

## **Educating the secular citizen in English schools, 1897–1938**

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None of the major English secularist organisations<sup>1</sup> in the early twentieth century could boast about membership figures as an indicator of their strength and influence. Compared with most Christian churches, and as a proportion of the general population, they were small. They did, however, claim to have achieved a diffuse impact on wider societal thinking and debate. National Secular Society (NSS) leaders, for example, asserted that the ideals and ideas that they stood for had gained “a hold on the public mind”. Oxford classicist Professor Gilbert Murray stated that the “spirit” of Positivism had “got abroad” at a time when only remnants of Positivist organisations remained.<sup>2</sup> These were outcomes that secularists strove, actively, to achieve. Energetic and canny publicists, they disseminated their ideas in letters and personal conversation, on the platform, and in print. Their influence in scientific, literary and left-leaning political circles has been noted; by the early twentieth century, a growing scientific and social-scientific elite, influential in governance and welfare movements, might not have joined secularist bodies, but sympathised with some of their arguments.<sup>3</sup> Secularists also targeted the captive audience of young people who were compelled to spend five days a week, over much of the year, in schools. Through pressure groups, they lobbied educational authorities, and produced teaching aids, aiming to shape the teaching in schools in ways that would promote their interests. Not least among these interests was the desire to instil the knowledge, values and behaviours that would prepare pupils for their future lives as adult citizens, but outside of a Christian framework. This desire sat within a broad discourse about the purposes of schooling in England, one of long-standing which pre-and post-dates the timeframe of the analysis here. As well as imparting academic knowledge, schools, it was argued, should develop in pupils the knowledge, values, and behaviours that they would require as adult citizens. These were concerns which appear to have taken on a particular urgency in the early twentieth century, owing to widespread perceptions of intense, and unprecedented, social, cultural, political, and ideological change.<sup>4</sup> Secularists sought to shape the civic morality that would be taught in schools in their own image. Through influencing policy-makers, teachers and pupils, secularist campaigners, some of whom were or had been teachers or inspectors themselves, challenged assumptions that England was inherently, and inevitably, Christian.<sup>5</sup> But the process of shaping a non-Christian civic morality was a complex one, involving shifting alliances, dialogue, and compromises between different secularists, and between secularists and Christians.<sup>6</sup>

Citizenship, by the turn of the twentieth century, was frequently understood as an individual's membership of the nation state community. Membership was defined by legal and political frameworks linking the individual with the state, and also a diffuse set of qualities and identifiers of national identity which could relate to any or all of empire, countryside, Protestant Christianity, and the Anglo-Saxon race.<sup>7</sup> Local and international dimensions of citizenship, also, had significant purchase in this period; the international community of the "world citizen" of the inter-war years is important for my purposes here.<sup>8</sup> Secularist campaigners' primary concern was the extent to which Christianity was perceived as a marker of English citizenship among contemporaries, within and beyond schools: empire and race mattered to them too, but to a lesser degree. They were aware that religious instruction lessons were commonly valued for their contribution to individuals' moral development and a virtuous and cohesive society,<sup>9</sup> and Christian figures were held up as role models in teaching texts.<sup>10</sup> Secularists promoted as an alternative teaching on a purely "social" or "humanist" basis. I will consider, as interconnected case studies, two attempts to promote such teaching. An Ethical Movement-dominated pressure group, the Moral Instruction League (MIL) (1897–c.1924) campaigned for what it termed "non-theological" moral teaching in English schools as the most effective approach to forming citizens. And Frederick James Gould worked within the League of Nations Union (LNU) (1919–38) to publicise his Positivist-flavoured version of world citizenship.<sup>11</sup> I will examine the educational proposals that the MIL and Gould within the LNU offered, and the institutional and intellectual resources that they drew on. I will analyse the responses that their efforts elicited from educators, and a wider public of Christian and secularist commentators.

