Susannah Wright

A Secularizing Mission? Moral Instruction in English Schools, 1890s to 1918

Abstract: In this chapter, I consider what secularization meant for non-religious minorities (secularists) from the 1890s to the end of the First World War. Such minorities have to date received only limited attention in historical discussions of secularization. Yet as much as Christians they sought influence in a range of societal institutions, including schools. Through the Moral Instruction League, they promoted moral instruction as a replacement for or an addition to (Christian) religious instruction. In so doing they aimed to form future citizens. However, it does not follow that those involved pursued a unified secularizing mission. Secularists held different views of the way that their 'secular' morality connected with or challenged religion. They responded in varied ways to critiques from Christian lobbies. Some welcomed alliances with Christians who wished to challenge what they deemed unwarranted and destructive intervention of churches and church personnel in schools. Others rejected such alliances. I examine in detail two elements of the Moral Instruction League's activities which bring to the fore secularists' intentions in relation to secularization: its interventions in connection with the Bible and religious instruction lessons in schools, and its demonstration lessons which involved encounters with people and spaces of religious belief. Rather than presenting a clear, single mission, this analysis reveals tensions between secularists and ambiguities within secularists' positions.

1 Introduction

A "civilizing mission" has been identified as a goal of reformers in varied contexts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whether colonial ones, or those of urban poverty in England.[1] Education emerges as an important tool in such a mission.[2] Benefits, it was argued, could be imparted in terms of knowledge

1 For example, Peter J. Cain, "Character, 'Ordered Liberty', and the Mission to Civilize: British Moral Justification of Empire, 1870–1914," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40:4 (2012):557–78; Anna Davin, *Growing up Poor. London 1870–1914* (London: River Oram Press, 1996).

2 For example, Kevin Brehony, "A 'Socially Civilizing Influence'? Play and the Urban Degenerate," *Paedagogica Historica* 39:1/2 (2003): 87–106; Rebecca Rogers, "Teaching Morality and Reli-

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and skills, attitudes, and behaviors, for the individuals who accessed education, and by extension for the families and communities that these individuals belonged to. Building on these ideas, this chapter considers whether education could have a secularizing mission too. In the hands of secularists – those associated with organizations established as organizational alternatives to Christianity – it could. Indeed, for secularists, a secularizing mission could have civilizing aims too.[3] Language of mission and missionaries featured across a range of secularist writings, including those emerging from attempts to influence education in English state schools through the Moral Instruction League (MIL).[4]

This notion of mission forms the starting point for considering two important issues relevant to an examination of secularization within a country's state education system, from the standpoint of secularist actors who expressed minority views about religion. The first is the intention and determination associated with mission. This leads to a consideration of the extent to which secularists attempted to achieve secularization through their pressure group activities in connection with state schools. Secularization, for these actors, ultimately aimed at cultural and ideological change at a societal level. The intention to achieve such change underpinned their proposals about schools, whether these were to change educational policy and legislation, and or curriculum content and teaching approaches, or whether they were to attach new meanings to existing activities and spaces. The second is the embeddedness of the language of mission in religious beliefs and practices; in the English context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century predominantly those of Christianity. When secularists spoke or wrote of missions and missionaries, they might have been exposing their roots in concepts and language of Christianity (see also Dekker, this volume), perhaps because they lacked alternative concepts and language of their own. Secularists' use of the language of mission and missionaries might, alternatively, have been subversive, an attempt to claim this language for their own purposes. Multiple interpretations are possible, and if Christian missionary endeavors have been subject to influen-

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gion in Nineteenth-Century Colonial Algeria: Gender and the Civilizing Mission," *History of Education* 40:6 (2011): 741–59; Susannah Wright, "Teachers, Family and Community in the Urban Elementary School: Evidence from English School Log Books *c.*1880–1918,"*History of Education* 41:2 (2012): 155–73. See also Buchardt, this volume.

3 For example, Susannah Wright, "Moral Instruction, Urban Poverty and English Elementary Schools in the Late Nineteenth Century". In N. Goose, K. Honeyman (eds.), *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England. Diversity and Agency, 1750–1914* (London: Ashgate, 2013).

4 For example, *Moral Education League Quarterly*, January 1, 1913, 4–5 and January 1, 1914, 7; *Ethical World*, December 15, 1912, 189.

ces of secularization over time (see also Sabra, this volume), we could conceive of secular interests being subject to Christianized notions of mission.

