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## Comment on Steve Bruce

### An Empirical Critique of Re-Sacralisation

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**Abstract:** In his paper Bruce gives the impression that all proponents of the re-sacralisation thesis expect the comeback of religion in Western Europe. But this is not the case. The re-sacralisation thesis concentrates on religious developments beyond the West. Bruce rejects approaches that discuss the classical secularisation thesis with regard to worldwide developments. However, the examination of worldwide developments reveals that religion and modernity can be intertwined in multiple ways. All in all, Bruce's argumentation could be extended to the discussion of factors that can explain the decline as well as the rise of religion in different regions of the world. Moreover, the way in which modern individuals believe and express their faith could be discussed.

**Keywords:** Secularisation, de-secularisation, re-sacralisation, Steve Bruce

## 1 Secularisation in the West and the Re-Sacralisation Thesis

Within the sociology of religion the classical secularisation thesis is not very popular anymore. Many authors regard its basic assumption that modernisation will inevitably lead to the decline of religion as eurocentric and outdated. Instead, they emphasize the vitality of religion in most parts of the world and term this vitality as re-sacralisation or de-secularisation. Steve Bruce is one of the few authors who still fervently defends the classical secularisation thesis. His main work *God is Dead* (2002) made Bruce one of the most prominent proponents of the secularisation thesis. Since then he has constantly argued against those who refute this thesis. This is the main purpose of *Secularisation* (2011) and likewise of his paper 'An Empirical Critique of Re-Sacralisation' (this issue).

For Bruce it is crucial that the classical secularisation thesis was intended "to explain the decline of religion in the modern industrial liberal democra-

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cies of the West” (146). Therefore the secularisation thesis could only be refuted if a re-sacralisation of the West was observed. Accordingly, Bruce defines re-sacralisation as a “growth in the influence of religious and religiously-inspired ideas on private behavior and on the public sphere in the largely secular societies of the West” (150). In his paper, Bruce presents empirical findings from Great Britain which prove that there is no evidence of such a re-sacralisation of this Western nation. He shows that “indices of religious interest continue to decline, that interest in spirituality is nowhere near popular enough to compensate, and that there is little support (even amongst churchgoers) for religion enjoying increased public influence” (146). He refers to the empirical result of the British Social Attitudes Survey in which 47 percent of the British population say that they have no religion (151). This result corresponds approximately with the trend observed by the European Values Study (Pollack/Rosta 2015, 93). According to the European Values Study, religious affiliation in Great Britain decreased from 91 percent to 55 percent between 1981 and 2008. These findings leave no doubt—Christianity in Great Britain is in free fall.

Bruce sees these empirical results as definite proof of the secularisation thesis and, correspondingly, as strong evidence against the re-sacralisation thesis. “Given the preponderance of the evidence, it is something of a mystery why notions such as re-sacralisation, de-privatisation, and post-secular society have attracted any support from scholars.” (159) With regard to Peter L. Berger and José Casanova, who are the most prominent proponents of the re-sacralisation thesis, this mystery can be easily solved. Both explicitly speak of a re-sacralisation or de-secularisation, respectively, beyond Western Europe. They see Western Europe as an exceptional case and therefore do not at all question the fact that Great Britain is secularised and that the secularisation thesis can explain this development (Casanova 2003; Berger 1999).

“In Western Europe, if nowhere else, the old secularisation theory would seem to hold. With increasing modernisation there has been an increase in key indicators of secularisation, both on the level of expressed beliefs (especially those that could be called orthodox in Protestant or Catholic terms) and, dramatically, on the level of church-related behavior.” (Berger 1999, 9)

Even Paul Heelas und Linda Woodhead describe Great Britain as a strongly secularised nation (Heelas/Woodhead 2005). They observe a growing importance of spirituality in Great Britain, but they do not assume—despite the misleading title of their book *The Spiritual Revolution* (2005)—that this spirituality compensates for the accelerated decline of Christianity in Great Britain. They predict that by the middle of the century little more than 3 percent of the British population will participate in a spiritual milieu on a weekly basis (Heelas/Woodhead 2005, 137).

This means, all in all, that the presented empirical findings do not provide arguments against the re-sacralisation thesis.

