profane' aspects of reality it established an intellectual framework within which secularization was almost bound to occur. A dialectical tension between 'religious' and 'secular' modes of thought became a fundamental of Judaism and, through it, of Christianity.⁹

Unlike ancient polytheisms, the Judaic monotheistic God is transcendent, is not subject to natural forces, cannot be manipulated by magic, is not capricious, and requires obedience. For Weber, this had important implications. Instead of worrying about a host of competing, capricious deities, spirits and entities, because the worshipper was concerned with obeying only one God, the ethical was rationalized and the scope of the sacred shrunk as the mysterious, the miraculous and the magical were expunged from the world. That is to say, a single system of religious ethics evolved, humanity was liberated from a dependence on magic, and the natural world, evacuated of spirits and magic, became simply the physical arena in which one obeyed God. The natural world was the creation of a good and loving God, but it was not itself divine. Consequently, bearing in mind that secularization is only possible in societies in which there is a clear distinction between the religious and the non-religious, that the spheres of the sacred and the secular were thus demarcated is very significant – the seeds of disenchantment were sown:

As Hellenic philosophical and scientific notions intruded into the Jewish world of the pre-Christian era, 'secular' elements became increasingly evident in Jewish culture. And wherever this cultural synthesis occurred, the rationalizing implications of monotheism left the residual polytheism of Hellenic culture with very little 'religious' plausibility indeed.¹⁰

Consequently, as Gilbert has noted, as heir to both the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman worlds, Christianity, from its beginnings, carried within it the dialectical tension between the sacred and the secular.

That said, 'many of the most pronounced secularizing tendencies carried over from the ancient world were either eliminated or suppressed'¹¹ in Christianity. This was particularly evident during the medieval period. To quote Gilbert again:

The dialectic could work in two directions, not one. If secularization could occur, it could also be reversed; and during more than a millennium of Christian history this is exactly what happened. The history of the west from the collapse of Rome to the fall of Constantinople involved, in the famous words of Edward Gibbon, 'the triumph of Barbarism and religion' ... After the Roman Empire had disintegrated, secularization had not simply been retarded, it had been effectively reversed.

The dominance of the Catholic Church in medieval Europe, while hardly producing the cosmologies of indigenous paganisms, nevertheless ensured that the world was interpreted almost entirely theologically. Theology was the queen of the sciences and the Church pervaded the institutional life of Western Europe. Religious values had a shaping effect on medieval society and culture: 'at all levels of social life and human need the Christian religion acquired immense and ubiquitous *utility* in the minds of medieval men. At the level of popular consciousness, for example, it functioned as "a vast reservoir of magical power, capable of being deployed for a variety of secular purposes".'¹² That medieval enchantment inhibited 'secular' thought is clearly evident in Karen Jolly's study of elf charms and popular religion in medieval England:

invisible powers associated with the Devil afflicted people with physical as well as spiritual ailments; hence Christian words of power made herbal medicine handed down through classical and Germanic lore efficacious against these forces ... All of the remedies show the conjunction of good forces against evil forces without a necessary distinction between physical and spiritual, natural and supernatural ... Any material phenomenon had a potential spiritual meaning, whether it be a demonic illness or temptation testing the resistance of a Christian or a weakness of body designed to demonstrate God's miraculous power.¹³

While secular cosmologies within this spiritual milieu were not unheard of, their sphere of influence was very small. The dominant worldview of medieval England was religious and predominantly Christian. Keith Thomas likewise provides evidence for the widespread supernaturalism of the medieval period:

The medieval Church ... found itself saddled with the tradition that the working of miracles was the most efficacious means of demonstrating its monopoly of the truth. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the *Lives* of the Saints had assumed a stereotyped pattern. They related the miraculous achievements of holy men, and stressed how they

could prophesy the future, control the weather, provide protection against fire and flood, magically transport heavy objects, and bring relief to the sick.¹⁴

Whilst ideas such as these continued into the modern period, Thomas's work argues that, beginning with the decline of magic, the supernaturalistic worldview started experiencing erosion. Although the erosion began during the periods of the Renaissance and Reformation, from the time of the industrial revolution it had significantly picked up momentum.