The MIL's and LNU's educational activities have been scrutinised in previous studies.<sup>12</sup> The new contribution offered here lies in examining these groups' campaigns as a strand of secularists' evangelism, their efforts to reach beyond the relatively small membership of their organisations and seek influence over questions of wide social import. Such an approach to the MIL and LNU requires consideration not only of these organisations' records and publications, but of the records and publications of secularist groups too. Secularists aimed to act as "agents of secularisation", to adopt a concept long-used in historical, sociological, and anthropological research.<sup>13</sup> They wanted to entice new recruits to their organisations, and to reshape English culture and institutions in their image. An emphasis on these attempts at evangelism, outreach and attempts at wider cultural influence challenges older theories of secularist organisational decline after the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> There is novelty also in considering two campaigns together over 41 years, and evaluating continuity and change. Activists worked within a shifting educational and religious context, starting with a period of interdenominational contest, but

witnessing a rise in ecumenical efforts in the interwar years. This was also a period of change within secularist bodies. The Ethical Movement reached a peak of organisational activity and membership in the Edwardian era. It provided networks, publications, personnel and even an educational programme, all of which proved central to the MIL's campaigns. F. J. Gould, within the LNU, drew relatively little on formal Positivist organisational channels, which were limited by the interwar years. But he found in his own version of Positivist thought inspiration for his educational activity. These campaigns constitute an ongoing form of secularist activity which could take varying forms, but which resonates with the campaigns of secularist bodies today.

Examining these educational crusades, therefore, contributes to a growing historiography of secularism. A spotlight on this aspect of secularist designs on English institutions, ideas, and culture offers new insights into secularist organisations and the ways in which their ideas and ideals "got abroad". I also add to a historiography of educating the young for citizenship within, and beyond, schools. Historians have been alert to the frequently Christian foundations of such an education, while also paying considerable attention to themes of empire and nation.<sup>15</sup> Secularists' campaigns for education for citizenship in schools have received considerably less attention. The combining of case studies here adds to the studies that do exist by highlighting the ongoing nature of secularists' ongoing contributions to a broader discourse about the civic purposes of education, and by revealing elements of long-term secular influence in English schools.

Yet any influence attained was limited, and could operate in complex, sometimes unintended ways. Secularists combined behind common goals, but disagreed with one another on ideals and strategies. They sought out Christian allies to help them create and promote educational schemes that were intended to include all. But they also critiqued widespread Christian educational practices, either by explicit challenges to the prominence of religious instruction as a tool for developing citizens (as with the MIL), or by providing what they deemed a superior alternative (as with the LNU). Activists might not have been able to "secularise" citizenship in English schools to the extent that they desired; they failed to achieve all they set out to. But secularist bodies achieved some influence over educational authorities, local and national, and their publications reached many thousands of teachers and pupils in schools. The available primary sources, unfortunately, tell us very little about how far their proposals had a direct impact on teachers' day to day educational practice or views about civic morality, or on pupils. I argue, also, for an influence on wider educational and public debates, though not always the sort of influence that campaigners intended. In response to secularist proposals, Christian perspectives were re-examined, reframed, improved, and restated. Secularist claims could be

accommodated (perhaps partially), resisted, or ignored. And responses among secularists, too, were similarly varied. Ultimately, a minority perspective was unable to win over a majority in a nation that, notwithstanding elements of religious weakness or decline, remained in many respects a Christian one.

### **Religion, secularism and education**

Early twentieth century commentators painted a mixed picture of the vitality of Christianity within English culture and society. Christians described a national community, with common positive characteristics, such as a sense of duty, based on shared Christian traditions. But they were also concerned about the un-churched slum child and a hedonistic and overly-commercial “secular age”.<sup>16</sup> Secularists were no less ambivalent. The Positivist Malcolm Quin proclaimed the “death of Christianity”, while the NSS argued that public avowal of secularist views would, in all but a very few schools, preclude promotion to a headship.<sup>17</sup> These commentators were not disinterested observers. Claims about the significance of Christianity could, for Christians, reassure believers, and, for secularists, galvanise efforts to promote change. Claims about Christian decline could, conversely, provide a rallying cry for Christians and solace for the secularist minority.

