

**STEVE BRUCE, *Comparative Protestant Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
1998, 236pp.**

In a recent letter to the editor of *Prospect* contesting that magazine's criticism of sociologists' professional introversion, Steve Bruce noted that he had published 48 articles in newspapers in the last two years. Not surprisingly, Bruce's academic output has also been prolific – with some ten books accruing to his credit in as many years.

Comparative Protestant Politics represents a synthesis of many of the conclusions that Bruce has drawn from studying Protestant nationalist and moral politics in the English-speaking world. In geographical terms, the volume moves rapidly, chapter-by-chapter, from Ulster and South Africa to Scotland, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Bruce's theoretical posture, outlined in the first chapter and summarized in the last, sticks unflinchingly to the facts, sacrificing theoretical absolutism for a multi-causal array of "analytical observations."

These observations may be compressed into two powerful theoretical positions: 1) Protestantism, especially evangelical Protestantism, is inherently fissiparous due to its individualistic nature, and is hence poorly suited to function as a border symbol for dominant-group ethno-nationalism; 2) Secularization, differentiation and modernization, of the Durkheim-Parsons variety, are among the most powerful social forces acting in modern societies, and these lead to the decline of religious establishments and ethnic hegemony. A corollary of both these points is that "all Protestant establishments [are] undermined by modernization." (p. 216)

Taking these points in more detail, Bruce argues that the voluntary principle in Protestantism encourages schism, which mitigates against establishment. Thus the Anglicans had to accommodate the non-conformists in England while the Church of Scotland had to accommodate the Free Church, both of which paved the way for the toleration of Catholics and the *de facto* separation of church and state. Furthermore, modernization tends to fragment the unity of the social (as with the newly divided spheres of work and leisure), relegating ever fewer functions to religion. Thus Protestant pluralism is exacerbated by social differentiation and the religio-ethnic core shrinks into the interstices of society where it remains as a voluntary choice with a purely spiritual function. (pp. 8-14)

The only instances in which religion can resist modernization, argues the author, are those in which religion can retain some extra-spiritual functions. This can occur when either a) marginal groups like the Irish immigrants in Britain or Highland Scots on the British periphery are temporarily struggling with the transition to modernity; or b) when secularization is associated with an alien society such that the national church can present itself as a guardian of tradition, as in Catholic Poland. In Ulster, Protestantism has managed to retain some of its religious vitality because of its association with the ethnic struggle against the Catholics, though forms of secular, civic unionism have recently emerged, associated with the UKUP. In summary, the author predicts that secularization will persist, which will continue to weaken Protestant religio-ethnic groups, even in Northern Ireland.

What is one to make of Bruce's conclusions, which reiterate and build upon the arguments of his *House Divided* (1990)? In short, this reader believes that Steve Bruce

has written a compelling account of an important phenomenon. As the author notes, journalists and social scientists are generally ignorant of history, hence they focus on short-term, newsworthy noise, and fail to appreciate the extent to which sectarianism has declined in the Protestant world. Bruce's willingness to employ unpopular frameworks like modernization and secularization theory in order to remain true to the facts, and his impressive grasp of the comparative history of Protestant ethnic decline make this book worthwhile reading for scholars of nationalism. It should prove especially suitable for those interested in the much neglected study of the *decline* of nationalism and ethnicity in the West.

To be sure, there are some serious criticisms than can be mounted against this work. First of all, the author tends to elide the phenomenon of the decline of religious establishment with the decline of Protestant hegemony. *De facto* religious establishment may have been dead in the United States, Britain, Scotland and South Africa in 1900, but can anyone deny that these were Protestant-dominated societies? To explain the decline of establishment is one thing, to account for the liberalization which later came to reign is quite another. For instance, the author argues that the need to placate non-conformist Protestant groups in various nations led to the tolerance of Catholics and others. Yet if the motive was instrumental, why wouldn't the leading Protestant denominations simply collude among themselves (the majority) and maintain restrictions against Catholics and Jews?

Catholic and Jewish power varied from place to place, but generally speaking, I am not persuaded that the dominant groups in Britain and North America were *forced* to abandon Protestant hegemony. Rather they did so because their liberal-ecumenical

political and religious elite, influenced by Enlightenment currents of thought, was able to institutionalize its wishes against the sentiments of the masses. The author makes tacit concessions to this in several places when he admits that "In societies which are not essentially egalitarian and democratic, a ruling elite may ignore such potential for conflict and use its power to sustain a minority religion in pride of public place." (p.187)

The author's claim that secularization weakens ethnic identities based on religious symbols is a more valid point. However, here one finds a certain circularity in the argument: Bruce claims that religious decline leads to ethnic decline except where ethnic resilience leads to religious resurgence. (p. 212) Other omissions include the lack of mention of the importance of religio-ethnic conflict in Canada (where the Orange Order enrolled roughly one in three Protestants between 1870 and 1920 and only declined after 1950) and an incomplete account of the extent and duration of Protestant hegemony in the United States. Nevertheless, these are the concerns of the specialist. Overall, Steve Bruce has produced a work which is engaging, relevant, well-argued and is highly recommended by this reviewer.