

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Secularist History: Past Perspectives and Future Prospects

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This article provides a survey of the growth and development of historiography about both Secularism and the wider secular movement since the onset of the nineteenth century. It analyses and highlights the main themes and their advocates as well as suggesting what historiographical developments we might be likely to see in the future.

It is a great pleasure to write an opening piece for this themed issue because it serves to signal the arrival of secularist history as, at the very least, a sub-discipline of the history of ideology and belief. One hesitates to suggest that it is an offshoot of religious history, largely because religious history generally ignored its existence for quite a sustained period. It was thus frequently relegated to the category of apostasy from religion, or instead labelled with the semi-religious category of doubt. Agnosticism was the earnestly church-bound term for the honest doubting Christian, a flavour of which we can sometimes recapture in the musings of our current Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby. Atheism was highlighted as pertaining to the conclusions, lifestyles and predilections of the ‘isolated’ individual – with a very firm emphasis on the term ‘isolated’. Secularism as an idea, as an ideology or, alternatively, as the spur for a whole movement culture was scarcely realised nor properly catalogued. Moreover, as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth century, Christian denominations began looking over their shoulder at the threatening manifestations of the secular life and thus ignored the ideology of secularism that wanted forms of confrontation. From this situation of neglect, however, things have changed considerably and as a senior historian in this area I am grateful to suddenly see the subject so full of vibrant and engaged enthusiasts, as well as those bringing important perspectives from other related disciplines and controversies.

When I commenced work in 1983 the whole subject area of Secularism in Britain was a backwater, substantially neglected by the history written in the 1970s and 1980s. In contemplating this I could never wholly decide what the reason for this sustained neglect really was. In darker moments this area felt like an obvious backwater, ignored for a host of good reasons for something more ‘interesting’ and something that more obviously seemed to ‘lead somewhere’. If you were, like me, a part of the

last gasp of social history and history from below, then the Marxism which overshadowed this outlook had little time for religious radicalism. Writers like Christopher Hill, when he considered the tide of religious discussion unleashed by the English Revolution, was anxious to see how these individuals invented species of political education through their interaction with religious texts and ideas. Similarly E.P. Thompson was famously dismissive of Methodism, further adding to the conception that any radical historian who interested themselves in such things had veered off the beaten path into a blind and dangerous cul-de-sac. Writers like Patricia Hollis, someone more receptive to the nuances of press and the popular than most, saw only the political side of Richard Carlile and Henry Hetherington (Hollis 1970). If class based history was on the wane it would surely be replaced by another paradigm of similar importance in the fullness of time. Such hopes (or for me fears) seemed eminently realised by engagement with Barbara Taylor’s *Eve and the New Jerusalem*. This involved itself in considerable discussion of Robert Owen and his utopianism, yet comparatively neglected the enlightenment-inspired critique of religion that crucially informed his thinking. Whilst this pursued a feminist agenda, the coming paradigm of a few sentences ago, it managed to neglect the work of the female figures associated with freethought – women who might perhaps have felt they had a right to a place in the roll call of nineteenth-century feminist trailblazers (Taylor 1983).

Despite this worrying impression of a mistaken cul-de-sac surrounded by the high buildings of ideological purity, in brighter moments I was courageous enough to think differently. It was possible to see secular history as an exciting, if undiscovered, neglected or overlooked gem. One that, if studied for long enough, and deeply enough, would very likely become a free-standing area of study. However free-standing as a subject in its own right this was never enough, and should scarcely have been the outer limit of ambition. Just as the history of political movements is somewhat sterile without new happenings in the history of ideas and political ideology, so the history

of secularism requires both its background and overarching events to propel it into the spotlight.

One reason for neglect and ignorance was the inescapable link between secular history and the debates that centre around religious history. Whilst the latter had ignored the former the upsurge of interest in the return of the religious inevitably spelled good news for secularist history. However the sheer lack of interest and 'movement' within religious history before this point still needs a larger explanation. Religious history was substantially moribund because so many historians believed it to be colonized by the biased, and also substantially devoid of historical problems. The sociological advocates of the secularization thesis convinced most historians that the issue was somehow settled. Part of this argument was a series of decline and catastrophe stories that portrayed religion's own serious implosion. Because it was religion that had collapsed and failed, this unwittingly became a situation that robbed secularist history of agency. Moreover, whilst religion had failed to disappear completely, secularist history was further robbed of such agency by various liberalising Christian narratives. These similarly gave the impression that it was a belief system that had consciously destroyed itself to save itself.