In this chapter, I consider the ideological basis of secularization and the sites, symbols, and actions it involved for non-religious minorities (secularists) in what was widely assumed to be a "Christian nation" from the 1890s to the end of the First World War. Such minorities have to date received only limited attention in discussions of secularization within historical research, although this is starting to change.[5] As much as Christians, secularists sought influence in and through a range of societal institutions, including schools. I focus particularly on secularist activity within the Moral Instruction League (MIL), a pressure group formed in 1897 to promote non-theological moral instruction in English state schools. The League lobbied central and local government, created teaching aids, and offered demonstration lessons, to promote secular moral instruction as a replacement for or an addition to (Christian) religious instruction as an important ingredient of elementary schooling. Through the League, secularists attempted to shape the ideals and behavior of children, and through this influence on individuals to create a society in which good citizenship could incorporate a range of religious, and non-religious positions. In so doing they aimed to form future citizens in their own image. Secularists criticized Christians for neglecting the interests of non-believers in educational provision and extending to all their own assumptions about an elision of good citizenship with Christian beliefs. Yet there were generalizing tendencies in secularists' own aims. Despite this, it does not follow that those active in or supportive of the League pursued a unified secularizing mission. For some, secular morality connected with and supplemented religion, for others it challenged it, for others still it did both. Secularists connected with the League responded in varied ways to critiques from Christian lobbies. Some welcomed overtures from Christians who saw in their programme a means to challenge what they deemed unwarranted and destructive intervention of churches and church personnel in schools. Others rejected such alliances.

This chapter focuses on secularists' intentions; this task alone is a complex matter, as the discussion that follows will indicate, and it would not be possible to do justice to a consideration of outcomes too. In terms of scope, I take England rather than Britain. England was the League's primary locus of activity, which itself was linked to the legal and administrative boundaries of educational systems within Britain. Secularists' intentions do not emerge as a clear, single secularizing

5 Susannah Wright, *Morality and Citizenship in English Schools: Secular Approaches 1897–1944* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Callum Brown, *Becoming Atheist. Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

mission. There are tensions between those who shaped its activities and created its resources, and ambiguities within these individuals' positions. The MIL had sometimes divergent, sometimes parallel, sometimes interlinked, aims. This was partly a matter of different members and sympathisers, who might be rooted in different secularist organizations and reflect the different ideas, and different approaches to religion, within these. Different aims might also come to the fore in different situations or contexts. On some occasions, it was deemed opportune to emphasize a secularizing mission. At other times, secularists played down any such mission in order to facilitate cooperation with anyone who would assist them, including those of religious belief, in their educational goals. A close analysis of two moments, however, in the League's pressure group activities during which positions and assumptions relevant to secularization are prominent also suggests both connections with, and separation from, religion, at the same time, with secularists connecting in complex ways with the rituals, texts, and spaces of religion. The first moment involves debates within the League, prominent between 1897 and about 1902, about what its policy should be regarding the Bible and religious instruction lessons in schools. The second moment relates to demonstration lessons which by 1910 were offered to teachers and other interested spectators in varied settings; these involved encounters with spaces and people of belief. Before examining these moments, this chapter offers background on the MIL, contextualized through broader debates about secularization and the positioning of secularist actors within these debates.

2 Secularization and Secularism

Contemporaries and later historians have characterized England, or Britain, depending on the particular study, in the period covered in this chapter as a "Christian nation". A Christian nation, according to Keith Robbins, comprises an "interrelationship between political attitudes, ecclesiastical allegiances, and cultural traditions".[6] Taking into account a combination of institutional power and legal structures, church membership and attendance, wider cultural texts, and individual recounted experiences of home, school and community contexts, a sizeable proportion of the English population were socialized into Christian ideas in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. Focusing specifically on the school, its potential as an agent of nation- or state-building was recognized by this time in many parts of the world, through structures, rituals, curriculum, and pedagogy, even if there were challenges in realizing this po-

6 Keith Robbins, *History, Religion and Identity in Modern Britain* (London: Hambledon, 1993), 85.

tential in practice. In England as in other countries, this involved compromises around and negotiations between 'secular' state power and religion.[7] In the English context, religion – typically meaning Christianity – was embedded within schools in multiple ways. Churches of different denominations built and owned schools, and religious lessons and observances were scheduled at the start of the school day from 1870. These were arrangements that Christian denominations argued about, but which ensured a baseline of religious input for most children at the time. At the same time, contemporary commentators, both Christian and Secularist, argued that religion, and particularly Christianity, was showing signs of decline both in terms of its institutional position and in terms of church attendance from the late nineteenth century onwards. These commentators were not disinterested but claimed these trends to be negative and dangerous, or positive and worthy of celebration.[8]

Later historians have similarly debated what to make of these puzzling and seemingly contradictory indications. Secularization in English and British contexts has been examined extensively. Earlier accounts suggested a uni-directional process, linked to other processes of modernization and urbanization, which was well underway by the third quarter of the nineteenth century.[9] More recent studies emphasize the institutional and cultural strength of Christianity until the mid-twentieth century, with the 1960s identified as the starting point for rapid decline, even if the details of what happened in this decade and after are subject to debate.[10] Overall, there has been a discernible shift away from secularization as a "grand narrative" with universal attributes giving it explanatory power,[11] towards "multiple secularities", with secularization found in isolated pockets and

7 Laurence Brockliss and Nicola Sheldon, "Introduction". In L. Brockliss, N. Sheldon (eds.), *Mass Education and the Limits of State Building, c.1870*–1930 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1–12. Out of many examples of relevant recent research see Yuval Dror, 'Textbook Images as a Means of 'Nation/State Building: Zionist Geographical Textbooks 1918 to 1948, *History of Education Review* 33:2 (2004): 59–72 and Filiz Meşeci Giorgetti, "Nation-Building in Turkey through Ritual Pedagogy: the late Ottoman and early Turkish Republican Era," *History of Education* 49:1 (2020): 77–103.

