

## **Believing in Secularization - Stories of Decline, Potential and Resurgence.**

‘Intellectual history remains affected by a master narrative treating religion as inchoate and backward superstition or as pathetic froth obscuring the surface of the real until blown away by revolution’.<sup>1</sup>

‘... secularization has been affected/shaped by an ‘unthought’, which is related in a more complex way to the outlook of the author in question, that is, not simply as a polemical extension of one’s views, but in the more subtle way that one’s own framework beliefs and values can constrict one’s theoretical imagination.’<sup>2</sup>

Do you *believe* in secularization? How persuaded are you by the stories it tells? Do you modify both your description of it, and subscription to it, when it is found to lose its explanatory power? The first and second seem somewhat odd questions to ask. This is because secularization has so often assembled a range of empirical facts to demonstrate a clear and unequivocal direction in which society appears to be proceeding. However, the third is an equally odd thing to ask rational individuals to continue doing when the world batters their view of civilisation, the status of religion, and indeed wider existence. But from such questions what this article seeks to initiate is productive use of the word ‘belief’. From this it goes further to enlist this term’s help in assembling observations and guesses about what is missing from analysis of the secularization thesis and its function. In doing so it looks

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martin, ‘Does the advance of science mean secularization?’ *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 61, 1, (February 2008): 51-63, 62

<sup>2</sup> C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge Massachusetts; Belknap Press, 2007), 428.

at secularization's stories, how these took hold of constituencies and stake holders in the past, and also how these captivate many today. Indeed an important element of the thesis suggested here is that some secularization narratives have attained the status of beliefs and actually drive both analyses and conclusions. As with most beliefs secularization appears to explain things that need explaining, and there are adherents who will seek to suggest that they can prove its existence from facts generated by observation and inference. Others will be content to acknowledge its effect upon the world and impact upon their lives. However, we should also recognise that secularization has been partly forced into becoming a belief by a general unfashionability, some would say discredit, of the persuasive truth of metanarratives. Likewise, it remains striking that one recent survey of the field encountered an array of ambiguous and, in some instances, easily questioned examples implying desperation to uphold the idea's impregnability.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, like nineteenth century thinkers approaching a 'crisis of doubt', it is noted by external observers that most contributions in some scholarly collections exploring secularization are persuaded of its inadequacy, without necessarily offering viable alternatives.<sup>4</sup>

However, there are rather more in the way of dissenters who are prepared to look realistically at an idea which has had something of a long history, and may have an uncertain future. Secularization, in many eyes, simply does not confidently explain or analyse the range of things it used to do with anything like the same level of confidence or credibility. Numerous examples could be cited, but a review of this author's most recent work noted '... secularization, however we understand it, remains difficult to repudiate because there is simply so much diverse evidence about to justify it. This is not to say that it hasn't acquired

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<sup>3</sup> D. Erdozain "'Cause is not quite what it used to be": The return of secularization.' *English Historical Review* CXXVII 525 (2012): 377-400. See 380-2.

<sup>4</sup> See T. Jenkins 'Review of Callum Brown and Michael Snape (eds.) *Secularization in the Christian World*. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26 ., 3, (2011): 492-493.

an accumulation of questionable forms, or even become something of an ideology.’<sup>5</sup> It is worth reminding ourselves here that secularization has also explained its shortcomings away through observers noting it has three distinct meanings. The description of an event, the description of a process and ultimately the description of a world we see around us that has wreckage and residues of something that happened before contemporary times. Yet we also notice that it so regularly comes up short when interrogated by particular exceptions (something that especially annoys Steve Bruce), and by how it is manacled to teleology.<sup>6</sup>

Like religious belief itself secularization may not speak to me or many others, as religious apostates or agnostics often suggested orthodox Christianity didn’t. Like apostates from Christianity of old one might admire secularization’s residue, and even some of its achievements. However, as happened to Christianity, secularization has now lost its power in the minds of many to provide rational explanation at the hands of repeated blows from the post-enlightenment’s incisive thinkers. This is also even true amongst those who write about it to argue the potential for religious resurgence. Just as secularization gleefully mapped Christianity’s deserters, those on the ground are speaking up where the secular stories run out of steam and progressive momentum. This is supposedly happening in micro sites and areas where moments of re-enchantment captivate the mind. Such evidence comes from noticing neutral space deliberately colonised by religious ideas, people and narratives. But it is also happening in renewed devotions to religio-national sites of remembrance and mourning as key anniversaries arrive. These are all indicators of where people feel the borders and boundaries of secularization within the contemporary world actually are. Some even boldly assert that ‘global resurgences’ amount to a reversal of the orthodox secularization

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<sup>5</sup> A. Chandler ‘Review of David Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture: Stories of belief in the Twentieth Century*’. *Contemporary Church History Quarterly* 21,2 (June 2015).

<sup>6</sup> See Taylor, 431-4 for a metaphor which sees it as a three storey building, implying once again a greater element of linkage than the ‘three definitions’ approach.

trajectory.<sup>7</sup> These are equally not truths that gainsay the facts of secularization themselves but are instead ‘re-enchantment’ stories of their own. They are hoped for, and even perceived, narratives in which the effect of belief’s resurgence seems manifest and becomes its own stimulus to further stories.

Given these shortcomings is it really time to proceed with yet another sustained critique of secularization’s potential?<sup>8</sup> Perhaps it is now important to step back and realise the benefits of putting criticism aside for a moment. If we can consider secularization to be a belief system, then it makes sense to treat it as historians treat other belief systems. This means seeking to understand their place, influence and power in both the historical past and the present. In normal circumstances a historian of religion would not engage with an investigation of whether religion, or religious belief, should be considered somehow ‘true’, in and of itself. Nor would they engage with precisely how it constitutes the valid explanation of humankind’s place in the universe.

Yet equally this is not an attempt at post-modern relativising to destabilise the truth. Nor does it deny the explanatory power that secularization theory genuinely has for some people. It is similarly not the job of a historian, necessarily, to bring disciplinary tools to the intention of ridiculing and undermining the religious beliefs of others. If considered essential this is the job of people with other agendas. Thus, in looking at secularization theory, isn’t it incumbent upon us to actually attempt to do with it what the responsible historian does in writing the history of religion? That is to detect the functional importance of religion in past societies, and evaluate how it worked in these past societies. This would chart and analyse its influence,

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<sup>7</sup> See the discussion of this in J Haynes, ‘Religion, secularization and politics: a postmodern conspectus’ *Third World Quarterly*, 18, 4, (2011): 709-728, see 713-15.

<sup>8</sup> This is something the current author has engaged with in the past. See D S. Nash, ‘Reconnecting religion with social and cultural history: Secularization’s failure as a master narrative.’ *Social and Cultural History* 1,3 (2004): .302-325. See also the introduction to D.S Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture: Stories of Belief in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2013), 1-28.

and we should thus extend a similar professional courtesy to secularization theory. Likewise appreciating its status as a belief system becomes a way to find its flaws more acceptable, whilst noticing how and why others appreciate its virtues. For the historian the theory of secularization received its own fair share of ‘appraisals’ or ‘state of the field’ articles.<sup>9</sup> These responded to new works, but were also conceivably inspired by the multiplicity of directions that the reader and scholar of this subject might be led in. It was obvious the subject was bewildering to the uninitiated, but also such surveys were always keen to warn against the appearance of a ‘magic bullet’ or overarching and resolving master narrative.

To move forward this article draws upon the methodology pioneered by this writer in *Christian Ideals in British Culture – Stories of Belief in the Twentieth Century*.<sup>10</sup> This stressed the fundamental importance of narrative’s ability to influence both secular and religious responses to the world, thus shaping the nature of Christian belief in Britain. These narratives were specifically reached for by individuals throughout the Twentieth century to make sense of experiences and events. As such, these had a clear value and active ‘use’ for those who embraced them at specific moments. Within this new paradigm, establishing absolute belief positions becomes of less importance and, likewise, secularization models which discuss absolute forms of change (linear and even teleological change) become of less relevance. Secularization as a process indeed becomes problematized by such an analysis, since the access and use of narratives is unpredictable. It also emerges as largely devoid of the patterns most versions of the secularization thesis would actively require. However, this article has space to approach only some of the important and recently influential

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<sup>9</sup> See J. Morris, ‘The Strange Death of Christian Britain: Another look at the Secularization Debate’ *Historical Journal* 46, 4 (2003): 963-976. This was followed by a flurry of surveys published in 2012 - J.C.D. Clark, ‘Secularization and Modernisation: The failure of a ‘Grand Narrative’. *Historical Journal* 55, 1,, (2012): 161-194.; J. Morris,, ‘Secularization and Religious Experience: Arguments in the Historiography of Modern British Religion’ *Historical Journal* 55, 1 (2012): 195-219; and D. Erdozain “’ Cause is Not Quite What it Used to be”: The return of Secularization’ *English Historical Review* 127, 525 (2012): 377-400.