Thus a significant array of tall ideological and historiographical buildings had been erected around this subject leaving it, at least comparatively, in the shadows for some time craving some daylight. Although it has taken years, the convening of the first conference of the International Society for Historians of Atheism, Secularism, and Humanism (ISHASH) at Conway Hall in June 2016 demonstrated that some significant developments were now capable of moving the subject forwards in a fruitful direction. At this juncture I thought it might be appropriate to offer some further reflections upon how the subject has been both shaped in the past, and indeed may shape up in the future. Perhaps partly due to my own failings, or perhaps also in the interest of spurring on further research, I have chosen to frame this discussion in terms of producing questions, many of which intrigue now as much as they have over the last two centuries as both historians and contemporaries within the secular have sought to make sense of them.

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In no particular order these are some of the research questions (or sub-questions) that really present themselves. Tackling these, even briefly, may conceivably point the way for some tentative answers. If this fails the process may at least help us in establishing an agenda of places to revisit and places to go next. Our first important task is to evaluate who precisely are the historians of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief? Perhaps the first thing we notice here is that there is something divorcing this from religious historians who are quite often narrowly denominational. Likewise we might think how historians of our area are also not necessarily like historians of other manifestations of belief or where belief is otherwise discussed. Historians of Witchcraft for example are more likely to find themselves rubbing shoulders

with anthropologists or, perhaps more recently, with some medical historians. Thus, secular historians seem more likely to find themselves engaging with sociologists far more than historians of religion do. After all, the act of acquiring a belief and becoming religious is a process described in theological terms; the secular has been readily characterized as a social process (Budd 1977). Too often focus upon the individual and their range of both rational and irrational choices has largely eluded research agendas. Once again this social process approach strikes me as an assumption further calculated to rob a worldview of significant agency.

Nonetheless secularists themselves, at various times, have made attempts to survey and portray the history of secular outlooks – primarily as a justification and the search for a past, something we will hear more of as an imperative later on in this introduction. In a sense this also comes out of an older version of liberalism that is also cultural. This essentially exists as a strong Whig improvement motif that we will also hear more of later on, a phenomenon we might term Liberalism's Marxism. Central figures in the secular movement, like George Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh, to an extent kicked this off with rudimentary but not really sustained forays into the history of unbelief. These were fragmentary attempts to place themselves in context and likewise fulfilled the function of *inspirational and instructive 'copy'* for a highly literate constituency.<sup>1</sup> This audience was partly held together by the 'imagined community' created by the secular press and a pamphlet culture that enabled such views to be consumed and meditated upon in private.

These were followed with more historically engaged, sophisticated and professional works from Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, Joseph McCabe and J. M. Robertson.<sup>2</sup> What all these versions of secular history had in common was that they were essentially all from a Liberal tradition with progress motifs writ large, alongside many ideas associated with struggle. It is interesting to compare these with some aspects of religious denominational history where motifs of struggle always end in various species of achievement, always 'against the odds'.

There were also works from some later activists who were motivated by an attempt to derail the 'history of the secular as motivated and enacted by wider social change' model. This reflected the coincidence that some crucial anniversaries in British secular history were occurring at the same time as the broad-brush narratives of secularization were gaining momentum. David Tribe was perhaps the epitome of this who, on the dustjacket of his 1967 history, noted that such social, political and economic changes which shaped secularization arose spontaneously. But he was equally clear that 'it is unlikely however that it would have gained its present direction and momentum without the assistance of a well-organized movement' (Tribe 1967).