8 Wright, *Morality and Citizenship*,18–19.

9 Among numerous studies see Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990); AD Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (London: Longman 1980); Hugh McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London: Croom Helm, 1974); Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

10 Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2009); Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

11 J. C. D. Clark, "Secularization and Modernization: The Failure of a 'Grand Narrative'," *The Historical Journal* 55:1 (2012): 161–94.

varied forms.[12] Some note a resilience of Christian narratives in particular contexts beyond these dates.[13] Education, internationally, has been used by states as a tool for modernization, and secularization, the two viewed often as going hand in hand. Yet local studies and those focused on practices on the ground highlight nuances and compromises. They show the limits of how far teachers and schools could influence pupils' beliefs and practices, even under Communism in Czechoslovakia, and the extent to which religious actors, even ones as powerful as the Catholic Church in Italy, could adapt their educational practices to partly secular ends.[14]

Indeed, arguments are offered not just for the co-existence of the religious and secular, but also for a lack of a clear divide between the religious and the secular in beliefs, institutions, and practices. Callum Brown for example notes a tendency to see "modern secularity . . . veined through with concealed religiosity". He critiques this tendency about atheist individuals who, he suggests, made a point of rejecting any religiosity.[15] For secularists involved with the Moral Instruction League, however, the suggestion of an outright rejection of religiosity on the part of all of them cannot be sustained. A lack of clear divide between the religious and the secular might potentially have impacted secularists in different ways. Focusing on cultural narratives, both secularization and religious belief can be conceived as "stories" which do not represent objective truths but can have resonance in particular contexts and provide ways of understanding the world. In this scenario individuals can move fluidly between the secular and the religious, and within both of these move between different organizations or denominations, and different ideals and beliefs.[16] In terms of organizational, social and ideological structures, Todd Weir argues for the "confessionality of secularism".

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12 Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones, "Introduction: Multiple Secularities." In *Religion and the Political Imagination* edited by Ira Katznelson and Gareth Stedman Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–22.

13 David Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture: Stories of Belief in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

14 Mette Buchardt, "The Political Project of Secularization and Modern Education Reform in "Provincialized Europe". Historical Research in Religion and Education Beyond *Secularization, R.I.P.*," *International Journal for the Historiography of Education* 11:2 (2021): 164–70; Fabio Pruneri, "The Catechism will Save Society, Without the Catechism There is no Salvation': Secularization and Catholic Educational Practice in an Italian Diocese, 1905–14," *Studies in Church History* 55 (2019): 511–29; Jiří Zounek, Michal Šimáněand, Dana Knotová, "Primary School Teachers as a Tool of Secularization of Society in Communist Czechoslovakia," *History of Education* 46:4 (2017):480–97.

15 Callum Brown "The Necessity of Atheism: Making Sense of Secularization," *Journal of Religious History* 41:4 (2017): 439.

16 David Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture: Stories of Belief in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); David Nash, "Believing in Secularization – Stories of Decline, Potential, and Resurgence," *Journal of Religious History* 41:4 (2017): 505–31.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts, he suggests that secularists challenged the essential structures of the confessional field, whilst contributing to its reshaping. Because secularism originated in and continued to influence the confessional field, it retained some of its structural elements.[17] Maintaining the confessional field involves rituals of belief with associated symbols, texts, and spaces or sites. These rituals could function as top-down invented traditions that keep the powerful in power and the less powerful in their subordinate place, potentially supporting the maintenance of the elites, ideological, and institutional structures of the "Christian nation". They also had the potential to carry different meanings, and to allow space for minor, unobtrusive forms of adaptation and resistance, even with traditional ritual spaces, symbols and acts.[18]

Religious and secular beliefs and practices can be seen to be in continual dialogue, shaping one another. Individuals made use of ideals, ideas, and symbolic and ritual resources, and acted on them in dynamic ways. In this discussion I have drawn on insights from a range of geographical, disciplinary and theoretical contexts that, brought together, might complement one another, or might create dissonance. Both a converging or diverging of insights are useful for exploring the dynamics at play for secularists in late nineteenth and early twentieth century England attempting to gain influence in and through schools.

3 Secularists and Moral Instruction

On 7 December 1897, representatives from socialist parties, trade unions, the National Secular Society, the Union of Ethical Societies, and other "progressive bodies", met in London. This meeting led to the formation of the Moral Instruction League.[19] In its early years, the League attracted a relatively small cadre of active workers and supporters that was mainly London-based, and mainly secularist, dominated particularly by the Ethical Movement. Over time, as its geographical reach and range of activities extended, members and supporters came to include a wider group of teachers, public intellectuals, and liberal Christians (and people of other

17 Todd Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

18 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction." in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1–14; Nicholas B. Dirks 'Ritual and Resistance: Subversion as a Social Fact.' In *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Geoff Eley et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 483–503.