Historians in recent years have tended to side with those commentators who noted Christian vitality in this period. The significance of Christian ideals and practices in domestic, community and national life, even among those who did not attend church, has been emphasised.<sup>18</sup> Church attendance and membership, at an aggregate level, declined only gradually during the first half of the twentieth century, and participation in Christian rites of passage remained high; regularity of church attendance, did, perhaps, decline more rapidly.<sup>19</sup> Such findings have challenged older theories of secularisation, which had it as an inevitable side-effect of modernisation and urbanisation and a process well underway by the early twentieth century. This is not to ignore indications of religious doubt; the oft-noted Victorian and Edwardian middle-class “crisis of faith”, and the respectable agnosticism among public intellectuals in the interwar years.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, beyond these particular groups, there is evidence to suggest that significant decline in Christian observance or professed belief did not occur until the 1960s. Whether this change in the 1960s was a “religious crisis”, a sudden “death” of Christian Britain, or the culmination of a more gradual process of the “passing” of protestant England is the subject of debate.<sup>21</sup> A differentiated analysis of religious institutions has been proposed, distinguishing between influence on social and educational policy, membership and attendance, and cultural impact, allowing, simultaneously, for elements of strength and weakness.<sup>22</sup> Some

have questioned the very existence of a uni-directional pattern of religious decline, emphasising instead the variety of religious experience and constant religious change.<sup>23</sup>

Secularism has, only very recently, been taken seriously as part of these debates. Yet a plethora of organisations offered non-Christians an alternative associational, intellectual and in some cases spiritual life to that provided by the Christian churches.<sup>24</sup> These organisations were united by the assumption that supernatural belief was erroneous, and also by the conviction that men (to use the language of the time) possessed the power to shape their world and determine their futures without recourse to a deity.<sup>25</sup> But they differed in their clientele and their ideas about how best to engage with Christian organisations and religious belief.

The largest and most prominent groups, Secularists, Positivists and the Ethical Movement are central to my narrative. Secularism was the first to emerge on British soil, in the 1840s. Organisationally and ideologically rooted in Owenite radicalism, Secularists sought to expose the intellectual faults of Christianity, and fought against the exclusion of non-Christians from full political and social rights. Membership of the NSS, dominated by skilled artisans, reached about 4000 in the mid-1880s at the height of Charles Bradlaugh's attempts to enter parliament without swearing a biblical oath. Numbers declined steadily to an estimated 700 in 1948.<sup>26</sup> The Positivist Political and Social Union, with its ideals and political programme firmly rooted in the philosophy of Auguste Comte, was established in London in 1867. Dominated by middle-class professionals, membership peaked at less than 300 in the 1890s. But through prominent sympathisers among the late nineteenth and early twentieth century progressive intellectual elite, including George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and George Gissing, and sympathetic academics like Patrick Geddes and Gilbert Murray, Positivism gained, T. R. Wright suggests, a wide, if diffuse, cultural influence.<sup>27</sup> The Ethical Movement, which emerged in England in the 1880s, also attracted an educated middle-class clientele, predominantly left-leaning in its politics. Elements of philosophical idealism, the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and social activism, were combined in an eclectic and somewhat loosely defined programme. Membership of the Union of Ethical Societies reached 2000 in 1912, but then fell.<sup>28</sup> All these bodies retained some organisational presence through the interwar years, notwithstanding numerical decline. And, beyond formal secularist organisational channels, adherents continued to seek a wider influence of secularist ideals through their publications, and activism within a range of other organisations, including pressure groups working in schools.

The main secularist bodies differed in their attitudes to Christianity, and, consequently, in how they interacted with Christians. Positivists and ethicists, along with other contemporary groups such as the theosophists, aimed to build on the best of Christian beliefs and practices

(and those of other world faiths). They offered spiritual alternatives, in the form of the Religion of Humanity for Positivists and for ethicists the Ethical Ideal, and devised rudimentary forms of worship. Without the trappings of “theology” (the belief in a supernatural being of older faiths), religion would support and help individuals, and be a unifying social force.<sup>29</sup> “Religion” thus conceived, emphasising emotional impact, common experience, unity of purpose, and shared moral values, not necessarily tied to theological beliefs, would help create civic ideals and practices that would include all, whether they believed in a God or not. Their notions of religion, indeed, resonated with contemporary ideological and organisational developments including the religion of socialism, Socialist Sunday Schools and the Labour Church.<sup>30</sup> And, in order to promote religion as they defined it, ethicists and Positivists would work with sympathetic, usually liberal, Christians. But, as J. H. Muirhead, founder of London Ethical Society in 1886, and, later, professor of philosophy and political economy at Birmingham, acknowledged, many Christian contemporaries continued to see religion as implying a God.<sup>31</sup> Most NSS members, however, perceived no value in Christianity and drew attention to its limitations. They sought no spiritual equivalent, seeking a secular future without religious influences of any sort. Attempts to develop a religion without theology were “useless or misleading”.<sup>32</sup> These different understandings of religion and its place (or otherwise) in the broader civic sphere form an important context for understanding the arguments and choices of secularist activists campaigning to influence teaching in schools.