Professional historians, such as Edward Royle, arrived on the scene in the 1970s with different agendas. Royle's perspective was shaped by engagement with George Kitson-Clark's interest in the Victorian period's great campaigning movements and how they shaped a wider liberal cultural landscape.<sup>3</sup> My own impetus to become involved

in this historical area was shaped, as I suggested earlier, by engagement with the Left's interest in somehow completing the history of radicalism that had resulted in the rise of electoral socialism. One other dimension to this split was that Edward Royle's work represented a macro history of a whole movement and this was an invitation for scholars like myself to drill down in search of local pictures and less obvious themes (Nash 1992). Had we been joined by other scholars the history of Secularism and secularists would be wider and deeper, and have a more enriched historiography.

More recently Callum Brown has crossed over from secularization studies in pursuit of those who could be labelled 'results' for the process he started by studying. In later work he seems to be moving on to asking pertinent questions about how far secularists and Secularism ought to be considered the catalysts for such changes. In doing so he has also introduced an important transnational element to such studies which, at last, is asking some interesting questions about the phenomena in western Anglophone societies.

## II

What are the many and varied lessons modern Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief can learn from delving into its history? This question still seems to be worth asking since this range of beliefs has a manifestly less obvious interest in its own history than many others. It is worth remembering that Secularism existed in England as a viable belief system and radical movement, and in other societies as something somewhat looser, or even in the minds of some commentators as a specific period of time – the last allowing for its supersession in the shape of the post-secular. The secularist movement in Britain today is represented by the National Secular Society (NSS) and the British Humanist Association. Both are the products of dialogues and questions about the function of a movement for individuals whose intellectual route and destination has so often appeared to be solitary. One of these lessons learned, applicable for any such movement, is to be ever mindful of the tensions between the local and the national alongside those of the metropolitan and the provincial. This was the sum of the lessons learned by the secularist movement in Victorian England. In the 1830s, attempts by Owenite Missionaries to reach out into the provinces were significantly unsuccessful. Whilst George Jacob Holyoake tried to reconcile the local with the national his performance in the latter was rapidly eclipsed by the rise of Charles Bradlaugh. Although Bradlaugh's personality was also involved in the shift to a national movement, it was also the case that he appealed to a new generation who wanted to campaign and raise the visibility of secularists and the things they were fighting for. When Bradlaugh was no longer around, his successor, George William Foote, was widely derided as lacking the power and presence to lead a national movement. Alongside this judgment, Foote's infrequent lectures in the provinces were likewise poorly received. Overall this latter phase, from the 1890s onwards, is often conceived of as a legacy squandered with no section of organized freethought

happy, or even content, with the outcome. Throughout this tension the national was metropolitan and strident, seeking urgent and immediate restitution of grievances and ills through campaigns and court cases. The local was much more about providing protection, facilities and succour for everything from reading rooms and sewing circles right through to enabling the nearest one could get to a secular funeral at any given moment in time.

Another important element that the modern movement may want to scrutinize in some detail is the role of communication media and its power. With individuals in the provinces seeking, at least sometimes, to live unmolested and untroubled lives the power of the secular press in nineteenth-century Britain can be difficult to calculate. If you were far away from the metropolis the secularist papers informed you about what was going on in the lecture circuits of the country's main cities. It also told of the achievements of freethought throughout history, commented upon pertinent issues of the day and the achievements of the leadership within their respective lifetimes (Nash 1995a). When death ended this for all, these papers played a crucial role in communicating the construction of the acceptable atheist deathbed and fortified those facing this with the stoicism of others (Nash 1995b). This truly fulfils the definition of the 'imagined community' which gave information, encouragement and shared experience to many in provincial Victorian England.

Today the capacity to be even more responsive to such needs is enabled by the Internet and social media outlets. Whilst this provision of a viable and effective movement culture may well tick many boxes about participation, the tension between activism and provision for a quietist membership remains an issue for organizations that so frequently will feel themselves charged with both responsibilities. The task of solving this particular equation was, and remains today, the role of the leadership. Here the history of Victorian Secularism portrays conflicting personalities and leadership styles as having an overbearing influence upon the wider movement and its potential success. Moreover there were also deep ideological disagreements that would frequently divide the whole movement into factions. Reputations hard won were relentlessly challenged, dusted down and defended into the next generation (Nash 2002a). The lesson here is that leaders can shape a movement, or at least had significant power to do so in the nineteenth century. Perhaps scholars should note that the nature of social media and the empowerment this has given to citizens at large does open the question about whether leadership in the contemporary world now seeks to achieve more. The ability to lead has gone beyond the earlier century personal touch and now perhaps it is equated with the wider leadership of opinion and the management of individual and organizational profiles within the public sphere.