## 2 (Re-)Sacralisation Beyond the West

Bruce is not in favour of an approach to broaden the scope of the secularisation thesis and to discuss religious developments in other parts of the world. His first reason is, as already mentioned, that for him the purpose of the classical secularisation thesis is to explain the decline of religion in the West and was never meant to predict developments in the non-Western world (147). From Bruce's point of view, this also holds for Berger's secularisation thesis from which Berger has clearly distanced himself since 'The Desecularisation of the World' (1999). Because Bruce is convinced that Berger did not make any universal claims about the connection between modernity and religion in his secularisation thesis, but instead only wrote about the connection between modernisation and religion in the West, he "cannot understand why Berger thinks that religious vitality in the Third World has any bearing on his work on secularisation" (Bruce 2001, 92). However, Berger repeats several times that before he recanted his secularisation thesis, he had been convinced of the idea of an irresolvable connection between modernisation and secularisation (Berger 2004, ix). One should take this statement by Berger seriously. Within the sociology of religion, it is, moreover, a very common interpretation that the classical secularisation thesis sees the decline of religion as an inevitable consequence of modernisation, irrespective of where in the world this modernisation takes place (Pickel 2011, 160; Pollack/Rosta 2015, 12). The critique of the classical secularisation thesis is therefore justified.

The second reason why Bruce does not want to discuss secularisation on a worldwide scale is that for him most of the countries usually cited as evidence of re-sacralisation have never been particularly secular or modern in the first place (147). Bruce is right that the term 're-sacralisation' respectively 'de-secularisation' can be misleading as it indicates a comeback of something which has already perished. But it should also be taken into account that the use of the term is not always meant to indicate such a comeback. Berger's re-sacralisation thesis applies to both countries that were never secular and to countries that go through a process of de-secularisation (Berger 1999, 2). The crucial difference to Bruce is that Berger perceives many of these countries as modernised (Berger 2015, 20; Berger/Zijderveld 2010, 18). Although Berger abandons the classical secularisation thesis, he still is a theorist of modernisation. His theory of plurality deals with the effects of pluralisation caused by the process of modernisation and, accord-

ingly, he focuses on modernised countries in which religion is still, or once again, important. Bruce refers to religious fundamentalism in Iran and Pakistan, countries that are, in his view, not particularly modern. In contrast, Berger stresses that the

“Islamic revival is by no means restricted to the less modernised or ‘backward’ sectors of society, as progressive intellectuals still like to think. On the contrary, it is very strong in cities with a high degree of modernisation, and in a number of countries it is particularly visible among people with Western-style education—in Egypt and Turkey, for example, many daughters of secularised professionals are putting on the veil and other accoutrements of Islamic modesty.” (Berger 1999, 7–8)

This assessment is shared by Olivier Roy, an expert for Islamic fundamentalism (Roy 2004, 14). He notes that, all in all, Muslim societies went through a decisive process of modernisation in the past decades and that this modernisation process fostered the Islamic revival.

Like many proponents of the re-sacralisation thesis, Berger refers to Shmuel N. Eisenstadt’s *Multiple Modernities* (Eisenstadt 2000). Eisenstadt is convinced that the cultural pattern of modernity evolves in multiple ways so that Western modernity is not the only possible form of modernity (3). Eisenstadt’s conception leads to the conclusion that religion can assume different roles in modern societies (Schwinn 2013, 75). The main purpose of the re-sacralisation thesis is to shed light on these different roles of religion in modern societies. In view of the religious vitality and the rise of religious fundamentalism in numerous modern societies, this seems to be a very reasonable research goal. To accomplish this goal, it is important to abandon the debate about the appropriateness of the classical secularisation thesis and instead examine the various possible connections between modernity and religion (Woodhead/Heelas/Davie 2003, 7; Pollack/Rosta 2015, 458). Actually, this is in line with Bruce’s position as he is also opposed to universal theoretical approaches (Bruce 2002, 37).

### 3 Theory Despite Variety

To examine the specifics of each particular case, however, involves the danger of abolishing theory altogether (Pollack/Rosta 2015, 12; Schwinn 2013, 84). But without theory the sociology of religion could only take on the task of description. It would be impossible to uncover the general structures within the particular cases and to provide explanations for the variety of connections between modernity and religion.