The general process of secularization, of course, is deceptively complex. However, the essential idea informing secularization theory is relatively straightforward. In the words of Berger, 'Modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals.'¹⁵ More bluntly, Bruce comments that 'The basic proposition is that modernization creates problems for religion.'¹⁶ Again, Bryan Wilson defines secularization as follows: 'Secularization is the process in which religion loses its social significance.'¹⁷ For Weber, of course, the disenchantment of the world is the process whereby magic and spiritual mystery are driven from the world, nature is managed rather than enchanted, the spiritual loses 'social significance',¹⁸ and institutions and laws do not depend on religion for their legitimation. And certainly, looking back over the past couple of centuries, it would seem to be overwhelmingly evident that religious beliefs, practices, and symbols are gradually being abandoned at all levels of modern society.¹⁹

What Secularization Is Not

A helpful way into the analysis of recent treatments of secularization is Bruce's discussion of certain misunderstandings of what secularization theorists claim. First, the theory does not claim that secularization is universal:

Anyone who had actually read Weber, Troeltsch, Niebuhr, Wilson, Berger or Martin ... would appreciate that they did not see themselves as discovering universal laws comparable to the basic findings of natural science. Like Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis, the secularization story is an attempt to explain a historically and geographically specific cluster of changes. It is an account of what has happened to religion in western Europe (and its North American and Australasian offshoots) since the Reformation.²⁰

Hence, that there is a resurgence of fundamentalism in some areas of the world, or that some Islamic countries are not secularized, does not count against the thesis.

Secondly, the secularization thesis is a model that identifies general trends rather than predicting inevitable decline:

it does seem reasonable to see some social changes accumulating in a 'value added process' ... so that, once they have occurred, it is very difficult to see how their effects can be reversed in any circumstances that are at all likely ... [It] is difficult to see how a religiously diverse liberal democracy can again become religiously homogeneous while religion retains much of its substance ... We are claiming irreversibility, rather than inevitability.²¹

That said, I cannot help feeling that Bruce at least suspects that there is a certain inevitability about secularization. More bluntly, his distinction between irreversibility and inevitability seems a little disingenuous, in that he is not describing a state, but a process. In other words, the secularization of the West is not static, it is an *irreversible process*. Consequently, whilst he does not claim it to have an 'even trajectory', he does believe it to be in motion and, since it is irreversible, it can only move in one direction. Therefore, in what sense is secularization not inevitable?

Thirdly, there is, Bruce says, 'no reason to suppose the decline of religion to be linear'.²² 'It does not require or expect that all indices of religious vitality will decline at the same speed or evenly. The process is bound to be lumpy because the world is complex.'²³ Clearly, this is an important, if obvious, point to make. Whether as a result of migration, or as a result of tragic events such as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center (11 September 2001), societies periodically become more or less religious. However, although Bruce describes his model of secularization as 'cyclical', the metanarrative is actually strikingly linear. For example, the metaphor he uses to describe his cyclical theory is that of a wheel travelling down a hill:

the changes which accompany modernization and which create problems for religion are often described in ways which allow them to be seen as evenly *progressive* (or *regressive*!), but the more nuanced accounts include elements that repeat and mutations that run against the *overall direction*. Perhaps a suitable metaphor is that of the progress of any point on the circumference of a wheel on a vehicle running *downhill*. As the wheel turns the point rises and falls, but on each turn the high point is *lower than it was before*.²⁴

The wheel travels in a line, in one direction (down) and, whilst the point on the wheel moves up and down (indicating the unevenness of secularization), its dominant trajectory is one of descent. Indeed, he goes on to relate the metaphor specifically to the religious life of Europe from the Reformation to the present, arguing that modernization led to the gradual demise of the religious and the domination of the secular.²⁵ (This is, of course, not so very different from Weber's equally linear thesis.) Moreover, to return to the above point, if this descent, this demise of religion, this gradual domination of the secular is irreversible, as Bruce claims it is, not only is it *not* a fundamentally cyclic process, but, again, it is difficult to see how it can be described as anything other than *inevitable*. (With John Milbank's general critique of social theory in mind,²⁶ I cannot but feel that this is an example of a thesis driven by a secular ideology – a suggestion which we will see Bruce vigorously reject.)