<sup>10</sup> D.S. Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture: Stories of belief in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2013).

secularization narratives, to examine the wider and deeper stories they tell and beliefs they convey about how and why religion has failed – sometimes if that failure is only for a short time.

Narratives are powerful ways of describing experiences which individuals undergo, desire, crave and sometimes actively require. Religion and Secularism have both offered these changing narratives to members of western societies since the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> If we accept the premise that narratives of religious belief and unbelief have had such power over this timescale, then it is worth considering how far narratives have had power actively within the study of religion and its own history. Where narratives have been influential, their impact upon secularization itself in the twentieth century should be studied every bit as much as their active work in producing religious belief and unbelief. This investigation would have to accept that the creation of secularization as a narrative involves shaking off its skin of empirical detachment.

Frustration with secularization as both observation and theory is by no means new. Jeffrey Cox was an early advocate of marginalising the term, or dispensing with it altogether. For him it failed to convince in the light of his discovery of late Victorian religious vibrancy. It also had, to Cox, a distasteful self-confidence and its penchant for predicting the future involved it in turf wars between the religious and the doubting.<sup>12</sup> In an earlier statement David Martin felt secularization was a comparatively dangerous tool in the hands of ideologically motivated rationalists, Marxists and existentialists.<sup>13</sup> For this reason it should be recognised as a construct which produced quasi-malevolent ‘ideological distortions’,

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<sup>11</sup> See D. Martin ‘Secularization and the future of Christianity’ *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 20, 2 (2005): 145-60. This locates the decline of Christianity and the possible stories of its future in the precise circumstances of individual countries’ own experience of religious decline.

<sup>12</sup> J. Cox ‘Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularization: A progress Report.’ In (eds.) C. Brown and M. Snape, *Secularization in the Christian World: Essays in Honour of Hugh McLeod*. (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010) 13-26.

<sup>13</sup> D. Martin, ‘Towards eliminating the concept of secularization’ in ed. Julius Gould *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences 1965* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965). 169-182.

leading Martin to conclude ‘*Secularization* should be erased from the sociological dictionary.’<sup>14</sup> In a later variation on this theme Jeremy Morris saw that eclipsing the concept would allow scholars to equate the religious with the modern, by definition destroying the previously unshakeable and mistaken link between the secular and the modern.<sup>15</sup> This particular article hopes to offer a more subtle critique. It suggests not that secularization should be forgotten and dispensed with in favour of simply another master narrative. Instead it argues that seeing secularization’s power in past historical and historiographical contexts depends upon recognising it for what it is – a variety of narratives about the decline of religion. As such these narratives contain emphases and baggage that do not always make them plausible or disinterested explanations. Thus, it makes sense to consider them as sources for a history of how interested and disinterested parties *wanted* and *hoped* to explain the eclipse of religion within modernity.<sup>16</sup> A series of clear narratives carried intentions agendas and messages and, lastly, often carried a palette of potentially didactic warnings. Let us now investigate some of these retold secularization narratives and search for the other investigative agendas behind them.

### *‘Spaces’ for the secular*

Modernisation has told a regular story of religion being marginalised by scientific developments which supposedly had no room for God. Likewise, a similar story of modernisation told of technology and a disenchantment of humankind, which became a consequence of rational explanations superseding providential ones. For this master narrative science supplanted religion and the modern became rational, wholly displacing enchanted and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 182.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, ‘Secularization and Religious Experience’, 209.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Cox first called for a related project of this nature in his essay ‘Master narratives of religious change’ in (eds.) H. McLeod and W. Ustorf *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), 201-217, 206 & 208. However, he moved later in the same piece to reach for other ‘master narratives’ of secularization that might fruitfully be told about religious history.

pre-ordained cultural outlooks. This narrative privileges the modern and obviously imbues it with the power to dominate historical progress, creating its own ever expanding space in society.

Secularization theory really took off when sociologists in the 1960s imbued writings about it with both a modernisation and evangelical quality. The now classic formulation of Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* saw the replacement of religion with the application of hard and social science to remedy social, economic and political problems. Education and welfare regimes were to be 'liberated' from religious and church influence as Berger expressed emphatically the joy of this release.<sup>17</sup> Such narratives belonged to the era of post-war social democratic confidence, foregrounding the power of rationality and social science to deliver sustained solutions to the problems that were besetting the world. Throwing extensive expertise and other resources at these problems would supposedly solve them for all time. This gave some impetus to what became known as a causalist approach, something which stopped judging and sentencing people and instead evoked utilitarian ideas of the minimisation of harm.<sup>18</sup> This also craved a modern and better paradigm that would satisfactorily supplant the inadequate misinformation, and 'sticking plaster', approach of religious solutions seeking to explain away or hide inequalities and injustices. Other symptoms of this general modernising change in society were sub-narratives about the power of technological change, seeing individuals making supposedly rational choices about the allocation of their time and resources. Social differentiation also explained its logic, giving spatial vision to how individuals and compartmentalised selves would live their lives in practice. Both processes were not dictated to (or by) moral precepts, so this also displayed

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<sup>17</sup> P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, Anchor Books, 1967).

<sup>18</sup> See David Martin's discussion of work in this area in Martin, 'Does the advance of science mean secularization?' 55-56.

graphically the fundamental message of this narrative - that secularization could be equated with freedom in the world at large.

In one of his last pronouncements on the fate of Twentieth Century Christianity, Bryan Wilson argued that the Religious narrative of reward and perdition had collapsed as a result of the pressures of modernisation. This 'elaborate compensatory system' which offered benefits in the afterlife had been a victim of western affluence, persuading individuals that their best, even transcendent, experience was likely to be in the 'here and now'.<sup>19</sup> For Wilson technology and increasingly rationally organised social and institutional systems had '... a logic that transcends the particularities of the Christian religion making it largely... inconsequential for the impersonal character of modern institutions.'<sup>20</sup> In an echo of Berger this became the relegation of religion '... to the interstices of social space, to the leisure time of individuals in their private lives, and so becomes inconsequential to the system as such.' At bottom it was this 'incongruity' that had caused secularization. From this Wilson saw accommodation with the world as counterproductive, producing a clergy forced to shelve the apparent truths it had told previous generations in a desperate pursuit of new relevance. Religious hierarchies and ministers alike had thus betrayed a confused laity who now possessed 'a much simpler and more literal faith than the clergy who serve them.'<sup>21</sup>

The interventions of Karel Dobelaere placed sociological explanations of secularization within the Durkheimian supposition that religion would retain some (albeit displaced) function within modernity. Like Bryan Wilson and Peter Berger, Dobelaere juxtaposed the apparent eclipse of religion with the post-war benefits that modern society was bequeathing

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<sup>19</sup> B. Wilson and D. Ikeda, *Human Values in a Changing World: A Dialogue* (edited and translated by R. L. Gage. I B Taurus London 2008. 136. For an earlier statement of this see Bryan Wilson *Contemporary Transformations of Religion* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> Wilson and Ikeda, *Human Values in a Changing World*. 137

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 138.

to its populations. Moreover what they observed further seemed to be models of many of the sociological processes they had all learned about as students, and had passed on as teachers. There was also an obvious inheritance from August Comte who foresaw the power of social change, linked to apparent advances in the way society conceived of religion. Moreover, in the modern context, these were arguably especially potent explanations because they could readily be born out through social investigation. This would eventually become institutionalised into a culture of surveys, alongside an interrogation of context. Thus explanations that emanated from this world relied on concepts that explained such change as an explicit function of modernity. Concepts such as social and functional differentiation, rationalization and individualisation/privatisation were all deployed as different components of an explanation of material secular prosperity pushing Christianity to the margins.

Dobelaere combined such elements to suggest a multi-dimensional narrative, whereby secularization could be explained through three distinct levels. The first of these was ‘Societal Secularization’ - describing religion as reduced to a ‘sub-system’ of society, largely at the behest of secular professions and professionals.<sup>22</sup> The second level, ‘Organizational Secularization’ described the process of religion modernising itself to accommodate new environments. Lastly was ‘Individual Secularization’ which was a marked and noticeable waning of interest in the subscription to, and practice of, religious beliefs. Although sociology would always claim its purpose was to observe and analyse contemporary processes, where secularization was concerned it unwittingly contributed to a somewhat whiggish history. This suggested that inevitable social changes were a natural consequence of twentieth century modernity.<sup>23</sup> This became a history in which functional differentiation meant that groups and organisations both caused such changes, as well as lived with and

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<sup>22</sup> K. Dobbelaere, *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2002). Brief explanations of these three stages appear on page 29- 35, 35-38 and 38-43.