## III

Given that secularist history is now an active and even vibrant presence within the academy we might also speculate on how it might contribute to other branches of historical investigation. Simply put, how valuable more

widely is Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief history to other areas of history, and what other areas of history does it engage with? Certainly it seems evident to me that the history of Secularism adds new dimensions to the history of morality. It raises more widely the related questions of precisely how, when and why did morality become potentially decoupled from religion and thus problematized as not solely emanating from a supreme being, nor from a covenant of works. A corollary to this question is to seek more informed answers to the question of where and how does the charitable impulse arise, and again how and why does this get potentially decoupled from religious definitions of its necessity. Certainly some of my latest work on stories of belief has become very interested in how narratives inform the creation of this in the mind and out into the wider religious landscape (Nash 2013). The foundation of moral behaviour and the charitable impulse were both sustained over many generations by a number of narratives and parables. Certainly there is scope for uncovering and showcasing more of these narratives beyond those that have already been explored. The 'Good Samaritan', for example, was surprisingly enduring and accessible, but there are others and discovering how these are remade in a secular context becomes an important project. What narratives, in particular, has the secular used to describe charity and altruism? Perhaps growing the profile of these will mean that they now need to be seen in the context of Christian narratives and their power, which has for some time been in danger of dominating the landscape. If the profile and depth of research in secularist history were to continue upon its present trajectory there is a real chance that it may offer some important philosophical insights into the history of welfare. Whilst altruism may be a philosophical construct it remains the starting point for secular conceptions of human duty beyond the 'reward punishment nexus' that Bryan Wilson cited as a major cause of secularization (Wilson and Ikeda 2008; Wilson 1976).

Whilst Radical history is less ambitious than it once was, the place of Secularism still functions as an important brake and qualifier upon the obviously orthodox 'rise of socialism and the left' narrative. Victorian Secularism's connections with liberalism asks some important questions about the connection between citizenship rights and the trajectory of social democratic liberalism. Such a relationship becomes particularly illuminated against a troubled sky of challenges to that system, alongside visible discomfort with its driving metanarratives of free speech, and the growth of the secular. Some years ago at a meeting in Conway Hall the historian David Starkey spoke in favour of Anglican disestablishment. During the course of his speech he noted that he was probably part of a small political minority in the room. He envisaged that the bulk of his audience were from the political left, individuals distrustful of the establishment and heirs to Marx's critiques of religion and the controlled abuse of power. Starkey's comments also highlighted another political history of Secularism which is sometimes too well hidden. Starkey remained representative of a strand of liberal individualism which stressed the supreme benefits of the nakedness of humankind before

its environment. This was a world where external help was unnecessary and actively undesirable. Much of these ideals did influence many nineteenth-century secularists alongside other ideas which stressed co-operation, shared experience and other forms of mutuality.

The history of ideas may also be enriched by an enhanced profile for Secularist history. Given deeper knowledge about its capacity for opinion formation and its role in permeating ideas through its media culture, does this history offer to shed more light on a number of 'isms'? Whilst Positivism has its historians we could still hope to know more about its reach and influence which increasingly appears to significantly dwarf the number of adherents actively drawn to it (Wright 1986; Vogeler 1984; Claeys 2010). In this did it have a peculiarly developed sense of mission and activism? Taking a longer term view it may also benefit the History of Ideas more widely to consider how atheist and secularist critiques have had an important role in making the idea of God discursive in everything from biblical criticism through to blasphemy. A related contribution of secularist critiques has been to comparative religion.