Fourthly, mapping the decline of religion is different from predicting a rise in explicit atheism. Individuals in a secularized society may simply have no interest in even thinking about religion, let alone arguing against religious worldviews and defending atheism *à la* Nietzsche.²⁷ They may simply be indifferent to religion *per se*. Indeed, in a sense, explicit atheism, in the form of an argued rejection of religion, testifies to the continuing significance of religion. If religion becomes truly insignificant in society, people will simply lack the knowledge and interest

to discuss it, let alone oppose it. However, the point is that most secularization theorists claim not to expect the widespread emergence of atheism or the absolute demise of religion. (Moreover, again, it should also be noted that, like Weber, secularization theorists do not necessarily welcome the demise of religion. While many are neutral regarding secularization, some are pessimistic about the possibility of a secular future. As Bruce says of Wilson, he believes that 'the erosion of shared values will make life decidedly less pleasant'.²⁸)

Finally, it is important to understand that, generally speaking, unlike Auguste Comte, who argued that secularization is the inevitable result of human maturation,²⁹ or Sigmund Freud, who believed it to be the demise of a primitive illusion in an age of scientific enquiry,³⁰ contemporary theorists do not claim that secularization is simply due to a better-educated and more sophisticated public. Bruce in particular is very keen to refute the idea that he is bolstering an implicit ideology of progress: 'Increasing knowledge and maturity cannot explain declining religion. There are too many examples of modern people believing the most dreadful nonsense to suppose that people change from one set of beliefs to another just because the second lot are better ideas.'³¹ Whatever 'dreadful nonsense' Bruce has in mind, it is certainly true that sophistication and intelligence do not necessarily lead to a secular worldview. Some of the most intelligent and sophisticated people I know are also some of the most conservative and committed Christians I know. Rather, as we will see, secularization is the product of a range of social, political, and, arguably, psychological processes.³²

Rationalization and Pluralism

Having looked at what one sociologist claims secularization is not, we now need to look at what it might be. As we have seen, 'rationalization', which is central to the process of secularization in modern societies, is a concept that lies at the heart of Weber's theorizing. As Gerth and Mills opine,

The principle of rationalization is the most general element in Weber's philosophy of history. For the rise and fall of institutional structures, the ups and downs of classes, parties, and rulers implement the general drift of secular rationalization. In thinking of the change of human attitudes and mentalities that this process occasions, Weber liked to quote Friedrich Schiller's phrase, the 'disenchantment of the world.' The extent and direction of 'rationalization' is thus measured negatively in terms of the degree to which magical elements of thought are displaced, or positively by the extent to which ideas gain in systematic and naturalistic consistency.³³

'Rationalization' is essentially the 'concern with routines and procedures, with predictability and order, with a search for ever-increasing efficiency'.³⁴ It has therefore led both to increased bureaucracy and to an emphasis on process and organization. Everything can and should be done better, faster, cheaper, and more efficiently. Consequently, religious beliefs such as, for example, the value of petitionary prayer and divine providence are at odds with a culture that values predictability, order, routine, and immediate quantifiable returns. Many Westerners, including those with religious convictions, will implicitly or explicitly accept that there are more practically effective ways of getting through life than the

traditionally religious ways. As such, secularization theorists point out that there seems to be relatively little left in the world for God to do. For example, in pre-modern societies immediate spiritual and moral connections would be made with tragic physical events, such as crop failure, and prayers of contrition would be offered. In the modern, industrial world, individuals instinctively seek a physical cause for a physical effect and, consequently, initially turn to physical remedies. Christians may pray for relief from a migraine, but few will not first avail themselves of the appropriate medication. Similarly, we can no longer accept that psychiatric disorders such as epilepsy and schizophrenia are the result of demonic possession. We know there are physical causes which can be very effectively controlled by the careful use of scientifically researched chemicals.

Central to modernization and a product of 'rationalization' is the differentiation and specialization of social units. Bruce, for example, draws attention to structural and functional differentiation, that is 'the fragmentation of social life as specialized roles and institutions are created to handle specific features and functions previously carried out by one role or institution'.³⁵ The family ceased to be a unit of production as industrialization rationalized the process. Commerce and industrialization led to the division of labour and introduced values determined by rationalization. Small, closely knit, family-based communities with the Church at the centre, living under a protective 'sacred canopy' (Berger), have been fundamentally eroded. Gradually, education, economic production, health care, and a host of other activities have shifted from ecclesiastical control to specialized secular institutions. In short, over the past few centuries religious authorities have lost their grip on the reigns of economic power as the world of employment has been increasingly motivated by its own values. Consequently, Christian influence is gradually weakened to the point at which it is all but absent. Even when the Church is involved in education, health or welfare, it is more often than not nominally involved. For example, 'the Church of England provides various forms of residential social care, but its social workers are tested in secular expertise, not piety, and they are answerable to state- rather than church-determined standards. Spiritual values may inspire the Church's involvement in social work but there is very little in the expression of that inspiration that distinguishes it from secular provision'.³⁶

Similarly, central to Karel Dobbelaere's strong secularization thesis is the process of *laicization*. This process, first, highlights the distinction between institutional religion and the modern administrative state, and, secondly, identifies a shift of responsibility from the former to the latter.³⁷ No longer, for example, does the provision of welfare come under the aegis of religious organizations, which was once the case in the West, but rather there has been a shift of control to government bureaucracies. This shift has, of course, also led to the emergence of experts and centres of expertise (doctors, social workers, teachers, schools, hospitals, departments of social services etc.). In modern societies, health, welfare and education are no longer primarily the concerns of ecclesiastical authorities. Consequently, laicization has meant that ecclesiastical concern is now limited to pastoral care and 'spiritual matters'.