<sup>23</sup> Morris, ‘Secularization and Religious Experience’, 199.

adapted to them, sometimes successfully.<sup>24</sup> Dobbelaere himself readily suggested that ‘laicisation’, and attacks upon religious ideas, were an inevitably successful project of radical liberalism and the left during the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> This was an achievement clearly built upon the expansion of social democratic systems during the latter half of this same period. This powerful master narrative was partly, in the British context, explored by Jeremy Morris who saw in this that Victorian ‘religious pathology’ was colliding with ‘Marx, Tönnies and Weber’.<sup>26</sup> These analyses were not entirely value free, whilst their conclusions inevitably suggested that what had happened was both an inevitable and natural consequence of modernity. Inevitably, it is this level of apparent certainty that has created so many problems for observers in the years since these pioneering insights were written. Subsequent work and awkward evidence have served to tarnish such certainty.<sup>27</sup>

Yet this certainty tries to persist in the work of Steve Bruce - British sociology’s major remaining proponent of the, by now diluted, formulation of secularization.<sup>28</sup> Bruce has subtly changed secularization from a theory to a paradigm and eventually, with his greater engagement with historical reflection, he has become less certain about the eventual

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<sup>24</sup> This is also substantially a conclusion of Alan Gilbert in A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England* (London: Longman, 1976)

<sup>25</sup> Karel Dobbelaere, (2002) *Secularization*:. 39.

<sup>26</sup> Morris,, ‘Secularization and Religious Experience’, 195-6. Victorian English secularists would frequently note how their crusades reflected the ‘spirit of the age.’ In two, not unrelated, observations by Jeremy Morris secularization was characterized as both a class based rejection of social control and secularization narratives were naturally generated by modernising Christianity itself. See Morris,, ‘Secularization and Religious Experience’, 201 & 207-8.

<sup>27</sup> There are many species of historical evidence which now problematize orthodox versions of religion’s issues in coming to terms with modernity. Whilst there is scarcely room for an exhaustive list, we might mention the less stable and rational reading of the enlightenment. Also the increasingly fruitful search for religious scepticism is now conducted back into the early modern and medieval periods as well as the ancient world. For work on the Medieval period see John Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). For the ancient world see Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods. Atheism in the Ancient World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016). Dominic Erdozain also notes that the link between individualism and the loss of faith has been successfully questioned. Similarly, the growth of technologically sophisticated societies does not any more by definition automatically make them godless. See Erdozain ‘Cause is not what it used to be’, 381.

<sup>28</sup> There are numerous works by Steve Bruce which outline his original conception of the secularization thesis. These include R Wallis and S. Bruce, ‘Secularization: The Orthodox Model.’ In S. Bruce., ed. *Religion and Modernisation, Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization thesis.* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1992): 8-30; S. Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Blackwell: Oxford 2002) 56.

completeness of the process.<sup>29</sup> However he is still suggesting it is both one way traffic and likewise a natural journey for such traffic – even in areas of the world yet to modernise. These elements and their retention of the original theory’s supposed coherence were pointedly noted by Dominic Erdozain.<sup>30</sup>

This overarching story of modernisation has subsequently been deemed to somehow be the ‘fault’ of the sociologists who propounded it, with its triumphalism held against it ever since. Even the subsequent ‘recantation’, or qualified reconsiderations of the general theory, both appear as counter evidence that some theories and narratives drawn from it are interlopers. Thus they only truly belong back in their precise historical context, and thus have no business in actively troubling subsequent generations.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic refutation of this whole narrative tendency has come from David Martin. He noted that in many instances the alleged antagonism between revealed religion and enlightenment/science are frequently overdrawn, citing instances where their relationship has been harmonious and productive. Likewise he argued that, within the human mind, it is rare to experience such binary opposition between world views and such an idea would not explain the use of ‘...different *kinds* of concept and discourse according to context.’<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, for Martin, there has to be a feasible explanation as to why religion is still around, and to explain how it functions in a world where he admits it is under threat. Moreover, it is interesting he identifies a secular bias in society leading religion to be blamed, naively, for its unmodern and corrosive power to adversely affect phenomena such as the

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<sup>29</sup> More recent works include Steve Bruce (2011) *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford, Oxford University Press); T. Glendinning and S. Bruce ‘New ways of believing or belonging: is religion giving way to spirituality?’ *The British Journal of Sociology* 2006 ,57, 3; S. Bruce ‘Secularization, Church and Popular Religion’ *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62, 3 , (July 2011), 543 - 561 and S. Bruce and T. Glendinning ‘When was secularization? Dating the decline of the British churches and locating its cause’ *The British Journal of Sociology* 61, 1.( 2010) 107-126.

<sup>30</sup> Erdozain “‘ Cause is Not Quite What it Used to be”’. 380. & 383.

<sup>31</sup> Martin, ‘Does the advance of science mean secularization?’ 58.

situation in the Middle East or Northern Ireland's past troubles. This is, so he suggests, a narrative that offers a picture of enlightened innocence and religious 'culpable vice.'<sup>32</sup>

### *'Places' for the secular*

It used to be a popular conception that urbanisation was responsible for the loss of faith and this was, in turn, a hybrid of the secularization as modernisation story. E.R. Wickham and Keith Inglis, drawing on Victorian pessimism, suggested that suburbanisation in modern western societies was related to a classic mode of secularization and its process based models. These suggested narratives of the loss of opportunities to worship with religious provision in the new suburbs failing to keep pace with sprawling development.<sup>33</sup> Alongside this was an indictment of suburban living, often deemed to be diversionary or hedonistic. The moralistic attitude to this outcome judged populations as no longer giving themselves to God, but instead to vapid consumerism.<sup>34</sup>

However the situation has been flipped by shelving pessimism about the fundamental nature of human life in the city. In subsequent years the moral tone from this judgement atrophied and turned around. Religion, seeking to recast itself from the ground up, began to see suburbs as containing a richness of communal social goods and resources. These could be channelled to achieve some downsized and limited ends. As one study of this area noted 'Mobility, transience and the geographical attenuation of community are treated as challenging influences on the nature of religious organisation, rather than inevitably secularising forces.'<sup>35</sup> This uncovered a narrative of churches and places of worship ensuring they have a

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<sup>32</sup> Martin, 'Does the advance of science mean secularization?' 62

<sup>33</sup> E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London, Lutterworth Press, 1969); K. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963).

<sup>34</sup> Note the challenge to this from Callum Brown's 'Did urbanisation secularise Britain?' *Urban History* 15, (May 1988) 1-14.

<sup>35</sup> C. Dwyer, D. Gilbert and B. Shah, 'Faith and suburbia: secularization, modernity and the changing geographies of religion in London's suburbs'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2013): 403-419. See 407-9.

snug and effective fit in both their local area and community, balancing their offers of provision and invitation.

Beyond these glimpses of religion recognizing its own latent capacity for renewal and rejuvenation, there have also been narratives from geographical perspectives that add further weight to this observation. Scholars such as Lilly Kong have noted how 'religion' is becoming a narrative with the power to outstrip previously important categories of analysis such as 'race' or 'ethnicity'. In most respects this has come out of migration studies where demographic change within cities has had its own unpredictable effects. Kong notes that urban groups, such as British Muslim men, have self-consciously reached for religious identity, rather than geographical origin as their marker of otherness in western society. Such choices are further developed through transnational links, phenomena which are now seen to reinforce religious conservatism rather than the dilution and leavening once thought.<sup>36</sup>

Alongside this interpretation spatial analysis of religious places and sites has more to offer. This argues that the sacred and its physical place in the urban environment has moved beyond the buildings conventionally designated for it.<sup>37</sup> Thus museums, schools, roadside shrines, even financial sites are all capable of being invested with the sacred. Such places are given sacred cogency through the repeated performance of ritual which lays claim to a place for the religious to gather and prosper. Some observers have coined the term 'cosmopolitan sociability' to suggest that the migrant experience actively rejuvenates and encourages such innovative forms of participation.<sup>38</sup> Likewise Fundamental Christianity has become flexible enough to encourage local and transnational identities. It has even become a focus of

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<sup>36</sup> L. Kong, 'Global shifts, theoretical shifts: Changing geographies of religion'. *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (6) 755-76. 758. See also Caitlin Cihak Finlayson 'Spaces of faith: incorporating emotion and spirituality in geographic studies.' *Environment and Planning* volume 44, (2012) 1763-1778.

<sup>37</sup> L. Kong, 'Global shifts', 756.

