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What the Secularization Paradigm really says

1. Introduction

Especially in the United States, the secularization paradigm has acquired in the sociology of religion a status similar to that of functionalism in the 1970s: it is assumed that all right thinking people are against it. Novice scholars begin their apprentice papers with ritual denunciations of it. I must say that, though I am often cited as an exemplar of the manifest errors of the secularization approach, I rarely recognise my views in such summaries. What I want to do in this presentation is explain what I believe the secularization paradigm entails and clarify what it predicts for various forms of religion in the western world. Obviously I will have to pass over much detail but my views are elaborated at length elsewhere (Bruce 1996; 2002).

2. The Secularization Paradigm

Figure 1 is an attempt to summarise the major elements of the thesis. Doubtless, in constructing something small enough to fit onto a single page, I have left things out. Some critics accuse the secularization thesis of being too simple; others say of it that it is untestably complicated. The latter is a more reasonable criticism but then complexity is a feature of the reality that it attempts to encompass. Put very briefly I believe that the Reformation introduced and stimulated a number of social and cultural changes that interacted positively with the economic and political elements of modernization to erode the social bases for religion (Gellner 1982, 107). Once established those changes became part of the common currency of democratic politics and were adopted even by countries that did not have large Protestant populations (e.g. France) or considerably diversity (such as those of Scandinavia).
Figure 1 *The secularization paradigm*¹

![Diagram of the secularization paradigm](image)

Key: R = Rationalization; RO = Religious organization; E = Economy; S = Society; P = Polity; CS = Cognitive style

¹ This figure has been adopted from Bruce 2002 (page 4), where the elements are explicated.