The history of religion will also have to confront questions about the role of the secular in its development. Chief among these is to consider whether Secularism is a destroyer of faith or its inevitable and legitimate heir? So has its history been a striving for liberation from religion or one of growing through the benefits of extending religious tolerance? Religion will certainly need to increasingly acknowledge what it has learned from the secular and charting this realization may yet prove decisive in our decisions about how much the relationship is antagonistic or symbiotic. Certainly the latter tendency is one that currently predominates but this may well not be the case for all time.

Social and Cultural History may yet find Secular history useful for noting how the history of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief prescribes the limits of belief. When Secular history is introduced to this sphere it helps to qualify, and potentially restrain, the tendency of some social scientists to create quasi forms of belief and make them religious. Certainly we can all readily think of histories of sport, nationalism and that strange hybrid political religion that have displayed this sometimes haphazard idea. Approaching some socio-cultural subjects reveals some interesting interplays between religion and the secular. Here particularly is specific evidence of religion, rationality and science co-existing and being drawn upon selectively by consumers. In other words, for many individuals, beliefs about religion, science and the secular world each have a definite function and potential 'use' in their times of trial and trouble. As we are discovering this does not necessarily fit trajectories or patterns otherwise linked with 'modernization', 'subtractionist' or 'secularization' style explanations.

#### IV

What are the main themes that the history of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief illuminate? It would seem to me that an important element we might



discover is just how far they were intended to be, or indeed succeeded in being, alternatives to religion or a descriptive absence of religion. This should be the focus of much attention since it poses the historically loaded question – does atheism occur naturally? If we go in search of answers to this, do we need to decipher this from – delete as applicable – pantheism, glimpses of materialist ideas, or glimpses of quasi-humanism (both small and capital H) couched in religious language? In one important respect this project is already underway in the work of Charles Taylor, however secularist history would be wise to seek a greater ownership of this, rather than let more obviously Christian historians do it for them. In particular Taylor's urge to identify loss and forms of spiritual poverty are in danger of persuading scholars and observers to accept, by default, the implicit urge for fullness and riches. To maintain an academic discussion, scholars of the secular and of secularism must have a presence here.

But there are other questions which also beckon and the answers to these will shape future research agendas. How far should the history of Secularism be considered the history of minorities? Does it emphasize the promotion of minority secular ideologies or does it represent a quest for individual rights? If both are present what is it that triggers concentration on either one of these at the expense of the latter? We might also ask how far Secularist history should see itself as a history of resistance, something couched in a very defensive form that is actually preventing the further incursion of the religious? If we consider it to be a history of resistance we need to construct a canon of things it sought to resist and uncover the context behind such decisions. This will, according to period and idiom, take in things like religious oaths, conceptions of an 'old immoral world', 'priestcraft', 'religious control of education and other rites of passage', 'anachronism' and perhaps most enduringly 'obstacles to progress and the spirit of the age' – the last a liberal and progressive view that itself becomes problematized.

Alongside such causes, Secularist history has to move outwards and appreciate the other causes it has aligned itself with and also appreciate what this relationship potentially adds to the history of both. In the past, at different times, Secularism has aligned itself with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), women's rights, anti-imperialism, pacifism and opposition to specific conflicts (such as the Second Boer War) with various impacts and consequences (See for example Nash 2002b). Throughout all these strategic decisions and manoeuvres it becomes incumbent upon us to ask what the movement and its members thought its definitions of success and victory might be when it stepped into the public sphere in this way.

## V

When we approach the past historiography of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief it is tempting to simply consider it Whig in tone, sentiment and direction. In this it was driven in this direction by an optimistic self-image. From Carlile, through Mill, Holyoake, Bradlaugh on to Russell, A.N. Wilson and beyond, the pronounce-