<sup>38</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, Tsypylma Darieva and Sandra Gruner-Domic, 'Defining cosmopolitan sociability in a transnational age. An introduction' in Tsypylma Darieva, Nina Glick Schiller and Sandra Gruner-Domic, *Cosmopolitan Sociability: Locating Transnational Religious and Diasporic Networks* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2012) 1-20, 3-6.

resistance to the power of the nation state by invoking a ‘higher’ authority on behalf of immigrants seeking to claim personal and citizenship rights.<sup>39</sup> Such ‘latent’ potential must always, by definition, remain elusive from the observer precisely because it is capable of emerging spontaneously without prior warning. Traditional sites for religious observance are now also used episodically by individuals undergoing personal stress. This is in contrast to the state’s apparent secular conceptions of urban space which utilizes forms of ‘rational pragmatism’, but fails to recognise sudden emotional and spiritual needs realized in the use of such buildings.<sup>40</sup> Far from the city successfully functioning as the fully understood rational ‘machine of secularization’,<sup>41</sup> some commentators suggest religion’s engagement with the welfare needs neglected by neo-liberal capitalism instead make the city ‘... a state of emergency that calls religion to arms’.<sup>42</sup> The city, and modernity more widely, are both also productive of an unforeseen species of re-enchantment in the shape of a modern occulture, a significant turn to interest in paranormal and occult cultural forms. Again this is not seen as a strange, somehow atypical, occurrence that wrong foots secularization, but instead ‘both the occult and the paranormal seeps from every pore of modernity’.<sup>43</sup>

These are all narratives of potential and dynamism capable of becoming a considerable range of phenomena that can be labelled religious or spiritual. As such they are, perhaps, an outcome of postmodern ways of thinking that are generally engaged upon observing cultures being made and remade, amid melting pot sites such as the urban landscape. These narratives undermine the certainty of other secularization narratives which claim to empirically measure

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<sup>39</sup> Nina Glick Schiller ‘There is no power except for God: Locality, global Christianity and immigrant transnational incorporation’, in eds Thomas Kirsch and Bertram Turner *Permutations of Order: Religion and Law as Contested Sovereignties* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) 125-146, 143.

<sup>40</sup> Kong, L. (2010) ‘The sacred and the secular: Exploring contemporary meanings and values for religious buildings in Singapore. *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 20, 1: 18-42, 40.

<sup>41</sup> N. Bartolini, C. Robert, S. Mackian, and S. Pile, ‘The place of spirit: Modernity and the geographies of spirituality’. *Progress in Human Geography*. Published online before publication (2016).

<http://phg.sagepub.com/content/early/2016/04/25/0309132516644512.abstract> 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid* 5.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid* 12.

and observe decline. Orthodox secularization narratives, which have much more rigid and rational definitions of the religious, will always under appreciate such strange hybrid beliefs. Against a definition of the religious coined by its own earliest advocates, hybrid beliefs which have somehow been cobbled together after secularization has arrived will always be dismissed as inferior, as remnants, as ephemeral or substantially irrelevant. Overall these are secularization narratives in which the dangerous and the threatening can be confronted and tamed for the benefit of religious belief. As such this belief can be optimistically held up as an exemplar to encourage religious provision to consider possible narratives of the ‘way back’ into the everyday lives of people *Honest to God*/Bonhoeffer style.<sup>44</sup>

One other place centred narrative about how secularization took such a ‘hold’ over the western imagination is an attempt to see its flourishing as a direct product of the idea of the University. Remodelled after the enlightenment this set of beliefs suggested that the university of the modern age was a space where empirical truth was explicitly foregrounded at the expense of all others. Its mission was arguably to undermine the subjective and the very idea of spiritual truth and knowledge. Objectively the university appeared as a repository of secular values, simply awaiting the arrival of the ways and means to promote these in a theory which both observed and actively argued for religion’s eclipse.<sup>45</sup> Whilst it is easier to see that academics in the sociological disciplines were visible adherents of the theory, the structure they inherited and fortified, alongside their means of promoting such ideas to generations of students, was less obviously appreciated until highlighted in this manner.

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<sup>44</sup> For more on this see Nash, *Christian Ideals* Chapter Eight.

<sup>45</sup> J. Arthur, ‘Faith and Secularization in religious colleges and universities’ *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 29,2, (2008): 197-202.

Robin Gill and his thesis of nineteenth century oversupply has behind it the idea of moral collapse if provision were not hastily enhanced.<sup>46</sup> This also speaks to nineteenth century perceptions of established churches, which administer religion and provide for it in the face of a developed conception of the spiritually destitute and godless. Also the theory's thrust lies in the realisation that morality could successfully be decoupled from religion. This appeared justified when civilised society did not collapse as the worst forebodings of some argued it could or should. A related suggestion from Jeffrey Cox is that English Christianity underwent a species of functional implosion, rather than it underwent a mauling specifically at the hands of secularization.<sup>47</sup>

### *Masculine pieties, Feminine pieties?*

A narrative that developed especially from observations taken initially from American Protestantism, but eventually embraced European continental Catholicism, involved seeing secularization as symbiotically linked to a traceable 'feminisation' of religion. The participation of women had been noted as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, with them significantly involved in the infrastructure of religious provision and conversion. This, it is suggested, significantly gathered pace from the early nineteenth century onwards. The thesis portrayed a religious and secular bifurcation, separating gendered worlds out into the faithful and the indifferent. Men, supposedly, became secularized whilst women attained possibly by default, a 'quantitative supremacy' in religious environments.<sup>48</sup> In later years this eventually led to a more obvious, and visible, 'feminization' of religion manifesting itself in rituals and

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<sup>46</sup> R. Gill, *The Myth of the Empty Church* (London:SPCK, 1993) and *The 'Empty' Church Revisited* (Aldershot:Ashgate, 2003)

<sup>47</sup> J. Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870-1930* (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1982)

<sup>48</sup> T. Van Osselaer and T. Buerman "'Feminisation' thesis: a survey of international historiography and a probing of Belgian grounds." *Revue d'Histoire Ecclesiastique*, 103, 2 (2008): 1-30.

emphases designed to apparently ‘appeal’ to this new constituency.<sup>49</sup> This, in the case of the Catholic Church, was predominantly behind the 19<sup>th</sup> century promotion of the Virgin Mary and the culture associated with her attributes and virtues.<sup>50</sup> In Protestant denominations, which are of greater relevance in the English context, the supremacy of women became manifest in the extension of their voluntary work into the areas of both education and welfare.<sup>51</sup>

However one essence of the ‘feminization’ thesis was a judgement that religiosity became identified with a considerable influx of sentimentalism. This stood in stark contrast to the rationality of the skeptical, rational male. Such judgements instantly gendered phenomena such as the ‘Enlightenment’ and various ‘Great Awakenings’ as intrinsically male and female respectively.<sup>52</sup> Aligned to this was an assumption that sentimentality emerged as a deliberate female gendered strategy of anti-intellectualism, in response to the apparent intellectualism of the secular. Likewise, gendered social behaviour’s impact on secularization was also mapped onto the increasingly nineteenth century demarcation of bourgeois space into public (secular, male) and private (religious, female) space.<sup>53</sup> In drawing this polarised picture still further, the very notion of piety itself became identified as ‘an intrinsically female trait.’<sup>54</sup> The mirror image of this was a significantly male interest in the nexus of ideas and narratives that the theory homogenises as anti-clerical. This mistrusted the now ‘feminised’ liturgy and the

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<sup>49</sup> H. McLeod ‘New perspectives on the religious history of western and northern Europe 1815-1960 in *Kyrkhistorisk Arsskrift*, 1, 100 (2000): 135-145.

<sup>50</sup> See J. Art, ‘The cult of the Virgin Mary, or the feminization of the male element in the Roman Catholic Church? A psycho historical hypothesis’. in in Patrick Pasture, Jan Art and Thomas Buerman *Beyond the Feminization Thesis: Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 71-84.

<sup>51</sup> Van Osselaer and Buerman, ‘“Feminisation’ thesis’, 4-7.

<sup>52</sup> P. Pasture, ‘Beyond the feminization thesis: Gendering the history of Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ in P. Pasture, J. Art and T. Buerman, *Beyond the Feminization Thesis: Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2012), 7-34, 8-9

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 14-15.

<sup>54</sup> Van Osselaer and Buerman, ‘“Feminisation’ thesis:’. p 8. See Also Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800-2000*. (London: Routledge, 2001) 79-88.

increasingly ‘feminised’ religious hierarchy that seemingly held women in thrall, again to the consternation of men who believed this had implications for their own family life, authority and autonomy within it. The work of Callum Brown really provides the significant coda and logical extension to this argument. He strongly suggests the pace and scale of Christianity’s significant fall from prominence reflects women’s essential control of the religious world. When they chose to turn their back on this, the collapse of Christianity’s cultural hold on populations at large was catastrophic.<sup>55</sup>

Whilst there are clearly important analyses forthcoming from this collection of observations, this trend has other stories to tell. At centre is an apparent dissonance between how men and women perceive the world of religion. This certainly draws from, and to an extent feeds, the central conception of gender history – that men and women fundamentally experience the world in very different ways. Thus religious responses become essentialised and homogenised to make them simply a component part of wider gender outlooks and identities.<sup>56</sup> A gendered analysis removes power and agency from the individual who may well be responding to particular religious forms, or personal circumstances, removed from gender inspired influences and responses. If this were fully indulged we will very likely also miss the religious responses from either gender that represent the opposite of the orthodox description of behaviour.<sup>57</sup> Both levels of male piety into modernity and also early nineteenth century female manifestations of skepticism, indifference or hostility around Christianity

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<sup>55</sup> See Brown *The Death of Christian Britain*, passim..