19 Frederick James Gould, *Moral Instruction. A Chapter from the Story of Schools in England and Wales* (London: Watts & Co, 1929), 2; *The Freethinker*, December 12, 1897, 793.

religions). The actions of a handful of individual school boards in England, the work of the Ethical Movement internationally, and the *morale laïque* developed by the Republican administration in France provided precedents for the League's underpinning educational ideas and its pedagogical suggestions. The League however was the first organization to promote secular moral instruction in elementary schools throughout England. It lobbied central and local governments and training colleges, produced syllabuses and teaching manuals, and offered demonstration lessons for teachers in schools.[20]

The dominance of a particular version of secularism in the MIL, that of the Ethical Movement, shaped its pedagogical and curriculum suggestions, and the approach that it took to promoting its cause, as will be seen in the discussion of the two 'moments' below. The Ethical Movement emerged in England in the 1880s. Membership was relatively small compared with Christian denominations, peaking at about 2000 in 1912; these figures are not entirely reliable. If membership figures alone are taken as an indicator of significance, we might assume an unimportant minority.[21] Yet these secularists, like their counterparts in other groups, lobbied and campaigned on a range of wider social issues, sometimes through the formation of secularist pressure groups like the MIL, sometimes through secularists' presence in a range of different campaigning bodies and print media. The League was therefore one means by which secularists sought wider societal influence.[22] The Ethical Movement was willing to work with Christians on these wider aims. It was open to ritual in its meetings, and to acknowledging ideals above the individual, embracing what might later be termed spirituality. Some Ethical Movement members defined what they did as religious, because religion did not necessarily involve belief in a super-

20 For more detail on the Moral Instruction League see: R.N. Bérard, "The Movement for Moral Instruction in Great Britain: The Moral Instruction League and its Successors," *Fides et Historia* 16:2 (1984): 55–73; Wright. *Morality and Citizenship*, 83–114. For a combination of commentary with extensive excerpts from League texts see Gustav Spiller, *The Ethical Movement in Great Britain* (London: Farleigh Press, c. 1934) 124–55. Elementary schools in England at this time educated pupils aged 5–14.

21 Classic studies include Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society, 1850–1960* (London: Heinemann, 1977); Ian D. MacKillop, *The British Ethical Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Membership figures from Spiller, *The Ethical Movement.*

22 T. R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Recent studies looking at broader influences include Suzanne Hobson, *Unbelief in Interwar Literary Cultures: Doubting Moderns* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Elizabeth Lutgendorff, "Slaughtering sacred cows: rebutting the narrative of decline in the British secular movement from the 1890s to 1930s" (PhD diss., Oxford Brookes University, 2018); Michael Rectenwald, *Nineteenth Century British Secularism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016); Laura Schwartz, *Infidel feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), Wright, *Morality and Citizenship*.

natural deity. These ideas and ways of working could clash with the approach of MIL supporters who were members of the National Secular Society (NSS) who challenged Christian religion on rational and intellectual grounds, sought to expose the exclusion of non-Christians from social or legal rights, and overall wished to distance themselves from Christians and Christianity. An anti-religious stance could preclude compromise or collaboration with Christians; some individual NSS members and local secular societies though did seek compromise and collaboration.[23] These differences are generalizations to an extent, and individuals could shift in their positions and even their attachment to different versions of secularism and different secularist bodies, but they had important implications for the MIL.

The MIL from its inception argued that secular moral instruction provided for the needs of the modern state, which had developed a "highly complex demand upon the citizen's devotion", requiring it to use its schools to form the habits and ideals of citizenship.[24] The best moral code for this purpose, it argued, involved "strictly human (i.e. not religious) reasons for good conduct" and "moral principles common to humanity . . . appropriate for people of all theologies or none".[25] The League constructed a graduated syllabus for use for children aged four to fourteen in elementary schools, covering an extensive range of moral qualities. It moved from personal traits such as kindliness, truthfulness, and self-control for the youngest children, through broader social themes including justice, humanity, and patriotism for children in the middle age group, to complex and potentially controversial topics such as cooperation, ideals, peace and war for the oldest pupils. The Bible and other religious texts, alongside biography, myth, and legend, could all be used to illustrate lessons, supplemented by modern political and social texts for the topics for older children.[26]

The League operated against the backdrop of what contemporaries termed the 'religious difficulty' in schools. Given the context of a lack of separation between Church and State in England, different Christian denominations fought over the funding and administration of schools, and over the appropriate form of religious instruction lessons (confessionally-oriented for Anglicans, non-denominational for Nonconformists). Secularists felt alienated by the main positions taken in these de-

23 Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*; David S. Nash, *Secularism, Art, and Freedom* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992); Edward Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans: Popular Freethought in Britain, 1866–1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).

24 Frederick James Gould, *A National Need: The Civic Spirit in Education* (London: Moral Instruction League (MIL), 1913), 3–4, 8–10.