To avoid this danger, a new theoretical perspective within the sociology of religion is needed. Detlef Pollack and Gerely Rosta propose a multi-paradigmatic perspective that combines different theoretical elements and can explain religious decline as well as religious vitality (Pollack/Rosta 2015, 461–462). Pollack's and Rosta's proposal is based on the observation that religion has no determined function within society. Therefore religion is, on the one hand, weakened through functional differentiation, because the capacity of the functional systems makes religion more and more superfluous in everyday life. On the other hand, religion can be intertwined with various political, national, or moral interests. In this case Pollack and Rosta assume that religion plays an important role in society.

These assumptions are in line with Schwinn's perspective which focuses on a constant conflict between different spheres of society (Schwinn 2013, 86). Schwinn stresses the fact that religion competes with the political, economic, or bureaucratic spheres for influence in society. Religion principally wants to retain moral authority. From Schwinn's point of view, the strength of religion depends on the prevailing connection between church and state. If church and state are strongly intertwined, religion is without doubt in a powerful position, but at the same time religion has difficulties mobilizing political, national or moral interests. The consequence can be a low religious vitality in society.

The considerations of Pollack, Rosta and Schwinn could extend Bruce's approach, especially as the differentiation theory is an important element of his secularisation thesis (Bruce 2002, 4). A profound discussion on the characteristics of modernity around the world would be crucial. But such a discussion is only possible if Bruce resolves his dispute with the proponents of the re-sacralisation thesis and gets involved with the discussion on multiple modernity and theoretical elements that can explain the decline as well as the rise of religion in different regions of the world.

## 4 Rationality, Faith and Vagueness

A further crucial question is if functional differentiation influences the way in which modern individuals believe and express their faith since differentiation involves secularity and rationality. Berger argues that modern individuals have learnt to balance the different spheres of society (Berger 2015, 87). Depending on the problem at stake, they switch between the religious and the secular discourse so that their religious convictions can persist despite functional differentiation and concomitant rationality. Berger refers to Robert Wuthnow's book *The God Problem* (2012). Wuthnow stresses, in contrast to Berger, that religious convictions

about God, prayer, or heaven indeed are in conflict with rationality and reasonableness. Modern, educated believers are therefore confronted with the problem that they have to reconcile their faith with reasonable and rational thinking.

Wuthnow's qualitative empirical research on educated believers from the United States shows how these individuals solve the problem.

"The evidence demonstrates clearly that expressions of faith in the contemporary United States are powerfully shaped by social norms of reasonableness. When people talk about God, when they pray to God, when they talk about the relationship of God to significant personal or social crises, and when they talk about their own mortality and possibilities of spending eternity in heaven, they talk in specific ways that conform to norm of reasonableness." (Wuthnow 2012, 1)

The interviewees present themselves as rational and reasonable believers by accentuating mystery. They avoid giving the impression that they are superstitious and believe in God's intervention in the natural order. They express their conviction that humans do not understand God and that this lack of understanding is part of believing, sometimes drawing parallels between the mystery of God and the lack of scientific knowledge. All in all, the interviewees accommodate to norms of reasonableness by vague utterances about God and their religious convictions.

Wuthnow rejects the interpretation that his empirical findings are a proof of the secularisation thesis because the findings cannot answer the question if "norms of reasonableness have become more influential in shaping religion during the long course of history and whether that influence is somehow weakening religion" (Wuthnow 2012, 1). Wuthnow also doubts that the sociology of religion actually can examine this question. However, the work of Pollack and Rosta demonstrates that empirical research on the vagueness of religious belief is promising. Pollack and Rosta point to the fact that in West Germany the belief in a personal God has decreased considerably (Pollack/Rosta 2015, 135). In 2008 only 25 percent of the West German population believes in a personal God, but 44 percent in some kind of a supreme being. Moreover, Pollack and Rosta show that the vagueness of religious belief is accompanied by a decrease in the individual relevance of religion (Pollack/Rosta 2015, 475). They therefore interpret the increasing vagueness of religious belief as sign of secularisation. These empirical results of Pollack and Rosta could extend Bruce's argumentation because they indicate that secularisation means more than having no religion and leaving church.

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