ments of these leaders and quasi-leaders exude confidence in the final and unequivocal triumph of the secular. Related to this is a sense in which the historiography has a nod to modernization theory – or perhaps at least a 'confused modernization theory'. This is because it regularly has in the back of its mind a search for the most modern approach in performing the act of being secular. Should this be to improve upon religion? Or to render it obsolete? Should the secular set itself the task of seeking to actively supersede religion? This also engages such historiographical thinking in the debate upon free expression as it is played out in each country and society. The triumph of free speech is by no means a certainty of modernity – as anyone connected with the history of blasphemy, or who observes activism on the subject will tell you. So how much does our latter history portray the progressive Prometheus running out of steam? Thoughts in this direction lead to the idea that there might also be a pessimist school that finds itself describing false dawns – paths not taken and the inevitable cul-de-sacs that movements and agitations fall into. What do societies and movements do when they achieve their ends and then entertain a species of failure going forward? As we are also aware some lines of thought are interested in linking the development of secular movements and ideas to other modernist ideologies like communism and anarchism. Elsewhere aspects of the historiography have been driven into producing studies which are 'campaign orientated' or 'campaign specific'. Issues such as reproductive rights and the Woman Question as it manifested itself in different societies and different times have been central to how secular movements and sentiments proceed. And again if we are in search of answers it becomes valuable to ask – are these, and should they always be, inextricably part of the mission or do they risk 'hijacking' the mission? Once again one might well find different answers proffered here according to both issue and context.

We might also identify a historiographical school that charts history through 'great figures' and personalities. This is driven sometimes by Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief's own search for precursors, ideologues and martyrs. So we might think how individuals such as Besant, Bradlaugh, Holyoake, Foote, O'Hair, Ingersoll, Russell, Hitchens and Dawkins become figures on which to hang the fortunes and tribulations of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief as integrated and sometimes separate worldviews. Whilst we may think of such figures as reaching outwards in forms of proselytism we must also be aware of their capacity to be problematic and even divisive as they encounter barriers to the message that can be linguistic and cultural as much as religious. This indeed remains a forthright lesson from the past. We might here ask how much does such a history get pulled in some different directions by following such personalities? Similarly, considering how representative they are of a wider rank and file, along with their sentiments, also reopens some of our earlier questions about promoting campaigns at the expense of worldviews. However, we should not forget that this approach is perhaps being countered by a new history that seeks to

get much closer to the experience of the rank and file, so that Secularists, Freethinkers, Humanists and Unbelievers come to substitute for the ideas themselves. Another tendency has been the discussion of categories and labels: Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief are simply a few of these and in some respects one history is to see the lifespan of some of these labels and quite how they are superseded by others – often in not always a readily obvious and neat sequence. We now move to consider how far changes and developments in historical techniques themselves may have something to offer the future history and historiography of secularism and the secular. Is there, for example, scope for microhistorical approaches which unpack moments of change, experience and realization which graphs, charts, surveys and pamphlets leave behind or are unequipped to explore? Likewise should the remnant of the numerous ‘turns’ that social history in particular has witnessed in the last thirty years leave any imprint upon secularist history?

Certainly the influence of postmodernism and forms of the ‘linguistic turn’ in particular persuade some that those within Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief whose work transcends metanarratives become more worthy of study than the alternatives. A clear example of this is how many people are now interested in George Jacob Holyoake’s forms of pragmatism, fluidity and compromise (See Rectenwald 2016). It is also true that Holyoake’s playing with language, whatever its original motivation, now seems popular – compared to the apparently one-dimensional bombast of Charles Bradlaugh that pushes him out of fashion and thus leads to his comparative neglect.

## VI

So what is secularism’s future history likely to resemble and foreground? We are already expanding our perceptions of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief as global phenomena. We have heard, and will be hearing in this themed issue, how Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief can be found in previously unappreciated contexts such as Japan and Sweden. We are also going to be looking at ways in which we can better integrate lesser known experiences such as those from Canada and Estonia. We are also liable to hear new meanings for some words and phrases that we regularly use uncritically, and certainly the evidence from Estonia (for example) indicates that our appreciation of how we categorize what we find will have to become more nuanced as we go along.

As this historiography moves forward we are likely to hear still more about Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief’s relationship with science and other aspects of social science theory. Likewise ideas that are on the fringes of science should also be investigated, in particular the ones that are borrowed to make arguments about propensities to believe/disbelieve, and how allegedly these can be hard- or soft-wired into individual minds.