25 MIL, *Our Future Citizens* (London: MIL, 1900), 8–9; MIL, *The Moral Instruction League* (London: MIL, c.1903), 1.

26 Wright, *Morality and Citizenship*, 58–59, 87–88.

bates, which, however antagonistic, assumed a place for churches and Christianity within schools. At the same time, through the League they utilized this ongoing debate as a promotional opportunity, a chance to offer "a secular solution to the religious difficulty".[27] Moral instruction was presented as the way out of these ongoing battles for everyone, whether they were secularist or not. Indeed, this was an attractive proposition for some Christians who felt that unseemly infighting diminished the quality of educational provision, and indeed the status and reputation of Christianity itself.[28] If secularization was intended, it was to be attained through collaboration with and consent from some Christians.

Even if key personnel were Ethical Movement members, the League aimed at the breadth of membership and sympathizers, noting in its 1911 annual report support from "Catholics, Anglicans, Nonconformists, Jews, Unitarians, Ethicists, Rationalists, Positivists, Hindus, Mahommedam, Parsees, Buddhists."[29] The League cooperated with believers for purposes of lobbying and policy influence too, working with the cross-party Nonconformist group in parliament while trying to persuade the government to change its educational legislation to make it compulsory that schools offer moral instruction. These efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, but having prominent Nonconformist allies ensured that the League was at least heard. In the broader context of the British Empire, educators of different faiths assisted with in developing, publicizing and disseminating texts and syllabuses for multi-faith imperial territories (notably India).[30]

In order to examine the intentions of secularists within the MIL, I draw primarily on the publications of the League and secularist bodies from which its workers, members and supporters came such as the Ethical Movement and National Secular Society. Also important are autobiographical accounts by F J Gould, one of the League's paid workers. In the absence of a full organizational archive for the MIL or personal papers for individual actors, I explore the intentions that secularists chose to reveal to the reading public. MIL and secularist periodicals especially and to a lesser extent Gould's autobiographical accounts typically envisaged a readership primarily of secularists and/or League supporters; some of the League's pamphlets targeted a broader public. This imagined readership is an important consideration when examining intentions and internal debates. Many of the texts seem to assume a base level of background knowledge and understanding of the issues at stake. They assumed sympathy with the overall enter-

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27 MIL from c.1903 quoted in Spiller, *Ethical Movement*, 132.

28 Wright, *Morality and Citizenship*, 93–95.

29 Cited in Spiller, *Ethical Movement*, 151.

30 Wright, *Morality and Citizenship*, 94–98, 130–34.

prise of secularism, and with promoting secular morality in schools, though they did not assume agreement about how this was to be achieved.

4 A Secularizing Mission?

I am alert to the possibilities of seeing in the MIL both the power of invented traditions of the Christian nation and the possibility of resistance, sometimes overt, often subtle. I see possibilities in acknowledging multiple intersecting narratives, and the significance of a religious field from which secularists emerged, which they influenced and changed, and which continued to influence and change them. The League discussed and utilized symbols and spaces of religion, namely the Bible and Christian buildings, for varied purposes. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain whether the intent was to secularize, to change the meaning of these symbols and spaces, or to draw from them for legitimacy. Perhaps it was all of these at once.

Secularizing goals are present in commentary on the Moral Instruction League's aims by its workers and supports, for example in references to the "secular solution" to the religious difficulty, and "the partial secularization of even the existing system."[31] In these examples, secularization and secular seem to operate as much as statements of intent as descriptors of reality. Not all involved thought that this intent was to be achieved simply by eliminating religion in the school context. How the League positioned itself in relation to the Bible and religious instruction was a thorny issue throughout the League's years of campaigning, but debates were particularly concentrated and heated in the first few years of the League's existence. To take religious instruction lessons first, the League's initial Object, agreed upon at its first business meeting in January 1898, was "to substitute systematic non-theological moral instruction for the present religious teaching in all State schools, and to make character the chief aim of school life". By 1902 the Object was revised to focus on introducing moral instruction, with the reference to religious teaching removed.[32]

Multiple reasons were offered for this change, which was advocated particularly by the League's Ethical Movement-affiliated officers and committee members in these early years. It was advocated on strategic grounds, as facilitating achievement of the League's goals. Removing the demand to end religious instruction could, it was argued, enable the League to avoid alienating potential supporters and encourage take up of moral instruction: "We may move more rapidly if

31 MIL from c.1903 quoted in Spiller, *Ethical Movement*, 132; *The Freethinker*, August 14, 1898, 516.
32 Spiller, *Ethical Movement*, 152–53.

we travel on the lines of evolution rather than revolution . . . Why would we raise unnecessary opposition?"[33] The take up of moral instruction lessons by approximately one-third of local education authorities over the first decade of the twentieth century suggests prescience in this assessment. Some of the reasoning offered, however, was less goal-oriented, and pertained to the meanings and relationships that could attach to the sites and spaces of religion in school. Always scheduled at the start of the school day, as dictated by educational legislation and codes, League supporters and workers claimed that the religious instruction lesson was a unique and important moment. Attention turned not to mundane or earthly curricula, but to a communal experience, tied to a higher purpose, and potentially meaningful for those involved. This was a time of potential in the school day and the League claimed that moral instruction would make the most of this potential. Secular moral instruction, systematically organized and offering relevant and engaging illustrations, could inspire awe and reverence and utilize the opportunities of this unique period of the school day.[34]