<sup>56</sup> See Van Osselaer and Buerman “‘Feminisation’ thesis”, 10 for suggestions that the bifurcation between male and female attitudes to religion can be overdrawn. However later discussion (14-17) notes how such a narrative sprang historically from both the ideas associated with ‘separate spheres’ and eighteenth century medical discourse, which promoted the ‘doctrine of two sexes’ which replaced the ‘one-sex theory’. Both provide clear lineages for how this narrative of gender religious bifurcation arose.

<sup>57</sup> For a good survey of the historical and modern context of masculine ‘revolts’ against feminised religious ideals and discourses see M. van der Meulen, Marten, K. Knibbe, M. Klaver, J. Roeland, H. Stoffels, and P. Versteeg. "Becoming a real man: evangelical discourses on masculinity." . Available at [https://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?q=van+der+Meulen%2C+Marten%2C+et+al.+%22Becoming+a+real+man%3A+evangelical+discourses+on+masculinity.%22&btnG=&hl=en&as\\_sdt=0%2C5](https://scholar.google.co.uk/scholar?q=van+der+Meulen%2C+Marten%2C+et+al.+%22Becoming+a+real+man%3A+evangelical+discourses+on+masculinity.%22&btnG=&hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5), (accessed 16/8/2016).

clearly need to be included within this equation.<sup>58</sup> The moment this does happen some elements of the reductionism inherent in the ‘feminization’ argument become readily apparent. So does the fact that analysis of this phenomena originates in preoccupations about the performativity of gender, as much as about the changing nature of religious belief, undermine its power as an explanation of gender’s relationship to religious decline? As one survey of the area concluded ‘...why it is that essentialising images and narratives seem to be so much more convincing and ‘sticky’ than open-ended, constructivist notions of gender?’<sup>59</sup> In other words, even gender historians have moved beyond the polarisation they feel offered to them by the divide secularization presents. As such they are anxiously portraying gendered approaches to religiosity as increasingly fluid and nuanced, without the need to provide the absolutism that rigidly defined theories like secularization require. From this point of view they have discovered that ‘... for many post-secular historians, the story is less about religious decay and more about religion’s capacity for transformation, survival and adaptation.’<sup>60</sup> Moreover the feminisation thesis emerges as a blatantly western Christocentric one, demanding projects to examine the experiences of women in Islam and Judaism.<sup>61</sup> In concluding a nuanced examination of this thesis, Patrick Pasture noted that those who had taken it seriously had at least used it to advance the re-evaluation of the role of women. Insights provided by ‘feminization’ and its chronological endurance had promoted the idea that religious responses were not antithetical to modernity but, arguably, belonged squarely within it.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> J. de Groot and S. Morgan, ‘Introduction: Beyond the ‘Religious Turn’? Past, present and future perspectives in Gender History’ in (eds.) Joanna de Groot and Sue Morgan, *Sex, Gender and the Sacred: Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History* (Wiley Blackwell: Oxford, 2014). 1-23, 3.

<sup>59</sup> van der Meulen, Marten, Kim Knibbe, Miranda Klaver, Johan Roeland, Hijme Stoffels, and Peter Versteeg. ‘Becoming a real man’, 26.

<sup>60</sup> de Groot and Morgan, ‘Introduction: Beyond the ‘Religious Turn?’ 20.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 20-21.

<sup>62</sup> Pasture, ‘Beyond the feminization thesis:’ 31.

### *Timings, Moments and Cataclysms*

Of considerable antiquity is what we might describe as the ‘Dover Beach’, pre-Dietrich Bonhoeffer narrative of secularization. This is a sustained lament at how religion has leached away with the passing of ages.<sup>63</sup> Such sentiments and beliefs, like Arnold’s poem, are steeped in the language of wistful pathos and can be powerful for all that, even if they are occasionally a little short on hard analysis. Sometimes it is the peculiar nature of the times that has enabled this leaching away, sometimes it is the annoying lack of compliance amongst people themselves. Edward Norman, one modern representative flag waver for this view of secularization and religiosity, outlined most of its essence in a single comment;

A religion first preached to the rustic people of the lakeside villages of Gallilee, and which the founder declared was to be received with the simplicity of little children, is above all things open to all people. It is precisely because of the nature of people themselves, however, that it is found hard to accept. People prefer a religion of practical help, of ethicised behaviour, of moral exhortation or social engineering – a religion which flatters their sense of self-worth or of the significance of their existence – to a religion which begins, as the message of Jesus begins, with a statement about the intrinsic wretchedness of each person. Modern people do

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<sup>63</sup> See Taylor, 570-2 for Taylor’s own meditation on the ‘Dover Beach’ narrative.

not feel wretched; they have a high estimate of their value.<sup>64</sup>

Although there is scarcely space to fully unpick the varied tropes and resonances in here, it is worthwhile for the reader to assess the sheer number of beliefs about the nature of secularization and secularised behaviour elaborated in the foregoing quote. In here it becomes readily possible to note how belief in secularization has transcended fact and theory.

Simon Green's *Passing of Protestant England* is a text which casts secularization as a significant reaction to an overtly religious Victorian period. An era which over indulged itself in religious sensibilities, in marked contrast to both its successor and predecessor.<sup>65</sup> This immediately invokes several familiar historical narratives about religion and Christian societies. Popular culture has abounded since the 1920s with a shared vocabulary of risible Victorian stuffiness fed by piety linked to morality. One function of invoking this is to make the Victorian period unfortunately homogenous, excluding from the mind the numerous challenges to conventional Victorian morality and religious makeup posed by doubters, seekers and secularists. Another narrative this invokes is of secularization as a force and tool for saving societies from anachronism. This also has a foothold in the declaration that secularization emphatically co-exists with modernism. This narrative also persuades Green to elaborate a peculiarly twentieth century invention of anti-clericalism in England, a phenomenon which would find its pre-history anomalous and inconvenient.

The highly influential work of Hugh McLeod and Callum Brown both belong to a narrative trend that might be described as the cataclysmic moment. They have some profoundly different conclusions, but this narrative and its different shapes deserves deeper investigation.

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<sup>64</sup> E. Norman, *Secularization: Sacred Values in a Godless World* (London: Continuum, 2002): 169-70.

<sup>65</sup> S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularization and Social Change, c 1920-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

McLeod sees the 1960s as a decade of crisis and transformation and, in doing so, links himself to other histories that see the decade as a watershed. For McLeod the 1960s brought ‘...an explosion of new ways of understanding the world’<sup>66</sup> and Christianity really only became one option amongst many which vied with alternatives such as Socialism, Anarchism and the contemporary stirrings of New Age and esoteric spirituality. Although interest in religion was significant in the 1960s, this was emphatically of a critical kind.<sup>67</sup> For McLeod this is depicted as fragmentation into variety, which also included atheism and the ethnic minority religions arriving in Britain as a final consequence of decolonisation.<sup>68</sup> This ended Christianity’s centrality to the life and death of previous generations, as spiritual potential suddenly became a catalyst for religious pluralism. Although the strong attachment to traditional Christianity had been the victim of irrevocable change, there were elements of spirituality channelled into other directions. McLeod saw this cataclysm as the culmination of multiple long and short term causes and wanted to trace the consequences of these.

Although an analogous argument, Callum Brown’s thesis in the *Death of Christian Britain* is more certain and direct in citing causes for the secularization event of the early 1960s.

Brown’s construction is considerably larger than McLeod’s creation of Christendom and operates within both a religious and moral framework. Together, these two very different versions of the cataclysmic narrative have also become part of a sub-historiography intent on dating the moment when Britain became a secular society. Several offer an earlier date and argue vociferously that Callum Brown in particular has post-dated this whole event.<sup>69</sup> His own approach also creates a story that a manifest change can occur through the actions of a crucial demographic group, or gender.

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<sup>66</sup> Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 242

<sup>67</sup> McLeod, 258

<sup>68</sup> McLeod, 245.

<sup>69</sup> See Postscript to C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, Second Edition, 2009). 216-20.