As more researchers delve deeper we are likely to come up with evidence of new periods of activism that may make us rethink our conventional histories of success

and failure. Also there are wholly new societies that the history of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief needs to invade and quarry – places where the history is unknown or unwritten. An example of this latter phenomenon can be mentioned from my own work with Atheist Ireland which, by chance, has opened up the opportunities for a whole search for those hidden from history. But it has also suggested how a country’s entire history and constitutional makeup can shape the history we might find. Atheism in Ireland and its history may yet be uncovered if the wish of a contemporary Irish atheist is granted:

Most of “modern” Irish history has been about the struggle between Catholic and Protestant and most of the accommodations in the legislation and institutions are to show an “inclusiveness” for both sides in order to reduce potential conflict (internally and with our larger Protestant neighbour). Pluralism in Ireland doesn’t stretch as far as atheists....

Irish institutions have managed to make some claim to be inclusive of new arrivals from other mono-“God” minorities, Jews, Muslims, new Protestant churches, Mormons, etc – but how do they fit with Hindus, Buddhists or the largest group – non-theists. Don’t these break the rules of any system that accommodates “God”?

Of course this is straying from “the history of atheists in Ireland”. But for a system which assumed you were mono-theistic from before birth through education, employment, civic duties, marriage and even death weren’t most atheists essentially hidden from view in a similar way that homosexuality was? Wasn’t it essentially “illegal” to be atheistic in Ireland until relatively recently? To risk being out-cast from employment, society and even family? So who even knows what the real history of atheism in Ireland is – any discoveries would be the tip of an invisible iceberg and would certainly help us in discovering our identity and campaigning against this hidden discrimination (Donnelly 2015).

One other historical development this also highlights is the role of activism. Certainly historians being drawn into the world of activism itself are going to discover more about the role of this in Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief. They are also going to be able to watch in real time the dilemmas of such activism in the actions of the modern practitioners of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief. Lastly awareness of this is going to bring the experiences of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief into the wider history of activism itself. We may well also see literary studies do more to discover the history and impact of Secularist, Freethought, Humanist and Unbelievers and their creative writing. Is there for example a Secularist, Freethought, Humanist and Unbelief-inspired literary criticism to be developed and argued for?

What also of the potential for the history of the material culture of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and

Unbelief? Whilst we might theorize that the material culture of atheism may well involve books, pamphlets, books and more books it is worth considering the role of print as a culture and the paraphernalia that produced it and marketed it – e.g. the Thinker's Library and Prometheus Press spring to mind. But this also may make us reconsider blasphemous images (not as artefacts grasped and prosecuted by Christian and state authorities) but as actually a part of Secularist, Freethought, Humanist and Unbelieving cultures that inspire and fortify. Likewise the role of such things as phrenological heads and the busts, statues and vestments utilized by the Positivists in their religion of humanity may well provoke new insights drawn from the history of material culture. In one direction, should the history of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief focus upon the enlightenment and seek to quarry and enrich this in order to protect what (up to now) has been accepted as the wellspring of thought critical of religion? But we may also be persuaded to follow other developments which have us reaching back before this period to try and deny Lucien Febvre's suggestion that atheism is impossible in Europe before Descartes. If we follow this latter path we enter a world where we may have to decipher and bring imagination to bear.

How far dare we read the precursors of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief? Should we look into pantheist ideas and something like the freethinking speculation of Carlo Ginzburg's *Mennochio* from the *Cheese and the Worms*? Similarly what of those whose religious ideas merely seem to be groping for the proto-humanist. We have seen how someone like Tim Whitmarsh is prepared to read evidence from the ancient world in different ways (Whitmarsh 2016). Is this about to be something that comes more widely to the study of secularism? Here we might start to think slightly differently of Familists who declared 'Heaven is when we laugh, hell is when we cry', or of Muggletonians who believed earnestly in the extinction of the body. Alternatively what of the numerous brands of antinomianism which, in certain lights, looks like a species of freethinking and perhaps should be considered to have a closer association with the 'mechanik' tradition which spawned the bulk of nineteenth century freethinking. Certainly we do not have a reliable methodology to deal with this situation or situations – but what I am suggesting is this project may well be worth the investment. We ultimately do not want to be concerned that in the future such explorations may be told that such groups should be left alone because they simply instead 'belong' to Christianity and its history. This in a slightly contrived way brings me to my last speculation.