Another key interrelated process that has contributed significantly to the secularization of the West is pluralization. As Robert Hefner has commented, 'Kinship, politics, education, and employment all separate from an original unity and assume a dizzying variety of specialized forms. In the process, human society is transformed from a simple, homogeneous collectivity into the pluralistic entities we know today'.³⁸ Communities in which people operated with a shared religious worldview, a shared morality, and a shared identity, and within which an individual's material, intellectual, and spiritual sustenance was provided, are rapidly disappearing. Berger in particular has drawn attention to the fact that, unlike pre-modern communities in which a single religious worldview was dominant and permeated all areas of community life, in modern societies there are few shared values to which one can appeal and the beliefs an individual does hold cannot be taken for granted: 'The pluralistic situation multiplies the number of plausibility structures competing with each other. *Ipso facto*, it relativizes their religious contents. More specifically, the religious contents are "de-objectivated", that is, deprived of their status as taken-for-granted, objective reality in consciousness'.³⁹ Consequently, to quote Berger again, 'the fundamental problem of the religious institutions is how to keep going in a milieu that no longer takes for granted their definitions of reality'.⁴⁰ Related to all this of course is the fact that individual believers are constantly aware that their faith is a *chosen* worldview from a spectrum of worldviews on offer. This situation, Berger has argued, leads to a crisis of credibility in religion: 'secularization has resulted in a widespread collapse of the plausibility of traditional religious definitions of reality'.⁴¹ In other words, there is a relationship between the 'subjective secularization' of an individual's consciousness and the 'objective secularization' at the social-structural level: 'Subjectively, the man in the street tends to be uncertain about religious matters. Objectively, the man in the street is confronted with a wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies that compete for his allegiance or at least attention, and none of which is in a position to coerce him into allegiance. In other words, the phenomenon called "pluralism" is a social-structural correlate of the secularization of consciousness'.⁴²

Popular relativism and the revision of traditional concepts of deity are of course encouraged by contemporary consumer-centric cultures that are driven by an insistence on variety and individual choice. Hence, 'by forcing people to do religion as a matter of personal choice rather than as fate, pluralism universalizes "heresy"'. A chosen religion is weaker than a religion of fate because we are aware that we chose the gods rather than the gods choosing us.⁴³ As a consequence, religion is increasingly a private rather than a public matter. It is not that religion disappears, but rather that it is relegated from the social to the private sphere. A palpable consequence of the overall secularizing, relativizing shift in modern democracies, which has seen the demise of the Church as a monopoly regulating thought and action, has been a series of laws that have repealed certain sanctions in order to ensure the equality of most forms of religious expression.⁴⁴ Hence, in Britain, the 1951 repeal of the 1735 Witchcraft Act was not an attempt to promote witchcraft, but rather a logical step in a modern, secular democracy.

There is no longer an acceptable rationale for defending the rights of one religious belief system over another. Since religion is simply a matter of personal preference, and since concepts of religious truth have been relativized (there being little empirical evidence to establish the validity of one choice over against another, or indeed to establish the validity of any of the choices), there are few reasons to limit choice. As Bruce comments, 'Modern society seeks to assimilate all citizens into the mass culture of free-wheeling choice where community commitments are notoriously difficult to maintain.'⁴⁵

Concluding Comments

This then, according to many, is the disenchanted world in which we live. The decline of the community, the proliferation of large, impersonal conurbations, the increasing fragmentation of modern life, the impact of multicultural and religiously plural societies, the growth of bureaucracy, the creeping rationalization, and the influence of scientific worldviews have together led to a situation in which religion is privatized, far less socially important, and far less plausible than it was in pre-modern communities. Certainly, a large question mark has been placed over the notion that there exists a single religious and ethical worldview which alone is true and to which all good and reasonable people should therefore assent — as was the case with Christianity in the medieval period.