The persuasive thrust of these theories is to locate and date the passing of a whole overarching system called Christendom. This is the finality of a dying belief system faced starkly with the fact that extinction is forever. The current dominance of such ideas should make us think deeply about how the narrative within them both displaces an alternative whilst conveying meanings of its own. This narrative is not simply important for what it says, but also for what it denies. Both McLeod and Brown actively turn their backs on a traditional narrative of religion simply leaching away as a result of gradual decline. This ‘traditional’ approach indicted both the First and Second World War as significant (if not watershed) moments. When vocalised by churches and religious activists this fed a ‘church in crisis’ narrative, inspiring attempts to survey, rejuvenate or revivify the religious territory investigating what is ‘wrong’ with how people view (or viewed) Christianity as the twentieth century progressed.<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to this the narrative offered by Callum Brown in particular speaks of what looks like a new religious robustness about the earlier part of the twentieth century. His ‘Salvation Economy’ and his account of the successful nurturing of the piety of women are set alongside a steadiness of religious subscription and occasional revival. Together both these, and other factors, make up the idea of ‘Christian Britain’ with deep roots which will not be disturbed easily. Religion since 1800 was primarily located in women and the disturbance of Christianity’s roots inevitably came within this sector of the population. This is also an argument that indicts other narratives about institutions and the whole realm of ‘provision’ which led churches to lambast themselves for failure to make individuals desire to attend church. This was ‘a focus on “structures”... to the neglect of the “personal” in piety’.<sup>71</sup> When we reach the end of Callum Brown’s account the break is final and irrevocable. ‘Christian Britain’ is over and a new less coherent and inchoate world has begun. He admits that

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<sup>70</sup> See Nash, *Christian Ideals*, Chapter Eight.

<sup>71</sup> Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 195.

religion may regroup, or that there may be residues, but neither will attain the same significance again, nor can they reconstruct the morally powerful and coherent edifice. As he suggests it may remain as a mere “‘root belief’”<sup>72</sup> but ‘the “religious life” in which individuals imagined themselves, and which gave them the narrative structure for gendered discourses on religiosity to be located in their personal testimony seems to have vanished.... Britain is showing the world how religion as we know it can die.’<sup>73</sup>

This cataclysmic narrative sets itself against gradualism and in particular against continuity which most observers of religion’s power to reconstitute itself have tended to promote. It also speaks against the often assumed power of cultural continuity such as that proposed by Daniele Hervieu-Leger (and later Charles Taylor) with the former writing of a ‘chain of memory’ binding past and future in attachment to Christianity.<sup>74</sup> Callum Brown thus empathically refutes this in *Death of Christian Britain* reaffirming and furthering this in his subsequent works. Thus, for him, there is no chain of memory and lingering sentiment for religion – women have given it up and given it up for good.<sup>75</sup> Moreover did he perhaps also speak for many when he claimed to celebrate it because ‘... it freed me and British popular culture as a whole from the relentless misery of an inescapable Christian discourse which governed virtually all aspects of self-identity and expression’?<sup>76</sup> The forceful statement of Brown’s narrative of secular cataclysm, and its assault on gradualist ‘pottering’ decline, unsurprisingly produced a counter narrative accusing him of ‘condescension’ and a manifest failure to appreciate Christianity’s achievements.<sup>77</sup> Likewise detractors bemoaned the fact that, even whilst their decline was an ongoing trial for them, Callum Brown had unforgivably envisaged their death - as though they had the same protected status as a

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 198.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 197-198.

<sup>74</sup> D. Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. Trans. Simon Lee (Rutgers University Press, 2000)

<sup>75</sup> C. Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularization in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA*. (London: Boydell Press, 2012).

<sup>76</sup> See Postscript to Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 200.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 199-200.

monarch in an earlier age. Worst of all they felt he belittled the fact that, whether decline was gradual or cataclysmic, they had at least been saving souls in the meantime. This is an especially potent example of the power of one version of secularization's narrative to display itself as ideologically charged content. Moving beyond the historical record, Callum Brown thought about the future and the logic of his own narrative. Importantly, at the end of his postscript Callum Brown does *believe* the death of Christian Britain will happen.

Perhaps of most recent origin is the revisited suggestion that secularization, as an apparently empirical fact, was invented by specific groups and stakeholders at a specific moment in time. Sam Brewitt-Taylor has argued that religious commentators in the very early 1960s, convinced by the 'radical theological critique of the churches', began to speak as though Britain had become, 'almost instantaneously, a secular society.'<sup>78</sup> This permeation of ideas through society eventually paved the way for later sociologists of religion to evaluate, count and predict as described earlier in this article. Brewitt-Taylor describes this as a '...problematic re-imagination of British religiosity' which turned decline into a story of a new type of society, "the secular age"<sup>79</sup>. This line of thinking belongs alongside some of the other narratives of top down secularization. In this narrative it is radical theology and theologians that are the elite game-changers. The permeation of these ideas, through the public sphere, becomes the most effective agent of persuading the country that it is turning away from religiosity.<sup>80</sup> It is plain here that elites (intellectual and spiritual) turn this series of events into self-fulfilling prophecy. This has a dynamic which leads to something of a snowball effect as '...the most relevant point in the debates which followed was not how

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<sup>78</sup> S. Brewitt-Taylor, 'The invention of a "secular society"?' Christianity and the sudden appearance of secularization discourses in the British national media, 1961-64. *Twentieth Century British History* 24, 3, (2013): 327-350. But see also an earlier version from Morris 'The strange death of Christian Britain' 963-76.

<sup>79</sup> Brewitt-Taylor, 'The invention of a "secular society"?: 349.

<sup>80</sup> For a further elaboration of this idea through a worked example see S. Brewitt-Taylor 'From religion to revolution: Theologies of Secularisation in the British student Christian movement, 1963-1973' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 66, 4 (October 2015): 792-811.

rapidly British Christianity was declining, but how rapidly it was thought to be declining.’<sup>81</sup> Thus, this is secularization created from both fear and, perhaps, over enthusiastic embrace of decline motifs Both contemporaries and subsequent historians of post war Britain might well recognize these alongside others that pervade this period’s history.<sup>82</sup> Very soon this can make us think of historical junctures, from Weber, Marx and Durkheim onwards, where historical narratives nurtured from above have told societies, for good or ill, that the religious presence is likely to decline within them, or indeed ought to decline within them.

### *Golden Ages Come Again and Longed for Lights*

This last category reminds us how some almost forgotten stories and beliefs around secularization can return in new and unexpected guises. The resumption of religious dynamics which have reopened some questions in the western world, alongside aspects of political relations have led to a philosophical scrutiny of secularization’s conceptualisation and purpose. In many respects the leader of this was Jürgen Habermas who was widely credited with the formulation of the ‘post-secular’. This accepted many of the essential arguments about what secularization was and, indeed, how it had happened. The, by now, established role of scientific progress producing ‘disenchantment’; the loss of control by religious organisations as a consequence of functional differentiation and the waning of pastoral need amongst western populations all served to play their part.<sup>83</sup> However Habermas led the reaction amongst those who saw secularization theory discredited by the failure of religion to disappear. This ‘stalling’ of the secularization thesis was, in turn,

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<sup>81</sup> Brewitt-Taylor, ‘The invention of a “secular society”?’ : 346.

<sup>82</sup> I have in mind here the work of the ‘pessimist school’ of historiography which produced a revisionist reading of the 1945 Labour government. See also for example W. Glinga, (trans. Stephen Paul Gost) *Legacy of Empire: A journey Through British Society* (Manchester, Manchester University Press 1986).

<sup>83</sup> Jürgen Habermas, (2008) ‘Notes on a post-secular society’ (originally text in German in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, April 2008), *Politics and Society* [online]. Available at <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html> [Accessed 26 August 2016]. 2.

augmented by the growing power of religious ideas as a vehicle for the expression of identity, conflict and violence.

Indeed Habermas evidently found himself reflecting a philosopher's need to explain and reconfigure the world where and when necessary. In this case in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the enhanced provision of security in Parisian banlieus and the murder of Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam.<sup>84</sup> This position argued ostensibly that three things had changed. Firstly that global conflict inflected with religion was transforming consciousness in the West, undermining the secular's 'triumphal zest.'<sup>85</sup> Secondly Habermas felt that religion had seized its chance to become 'communities of interpretation', which authoritatively influenced issues such as abortion, euthanasia and reproductive medicine where societies otherwise seemed confused or unclear.<sup>86</sup> Lastly immigration had brought the issues of globalised Third World religious cultures to the doorsteps of Western Europe. All these, so Habermas argued, had unseated secular rationalism from its supremacy. Consequently, Habermas vehemently wanted dialogue between the secular and religious, imploring both to leave their ideologically armed camps and acquire a language and attitude of mutual respect.<sup>87</sup> Whilst this tried to bring distinct world views together the work of Talal Asad was arguably a stage further since it argued that the religious and the secular could not be defined with the degree of separation philosophers and social scientists had previously been so certain about. Asad rejected the idea that the religious and the secular respectively had an intrinsic and distinct 'essence'. Instead each religious event constituted an individual context in which ideas and symbols would become important.<sup>88</sup> In more historically specific observations José Casanova noted the different ideological and discipline specific developments that had occurred on both sides of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 5-6.

