



Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults

Steve Bruce

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Religion, throughout history, has held a prominent yet curious place in western civilization. Though in constant flux, the institution of religion has consistently offered its followers solace in times of trouble, hope amid eminent failure, or, more generally, a sense of place and self in a large and seemingly indifferent world. It is the manner in which people have pursued their spirituality, however, that poses challenging questions of what religion means and where religion is heading in the twenty-first century. Offering an engaging look at the evolution of western religion from the early sixteenth century through the contemporary "New Age" cult, Steve Bruce argues that modernization, and the rise of individualism, have fundamentally altered the place and relevance of religious beliefs, practices, and organizations for both groups and individuals in Western society. The people of the Middle Ages did what the Church told them God required. A small number of highly trained officials, acting on behalf of the state and the people, glorified God. They did so with a liturgy and with music that was far too complex for the active participation of lay people. Services were conducted not in the local language but in Latin, with ordinary people simply expected to behave morally, to attend church on the great feast days, and to finance the professionals who did the serious religious work. As Bruce shows, religion of this time was very straightforward: "Do God's will, or you'll go to Hell." It was a time when religion and superstition went hand in hand, as priests prayed for the salvation of the general public and saints offered powerful remedies for ailments. St. Wilgerfort, for example, could help wives be rid of their husbands, while other saints could protect men and cattle and visit plague on one's enemies. It was not until the Reformation and the innovations of Martin Luther and John Calvin, Bruce points out, that relig

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