Teachers and ex-teachers attached to the League, moreover, also argued that religious instruction cemented relationships within the school, providing a further rationale for why it should be supplemented, even modified, but retained. Frederick James Gould was connected with the League from its inception, and from 1910 was employed as its demonstrator. As a secularist elementary school teacher in London in the late 1880s and 1890s, he was ordered by his school to stop giving religious instruction lessons to his pupils. Looking back on this later, he recalls feeling "an alien": "I kept on fraternal terms with my half-dozen fellow teachers, but I was *in* the school, not *of* it. I was a foreign body." Gould appealed, unsuccessfully, to his school and to the London School Board to reverse the decision.[35] His situation, which received attention at the time in the secularist and local press, might potentially have fed into the League's focus on religious instruction lessons a few years later. There were, however, many teachers within the Ethical Movement, so a wider set of experiences that has not survived in the written record in the way that Gould's have might potentially have been influential too. Others, mainly early National Secular Society members, advocated retaining the demand that religious instruction lessons should be removed. One correspondent in the NSS's periodical *The Freethinker*, reflecting on debates within the League on this matter, argued that all instruction should be "secular". Moral instruction should not try to "bridge over the chasm between the knowledge which deals with the demonstrable facts of life and

33 *The Freethinker*, August 14, 1898, 525.
34 MIL 'manifesto' of 1898 cited in *Ethical World*, March 15, 1905, 93.
35 Frederick James Gould, *The Life Story of a Humanist* (London: Watts & Co 1923), 63–71. Quote at 67.

that faith which has nothing whatever to do therewith". Not demanding the removal of religious instruction would dilute the League's message and lead to a lack of clarity.[36]

The Bible was, if anything, even more controversial. Through these early years, League members and sympathizers debated whether the Bible was an appropriate source of illustration for moral instruction. The League's official position arrived at in 1898 was that the Bible and any other religious texts could be used for this purpose. This would be possible as long as, firstly, "theological" elements were left out, and, secondly, the Bible or other religious text would not be placed directly in children's hands so that teachers would retain control over the ways in which it was used.[37] The Bible was a potent, multivalent, symbol and the League's position on it a source of friction among members and supporters, with divisions roughly but not entirely on NSS and Ethical Movement lines. References to the Bible represented not only the book and the words within, but broader assumptions about the place of religion in schools and wider society. Christians in this period claimed a close association between the Bible and English national character, and secularists were very alert to the gravity of what was at stake.[38]

The League's official stance on the Bible, defined over 1898/1899, was framed chiefly by its leaders and officers, most of whom were tied to the Ethical Movement. They drew on traditions from the Ethical Culture Movement in the USA and in particular the philosophies and educational suggestions of its founder, Felix Adler. Adler's *The Moral Instruction of Children in Classes*, published in 1892 and soon issued for distribution in England, outlined the moral instruction lessons given in Adler's ethical culture school in New York. Teachers used the Bible in these lessons to illustrate a human moral code, avoiding theological implications.[39] A few years later the League's early officers and paid workers noted the potential benefits of using the Bible. Zola Vallance, the League's first Secretary, described the Bible as "one of the richest and most poetic of the world's collections of moral and social experience". Frederick James Gould offered similar arguments for the value of the Bible, but advocated its use as one of many texts. Teachers, he argued, should bor-

36 *The Freethinker*, November 28, 1897, 765.

37 Resolutions from 1898 cited in Spiller, *Ethical Movement*, 125.

38 C.f. Matthew Grimley, "The Religion of Englishness: Puritanism, Providentialism, and 'National Character', 1918–1945," *Journal of British Studies* 46:4 (2007): 895.

39 Felix Adler, *The Moral Instruction of Children* (London: Edward Arnold, 1892). On Adler's influence on Ethical Movement educators in England more broadly see Susannah Wright, "'There is Something Universal in our Movement Which Appeals Not Only to one Country, But to All': International Communication and Moral Education 1892–1914," *History of Education* 37:6 (2008): 812–13 and Wright, *Morality and Citizenship*, 117–19.

row from the best parts of the sacred texts of Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, and other faiths, and from secular ideals such as the principles of the French revolution. This way, it was possible to combine and systematically order high-quality content in a moral instruction scheme.[40] This sort of use of the Bible, it should be noted, was not far from that advocated by some Christians in England, especially Nonconformists influenced by modernist criticism, and elsewhere (See also Hellstrom, this volume).[41]

For others, though, the Bible was too loaded, had too many negative connotations, and blurred the distinction between secular morality and theological belief. By including the Bible, argued National Secular Society members, the League failed to send out a clear message to supporters, and also to those who were content to ignore its proposals.[42] In the end, the National Secular Society withdrew its institutional membership of the League in 1899, primarily because of the League's position on the Bible as a source for moral instruction, though some NSS members retained individual affiliation. The NSS's president, George W Foote, outlined the reasoning behind this move. "The Bible", he wrote, "was placed in schools for religious reasons and its retention in public schools is opposed to the principles of secular education." He elaborated on the rationale behind NSS's position in the context of schools at least partly funded and administered by the State: "They [secularists] know that the Bible is a religious book, and they say that the State should have nothing at all to do with religion." The churches, he noted, were strong enough to control education "and they keep the Bible in the schools for the sake of manufacturing customers".[43] By using the Bible at all within the school setting, he implied, the League would help churches to both retain control of state education and to socialize children into Christian beliefs.