<sup>87</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Europe: The Faltering Project* (trans. Ciaran Cronin) (Polity Press: Malden M.A. USA, 2009)

<sup>88</sup> For Asad see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford California USA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

the Atlantic. These had, in turn, led to a very different reception of religious resurgence in these different types of society leaving emphatically them as public entities. Nonetheless, he also wanted to explore ways in which the minorities within democratic systems should secure protection for forms of ideological dissidence.<sup>89</sup>

It is possible to see the influence of postmodernism in these attacks upon the arrogance of absolute rationally defined ideological positions. This occurs alongside the relativizing of previous absolutes - preferring to see them in context. However, much of this critique of the secular in Western countries was a suggestion that its arrogance and dogmatism had itself spawned religious conflict. Thus, it needed to account for such behaviour before the court of world public opinion. In doing so some of the language moved from describing the secular, or secularization, instead to speak of 'Secularism' – thus investing it with new and sudden ideological inflexions and baggage. It became not so much an outcome as a world view capable of being challenged like others. Thus the attitude of Habermas, in particular, was an explicit reaction to outbreaks of religiously inspired violence and its threat to the peace of the global community at the start of a new millennium. This constituted another one of the 'contexts' that Asad identified as crucial. In other words, this was a phase where the West turned against its own previously confident project of secularization. Instead it accepted degrees of guilt, whilst offering conciliation to those it had wronged and alienated. In doing so it accepted a new role for religious sensibilities which had survived, and now transcended, secularization to become one component of the post-secular. Could the right of such sensibilities to their own survival ever again be questioned? The vibrancy of the 'post-secular' would also emerge in the later work of Charles Taylor who, throughout *The Secular World*, saw the co-existence of the religious and the secular as more comfortable and logical

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<sup>89</sup> Casanova substantially rejected the 'privatization of religion' thesis. See J. Casanova, (1994) *Public Religions in the Modern World* (London, Chicago University Press). See also for a more recent update José Casanova, (2006) 'Rethinking secularization: A global comparative perspective. *Hedgehog Review* Spring/Summer. 7-22.

than previous analysts and, in particular, the avowedly secular themselves were prepared to accept.

This last mentioned work is the latest manifestation of secularization narratives which offer a qualitative shift, creating versions of secularization that foreground the role of Christianity. These soothed the religious and made decline feel positive, whilst making religion less anachronistic and more in tune with modernity. Through some eyes this could unwittingly make it seem to look like a part of a divine plan. Whilst we have had many versions of what might be termed the ‘underrated smart Christianity’ narrative, Charles Taylor’s work is perhaps the most contemporary and the highest achievement of this construction.

Fascinatingly, as we have discovered in one of the epigraphs to this article, Taylor himself acknowledges the potentially personal narrative of secularization that so often we should recognise is evident in its retelling.

*A Secular Age* when stripped down is a surprisingly traditional, even old fashioned, work.

Secularization happens in readily delineated stages which, interestingly, occasionally wobble away from the linear, whilst there are even versions of classical modernisation theory hidden in here.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless, Taylor’s adoption of a three stage model would certainly also please August Comte and the Positivists, who were forever seeking to harness religious potentiality. Taylor’s narrative begins in the increasingly historically questionable ‘world’ of the mediaeval, allegedly enchanted by Christianity and the amenable folk/mystic culture which was its active handmaiden. Both hold complete sway over the mediaeval mind and culture, excluding all other possibilities in the concept of the ‘porous’ self. Whilst qualification is offered in some places, this is still predominantly like reading the universe constructed by the literate classes of the period, whose world view is significantly led and governed by the

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<sup>90</sup> Taylor, 436-7 for a description of delineated stages & 443 for a version of classic modernisation – only for this to be replaced by a cobbling together of ‘alternatives (that) are available or can be invented out of the repertory of the populations concerned’. See 461.

cloister. When Taylor describes the requirement within mediaeval popular Christianity to fast, what should we make of the inevitable recalcitrant who must have foregone this devotion.<sup>91</sup> Were they ‘disenchanted’ and engaged in a process that would lead eventually to some kind of ‘subtraction’? Or were they simply hungry and negotiated their behaviour with any unseen forces, or dare one say it disregarded them entirely. Thus we can see how easily the mirror of all embracing ‘enchantment’ can crack from side-to-side.

As Callum Brown notes elsewhere in this collection Charles Taylor, like Lucien Febvre before him, is in significant denial about the very possibility of atheism and its attendant doubts. However, Taylor’s thesis also taps into another narrative about ‘unbelief’ which characterises it simply as a revolt against religion and its existence is predicated on this.<sup>92</sup> Such a suggestion is closely followed by another which sees unbelief as partly caused by the arrogance of humanity - Reason and Science is ‘part of the self-image of Enlightened unbelief’.<sup>93</sup> This is recasting a religious golden age in a manner which only a religious believer can. This is also a construction scholars of this subject have encountered before in sermons, visitation records, and the muted disappointment that has haunted the Anglican Church (and latterly other churches) since the late eighteenth century at least. The impact of religious belief in Taylor’s writing is actively palpable in what is his ‘imagining’ of the power of the religious, the mystic and the spiritual. Yet this is offered without deeply grounded historical proof. This *belief* in its transcendent power is equally responsible for the absence of atheist possibilities within this golden age, predicated on not simply the ‘porous

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<sup>91</sup> Taylor, 258.

<sup>92</sup> Taylor, 269 & 564. For other versions of this see Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also the reply to it by this author. D S. Nash ‘Reassessing the ‘Crisis of Faith’ in the Victorian Age: Eclecticism and the spirit of moral enquiry’ *Journal of Victorian Culture* 16, 1 (April 2011): 65-82.

<sup>93</sup> Taylor, 273

self' but also, importantly, the absence of the modern 'buffered self'. In the face of religion's power it is possible to *believe* atheism and atheists do not exist.<sup>94</sup>

After Taylor's reshaping of a golden age he notes traditional secularization theories give us the 'come down' in the shape of decline. For the most part, the actual nature and vocabulary of this decline can be crucial in formulating its precise narrative character. Alternatives are rarely breaks with the past, and the links back to earlier formulations are always grasped at and displayed throughout the book. Taylor keenly notes how Christianity modernises enabling the 'decline of hell' and 'new understandings of 'the atonement.'<sup>95</sup> Likewise Deism and Unitarianism are vehicles carrying the essence of religious potentiality forward in time.<sup>96</sup> Taylor's characterisation of modern society is one in which 'self-sufficient' humanism has become an 'available option'.<sup>97</sup> This engages with the 'transcendent God' of Secularity 1, who Taylor says has been 'displaced at the centre of social life' by developments in Secularity 2 and Secularity 3.<sup>98</sup> It is even at this stage that Taylor displays suspicion and disdain for "'subtraction" stories', which describe a species of loss, of successful substitution and removal alongside that fact that religion only suffers from the bad things that humankind has done - such as the First World War.<sup>99</sup> One essence that seems to run through all three versions of 'Secularity' is an ongoing attempt to assert potentialities throughout all of them. Different paths through which a religious future could have been trodden, but in many instances, were not.<sup>100</sup>

Perhaps what is most interesting is his description of the end of this process after the maturity of Secularity 3. This is a world riddled with crippling 'anti-structure' which enables a

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<sup>94</sup> See Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, and Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe*.

<sup>95</sup> Taylor, 13.

<sup>96</sup> Taylor, 291-2

<sup>97</sup> Taylor, 18.

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, 20.

<sup>99</sup> Taylor, 408 & 416.

<sup>100</sup> Taylor, 26.

‘tyranny of instrumental reason’, protests against ‘the forces of conformity, the rape of nature, the euthanasia of the imagination.’ Taylor notes the ‘buffered self’ is an attractive proposition for a while, but this is not going to be the case for all time. Once we realise the ‘buffered self’ is not forever, a plea for re-enchantment becomes desirable and possible. Thus, we realise quite why the construction of ‘enchantment’ within Secularity 1 was so monolithic. Moreover, ‘enchantment’ could be encouraged to return amid the apparent hollowness of, and disenchantment with, the secular world. This has been a very consistent story pedalled by Christian spokespersons who persistently latch on to the apparent vacuity of a world dominated by the mundane, illusory and finite. The consistently posed question in the hands of modern religious hierarchies - ‘is there something more?’ – has Taylor assuring over seven hundred odd pages that there really always was ‘something more’, if humans were patient and prepared to look.