What is the history of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief's relationship with religion and religious history and what does it mean for Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief itself? Certainly this has now become a critical focus of some of my own work recently so it is worth rehearsing and considering how we come to get here! In this there is also an argument that looking at religion (in particular Christianity's reactions and accommodations to religious change) will

invariably become a part of what Atheism and Secularism's history looks like. Such a discussion raises the point that future scholarship on the secular and its origins might also participate in the decolonization of non-Western traditions within the universalist discourse of religion. The secularist movement of the nineteenth century indulged in Euro-centric speculations of comparative religion. Using the methodologies of atheist, secular and humanist history we can also perhaps trace new methods and discourses about what is and is not religion, alongside new languages to describe traditions which have been corralled under the label of religion.

In searching back to find its origins how far we should go beyond the standard account and look for secularist precursors? How do we react to the different accounts that we may get about the origins of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief? If we go beyond ideas and movements do we come to a conclusion that such ideas are capable of springing up autonomously? They can appear anywhere and the potential lies for them to be discovered anywhere if we have the ability (and methodology) to look for it. Alternatively do we accept that the secular is inextricably a product of the religious? If so is a part of the history of Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief moving forward an exploration of how religion itself has sought to accommodate, deny, outflank, transcend or appropriate the secular?

Lastly there is also a sense that religious history may seek simply to deny the secular. There is a frequent boldness of writing the secular out – something which begs the question of whether secularist history should be trying to do the same. Perhaps it is a perceived advantage of this particular position that it undermines the primacy of religion and frequently the censuses and surveys feed modern Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief with a narrative that says 'we are all Secular now'. This however also takes me back to so much of denominational religious history which suggests a wider plan unfolding in the history it tells. Such histories have always had a wider plan in mind.

Certainly this has occurred to Charles Taylor who has ostensibly written up the secular and secularization as part of God's plan for humankind all along. Perhaps it represents the testing of man and we can all now thank the almighty that humankind found the secular to be this blip in which it so often appeared illusory, insubstantial and deeply unsatisfying. Whilst to secular eyes the idea of a plan unfolding might be source of mirth or ridicule, it is worth considering whether the secular itself has any kind of plan, especially since so much of secular work, thought, organization and campaigning is individualistic, fragmented, quietist and emphatically not likely to use communitarian narratives. After all, the tribulations and cultural problems of modern US organizations mirror those of nineteenth-century British ones. How much is the secular and its history buffeted, shaped and influenced by this periodic ambition of Christian history? Perhaps a part of this is to think just how much bad history should Christian practitioners be allowed to get away with. But if such an idea – a secular plan unfolding – is anathema



then will this limit the appeal of such worldviews to the populace at large? In other words this will be providing precisely the answer that religious worldviews do in fact wish to hear about the secular and secularist.

Where this leads to for me is that Secularism, Freethought, Humanism and Unbelief needs to recover the sophistication of its own past. In its attempts to 'WIN' against the religious it has been torn between providing for its adherents and providing things for wider society. Secularism must become more articulate and malleable in the creation of its history and above all the visibility which scholars now offer to it from a variety of perspectives means that we can now look forward to a much fuller history of belief and unbelief.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> We could consider both Holyoake and Bradlaugh to have created their own archives quite effectively. Both publicized their lifetimes of struggle forcefully and arguably made too much of placing themselves at the centre of developments. Their historical approach appears to be stridently biographical, but such biographies were occasionally also about scoring points or affirming unbelief before death. For Holyoake's quasi-historical output, see Holyoake (1849, 1851, 1866, 1891). For Bradlaugh's discussions of the historical Jesus, and his own attempts at autobiography and the biographical attempts of others, see Bradlaugh (1882).
- <sup>2</sup> The first effective history of blasphemy was Bradlaugh Bonner (1912). For McCabe's approach, see McCabe (1920). For Robertson's historical writings, see Robertson (1914–15, 1929).
- <sup>3</sup> The modern historiography of the subject was arguably created by Edward Royle's two books (1974, 1980).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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