The League's demonstration lessons offered a different form of encounter with belief. From the start the League sought to help teachers and other potential supporters understand what it was trying to achieve, through seeing its approach of secular moral instruction lessons in action. It offered occasional model lessons and a moral instruction circle for those who wished to develop their practice in its early years. Frederick James Gould was employed as the League's demonstrator from 1910. His demonstration lessons involved secularists encountering a wide range of people and settings first hand; these lessons effectively tested the portability of its ostensibly inclusive, human, morality. Demonstration lessons thus offer close-up glimpses of encounters with spaces and people of belief.

40 *The Freethinker*, July 9, 1899, 445 and December 19, 1897, 812–13.

41 Wright, *Morality and Citizenship*, 100.

42 *The Freethinker*, July 31, 1898, 494–95.

43 *The Freethinker*, May 28, 1899, 347 and July 9, 1899, 445.

Gould's lessons took place in schools, but also in venues beyond: drawing rooms in the houses of wealthy supporters, labor halls, playgrounds, Sunday school rooms, churches, and chapels.[44]

Reverend Hugh Chapman, Chaplain of the Savoy Chapel in London 1909–33, invited Gould to give three demonstration lessons there between 1909 and 1911. Chapman was a broad-church Anglican, known for his advocacy work on a range of progressive social issues, including marriage law, and was described in his obituary as "one of the most unconventional figures among the London clergy".[45] He became a long-term supporter of the League. Gould describes one of these lessons in his autobiography: "In the choir I had a class of boys and girls, and, aided by a blackboard, I told them my stories in the presence of an audience that sat in the pews; the Rev. Hugh Chapman looking on in benediction."[46] This passage raises important questions about the meaning and use of the chapel space for these purposes. The description of the spaces of the chapel, the choir and the pews, juxtaposed with the imported blackboard, is striking, as is the word "benediction", suggesting support but also seeming to reference Chapman's profession and faith. This might be a case of non-Christians adopting Christian concepts and spaces because of the lack of distinctly secularist alternatives. Alternatively, it might illustrate the ways in which religious and secular fields shaped and reshaped one another.[47] Gould's own biography might also be influential. He was a chorister at St George's Chapel in Windsor as a schoolboy, so a space like this might have been especially potent for him. The League in annual report mode however noted pragmatic benefits of such a setting in furthering its aims. It could attract a high-powered audience, with Gould's 1909 lesson in the Savoy Chapel attended by representatives of staffs of training colleges county education authorities. While the League intended demonstration lessons to be useful for ordinary classroom teachers, it also valued their ability to reach those who might be able to effect policy and curriculum change.[48]

Reverend Chapman's commentary on Gould's demonstration lessons hints at where the League's agenda might align with that of some Christian supporters. For Chapman, such lessons could counteract the "clerical rut into which the training of the young is all too prone to slip". He taps into common arguments at the time, offered by Christians as well as secularists, about the impact of the religious difficulty in schools: it was a distraction, it was damaging, and it created a negative im-

44 Gould, *Life Story*, 117–18.
45 "The Rev. H. B. Chapman," *The Times*, April 3, 1933, 16.
46 Gould, *Life Story*, 112.
47 Weir, *Secularism and Religion*; Brown, *Becoming Atheist.*
48 Gould, *Life Story*, 5–14; MIL Annual Report for 1909 cited in Spiller, *Ethical Movement*, 134.

pression of religion. Chapman also noted the potential for moral instruction to have "poetry" and "spirit".[49] His take here seems to align with the "spiritual" and "religious" (but not theological) qualities of moral instruction that some League activists emphasized. Christians like Chapman, and some of the secularists in the League, shared common ground.[50]

The lessons at the Savoy and Reverend Chapman's comments are a particularly striking example of encounters with spaces and people of belief but they are part of a wider pattern. Gould, when reporting on his demonstration lessons, noted occasions when he taught in venues like churches or taught children of different religious groups. He wrote in his autobiography:

> What mattered it if the Children were Jews, Secularists, Anglicans, Congregationalists, Wesleyans or Unitarians? Or if a bishop presided (as has twice happened), or a Positivist like Mr Frederick Harrison, or the venerable Baptist Dr Clifford? I have spoken to youth from a Leicester Unitarian pulpit and from the pulpit of Rhondda Williams' chapel at Brighton.[51]

In this example, Gould implies a basis of common humanity whatever someone's religion. The varied settings and audiences for his demonstration lessons operate as evidence for this claim, showing that moral teaching based on a common human basis really could work in practice.