If bold and optimistic Christianity were to be charged with writing a history of secularization which happened as God intended it to – this surely is it! The world created by Taylor begins in Eden like enchantment, followed by a series of changes wrought by man (including a new role for Deism) and a state of unbelief that was wholly invented in the nineteenth century. Later Positivism provided proof evident of the lingering obsession with God that rational man has no real desire to shake off.<sup>101</sup> All of these sites and instances don’t disrupt the continuities of religious potential nearly as much as some other versions of secularization – no cataclysms, breaks or serious interruptions here. The development of western society proceeds whiggishly apace (and in places in imitation of Elias), whilst the rise of secularity 2 and 3 occurs with disenchantment proceeding alongside a significant retention of cultural norms and baggage. This was absorbed through new practices of the ‘Social Imaginary’

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<sup>101</sup> Taylor, 221-69, 374-5 & 389-90.

which shows ‘how we all fit together’.<sup>102</sup> Disenchantment it seems is a process required by science and virtue,<sup>103</sup> whilst the rise of individualism is likewise emphatically not a ‘subtraction story’ but instead ‘embedded in society’.<sup>104</sup> The comparison with Elias three sentences earlier is especially fruitful since the ‘Civilising Process’ held out the prospect of an enjoyable end time for the Western world, once violent and uncouth forms of behaviour had been pushed out of mainstream society – dare one say ‘subtracted’?<sup>105</sup> Although sharing this desire for an end time, unlike the teleology of Elias, the believer in Charles Taylor wants a return to enchantment. Thus, it becomes clearer still just how important the statement and establishment of enchantment had been in the earlier sections of the book. Such a return would provide the Elias like experience of celebration and achievement of what society has evolved into, at the behest of benign forces. These seemingly inspire the ‘exalted view of life’ that unbelief is apparently so poor at.<sup>106</sup> For Taylor, the longed for divorce of morality from religion demanded by the enlightenment is denied, since the ‘... standard subtractionist story (which) would convince us that once the old religious and metaphysical beliefs withered away, meant room was finally made for the existing, purely human motivation.’<sup>107</sup> This denial characterises humanism as a species of transcendence reaching back to the ancients and not linked to subtraction stories.<sup>108</sup>

Charles Taylor’s most cogent pronouncement comes towards the end of the book when he states:

The hold of the former Christendom on our imaginations  
is immense, and in a sense, rightly so. So the sense can

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<sup>102</sup> For disenchantment see Taylor, 266 for construction of the ‘Social Imaginary’ see 172.

<sup>103</sup> Taylor, 131.

<sup>104</sup> Taylor, 157.

<sup>105</sup> Taylor, 101, 102, 107, 134-5, 139 & 215.

<sup>106</sup> Taylor, 621.

<sup>107</sup> Taylor, 245.

<sup>108</sup> Taylor, 246-7 & 253.

easily arise, that the task of breaking out of the dominant immanentist orders today is already defined by the model of Christendom. Of course, the issue remains open of how much we can actually go back, but this earlier civilization gives us both our paradigm language, which we are seeking, and perhaps also the model of a society and culture which is not in tension with, but fully expresses the Faith.<sup>109</sup>

In this Taylor is the trailblazer for a return to older, more traditional forms of Christianity, indeed like his own Catholicism. As such, this signifies clearly dissatisfaction with the numerous accommodations liberal Christianity has made with the world. It acknowledges that modernised liberal Christianity has allied itself with disenchantment and, thus, can never aspire to be the real thing. In some senses the proof of Charles Taylor's conviction of a potentially hopeful future for Christianity, in which secularization gets finessed by becoming 'less plausible over time',<sup>110</sup> comes from listening to his readers. From a Catholic perspective writings emanating from Notre Dame spell out one kind of message. This acknowledges *A Secular Age* as a thinly veiled celebration of Catholicism's endurance and fortuitous discovery of religious tolerance.

Taylor occasionally identifies his own proclivities and commitments, his own receptivity to transcendence and engagement with the historical, cultural, and political challenges we all face. Along the way, of course, we are introduced to a variety of ideal types of religious and non-

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<sup>109</sup> Taylor, 735.

<sup>110</sup> Taylor, 770.

religious ways of life, but this is no disinterested scholarly inquiry, no disengaged charting of territory or classification. It is rather an elaborate and committed mapping of territory for inhabitants by a co-inhabitant and a restrained eulogy to a particular domicile by one who occupies it. *A Secular Age* is a philosophical paean to one form of Christian moral and political life.... We are in a new age of religious searching.... Taylor argues, religious answers to the question of life's meaning are still available, and, to some, such answers are desirable (pp 591-592) <sup>111</sup>

Meanwhile, a Mennonite perspective demonstrates the buoyant mood Taylor has seemingly created amongst the religious who entertain a desire to re-enchant the world, celebrating his subtle assault on the secular's apparently vacuous, unfulfilling nature:

Taylor cautions us, however, against taking the apparent stability and contentment of the "immanent frame" of secularity at face value. There are numerous "cross-pressures" that threaten the calm certainty with which the secular hold their convictions. For example, despite an implicit commitment to materialism, many are uncomfortable with the idea that their actions are "determined," as behaviorism or sociobiology can suggest; or with the implication that their sense of higher ethical

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<sup>111</sup> 'Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*'. Reviewed by Michael L. Morgan, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 10 (August 2008).

motives is somehow illusory; or with the failure of materialism to provide a convincing explanation for their aesthetic responses to nature and art (p 596). The secular also are prone to a nagging unease with the emptiness of their lives; the lack of demanding ideals; the disconnection from their deeper selves, their community, and nature; and the pursuit of forms of happiness that often feel demeaning (pp 311–320).<sup>112</sup>

Lastly we should also make ourselves aware of how sometimes the secularization narrative unhelpfully arrives in the mind, before individuals have the wherewithal to unpick and think about the context. On occasions, this also demonstrates that secularization gets revered and respected as a belief, regardless of the experience of the individual observer. This precise realisation was brought home to me at a colloquium I recently attended in Frankfurt. Amid presenters from many Western European countries, was an academic from Estonia seeking to analyse the complex nature of recent religious history in his country. He felt confused and bereft in trying to describe a history at odds with what he knew of Western European religious history. How could he, he asked us, make sense of a quasi-explosive melange of different confessional versions of Christianity, in amongst a stubborn and persistent pre-reformation paganism, something which also had modern roots in both state sponsored irreligion and New Age perspectives? Linearity, process and subtraction stories did not help him view this kaleidoscopic world of his country's religious history, which seemed to be in perpetual and unpredictable movement. I advised him to close his eyes and think quietly for five minutes, and partly invoke Jeffrey Cox, by putting western secularization stories and

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<sup>112</sup> V.Lef Froese, *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* Volume 40 no1 (Spring 2011) : 90-100.

assumptions out of his mind, removing such unhelpful obligations. He drew breath and began to suggest that this now felt easier. Henceforth he did not have to share and shape this history he knew into the narrative structure expected by his audience, because this was now not appropriate. His audience was also now able to, at last, hear other stories from him about religious history that potentially opened up new comparative insights.

### *Conclusion*

Secularization exists as a belief fed by the power of narratives. As such it does not necessarily rely for this power upon conviction based on empirical fact. It trades stories with its own cloister, whilst these are less prone to refutation than individual illustrations of them – again an experience that nineteenth century secularists would recognise. The latter's engagements with religious speakers throughout the Victorian period were 'disputes' rather than refutations – beliefs are less amenable to critique than theories.

Likewise we should also note that the opposing position to secularization, 'Resacralisation' is equally shaped by stories tied to beliefs such as the 'Second Spring of Catholicism', 'The Great Awakening', 'Evangelical Revival', 'The Mission to the Heathen', 'Faith in the City', 'Honest to God' and even 'Re-enchantment'. Likewise it is very pertinent here to remind ourselves of the self-interested denominational stance of much religious history. Nonetheless this does mean the religious may actually be more self-aware about their fate. Many of the Protestant narratives of renewal, such as the idea of a 'Great Awakening' acknowledge that the power of religion has diminished (or secularised), but it hopes for only a short time. Is it the case that Christianity has learned flexibility, to fit its times in the shadows into a wider and more detailed chronological framework than the secular has so far managed?

Postmodernism itself may intrude here and ask what, perhaps, is quite so special about secularization as a metanarrative. Does not the logic of the postmodern position effectively destabilise all attempts to produce irrefutable fact and theories and turn all these into narratives? Whilst this logic may be so, an astute answer would be to suggest that, not since Marxism's fairly rapid fall from grace and prominence, has there been quite such another metanarrative like secularization. Which other destabilised theory has so engaged the 'soul' and the 'person' from the different respective sides of the argument? It is precisely this engagement which so often lets us hear the *beliefs* of such individuals about religion's fate – and indeed the desirability of these respective outcomes.

Perhaps we should no longer ask about the relevance, cogency or credibility of the secularization thesis, but accept instead it is a series of narratives that convinced and comforted some, strangely in a manner that secularization saw religion doing in earlier ages. Instead we should now perhaps ask what do we all want from our various formulations of the thesis. By treating secularization as a belief we are more and more persuaded, as historians, that it is less of an important question about whether its 'claims' are actually true. Instead we can move forward and provide analyses of what it does, how it functions and what other spheres of life it interacts with and impinges upon. Once we realise that secularization potentially exists as a narrative, a story, a fable and a belief we must accept the implications of this and move forward to perhaps consider the narrative and belief status of 'Resacralisation'.