Gould presents himself as not seeking controversy on religion and respecting all in his approach to demonstration lessons.[52] It is debatable whether we should take this comment entirely at face value. Whether intentionally or not, he might conceivably have been contributing to a secularization of a Christian space by using it for a non-theological moral instruction demonstration lesson. This sort of use could potentially disrupt the association of Christian people, beliefs, and spaces, with theological meaning. Secularists might have seen the stamp of approval of believers, and the endorsement perceived in the provision of spaces like churches and chapels, as evidence of the wide applicability of the League's proposals, or as advancing a secularizing cause. Alternatively, the intention of might have been to enable moral instruction to take on some of the sanctity, the atmosphere, awe, and wonder associated with these spaces. All of these are possible. In the absence of explicit discussion of the possible currents of intention beneath the surface, the historian is left to speculate on possibilities.

49 *Moral Education League Quarterly*, April 1, 1912, 1–3.
50 Wright, *Morality and Citizenship*, 98–103.
51 Gould, *Life Story*, 118.
52 Gould, *Life Story*, 119–20.

5 Concluding Remarks

The Moral Instruction League claimed to draw on a universal human moral code and to offer educational schemes and texts that could be applicable to all, whatever faith they adhered to, if they adhered to a religious faith at all. Nonetheless, its proposals potentially created an avenue for influence and legitimacy for secularist interests. Its program constituted a mission; not only Christians wanted to extend their moral ideals to all. The League presented its proposals as more appropriate than the tenets of Christianity for all citizens of a modern state, and as having civilizing potential, the ability, because of their relevance to all, to impart benefits and cure the social and moral ills of the modern state. The coherence of the League's vision and intentions, however, was fragile. The League positioned itself in an ambiguous way in relation to the existing state of affairs regarding religion in schools, and in relation to religious individuals and settings, with elements of challenge, but also cooperation and collaboration with non-secularists to achieve reform. The League utilized and reimagined Christian texts, symbols, and spaces. This could be viewed as an attempt to find common ground with Christians, or as a subversive act, an attempt to co-opt these texts, symbols, and spaces for secularist ends. Perhaps it was both at the same time. Despite these ambiguities, secularists and moderate Nonconformists and even progressive Anglicans worked together in connection with the League, potentially because they all had something to gain in the context of a "Christian nation" in which a particular version of Anglicanism was powerful, politically, culturally, and ecclesiastically.[53] Both secularists connected with the League and Christian allies utilized this particular attempt at educational reform for purposes of educational and societal change. They also used it to assert their sectional, and indeed individual, interests and ideals within the overarching framework of a Christian nation.

For secularists connected with the League, at least for the two moments analyzed here, a secularizing mission was intended to the extent that they wanted moral instruction based on human sanctions to be the norm in state schools and available to all. It was intended to the extent that, for these secularists, churches, or considerations of Christian belief, should not dictate schooling for all citizens of the state. The League presented its program as providing a neutral ground for all varieties of religious belief (and non-belief), though secularists within the League framed the terms of that neutrality. Thus far there is some consistency in the League's mission, and arguably some affinities with notions of Christian versions of mission, an affinity also found in the belief that the mission would extend civilizing benefits. Beyond this, much was open to different interpretations of the religious and the

53 Robbins, *History, Religion and Identity*, 85.

secular, and to different ideas about how the complex dialogue and relationship between them could play out both in the context of the particular moments considered here, and of schooling more generally. A secularizing mission emerges as a combination of the intentional and the unintentional, of the explicit and of unstated undercurrents and assumptions. In their debates and decisions about religious instruction and the Bible, and their encounters with people and spaces of belief through demonstration lessons, were the League attempting to reach out to others, to be as inclusive as possible? Or were they attempting a subtle form of resistance, an appropriation of some of the symbols and ritual trappings of Christianity for secularist, and secularizing, purposes? It is not possible to answer these questions with any certainty.

My analysis here contributes to iterations of secularization offered in recent years which move away from assumptions of a grand narrative and an inevitable product of modernity, and instead see it as a project, something imagined, multilayered, and partial. It emphasizes the complex and enduring connections between the religious and secular, whether in institutions, wider culture, or individual beliefs. It brings to these discussions the intentions of secularists attempting educational reform – a group of actors hitherto with limited presence either in educational histories or in histories of religion and secularization. The perspectives of a minority such as this contribute to a rounded understanding of contemporary debates around both religious belief and educational reform. Intentions are important when considering secularization in the educational sphere, as conceived as project, an imagined goal, a mission. A close analysis of secularists' intentions through a focus on 'moments' such as that attempted here shows them to be mixed and multi-valent. The complexity and ambivalence seen here make it difficult to define a clear mission but are in keeping with the nuances found in close-up or localized studies of histories of religion and non-religion in schools in different national contexts. I might not have offered clear answers but offer a richness that we should embrace if we are to advance our understanding of secularization, and of educational institutions and the ideas and people that operate in, around, and through them.

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