### **The Moral Instruction League**

On 7 December 1897, members of the Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour Party, trade unions, the Union of Ethical Societies, the NSS, and other “progressive bodies” met at St Martin’s Town Hall in London.<sup>33</sup> At this meeting, the Moral Instruction League (MIL) was formed. The MIL promoted “systematic” moral instruction in state schools, its pedagogy of direct moral teaching (“lessons or talks dedicated to the subject”<sup>34</sup>) contrasting with more popular indirect approaches whereby good citizenship was to be absorbed as a by-product of the school ethos, curriculum content or extra-curricular activities.<sup>35</sup> Early campaigns were London-focused, but the MIL became a nationally-oriented body that canvassed school boards and local education authorities (LEAs), the Board of Education at Whitehall, and teacher training colleges. It created syllabuses and teachers’ handbooks for use in schools, and offered rudimentary professional development for teachers through demonstration lessons.<sup>36</sup> References to moral instruction in the Board of Education’s 1904 and 1906 *Codes of Regulations for Elementary Schools* and 1905 *Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers* were thought at the time to reveal the MIL’s

influence; the existence of an intellectual elite who advocated a civic morality with secular components might be relevant here.<sup>37</sup> Individual LEAs, however, were to decide how moral instruction would be delivered; 60 out of 327 opted for “more or less systematic moral instruction” along MIL lines.<sup>38</sup> Devolving decision making to the local level enabled the Board of Education to avoid alienating powerful church lobbies, the MIL noted, somewhat bitterly.<sup>39</sup> In 1909 a change of title to the Moral Education League signalled less parliamentary lobbying and more curriculum development, and F. J. Gould was employed from 1910 to 1915 as paid demonstrator to promote the MIL’s work among teachers on the ground. Attention was, from 1914, increasingly focused on civics, adult education, and regional surveys; further name changes to the Civic and Moral Education League in 1914 and the Civic Education League in 1919 captured this shift in emphasis. After 1920, the MIL moved its offices to LePlay House, home of the Sociological Society and kindred bodies. In 1925 its school-oriented activities, by then subsumed into LePlay House’s civics teaching department, merited only a sentence in publicity material.<sup>40</sup>

Although other groups were involved in the League, the Ethical Movement was dominant, offering ideological and organisational resources. The MIL’s key officers, including Gould, Harrold Johnson (Secretary from 1902 to 1913), and Gustav Spiller, were all paid Ethical Movement workers around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>41</sup> Prominent supporters had strong Ethical Movement credentials. G. P. Gooch, for example, historian and Liberal MP for Bristol 1906 to 1910, who spoke on behalf of the MIL in parliament and before the Board of Education, was an early member of the West London Ethical Society and President of the Ethical Union from 1933 to 1935. The MIL’s educational approach of direct moral instruction, also, had Ethical Movement roots. Felix Adler, founder of the first ethical culture society in New York in 1876, introduced a graduated programme of moral lessons in his ethical culture school in that city which he published in book form in 1892. His book was, for the MIL, the “the pioneer work from which our modern moral education movement has sprung”.<sup>42</sup> The moral instruction circle organised by the Union of Ethical Societies for London-based teachers was an immediate precursor to the MIL’s activities, and the Sunday Schools of local ethical societies provided a “field of experiment” that activists would draw on in their MIL work.<sup>43</sup> Earlier, smaller scale, efforts to introduce secular moral instruction in England by liberal Christians and socialists wanting to end interdenominational battles over schooling were not acknowledged in the same way. The same was true of contemporary international developments, such as the *morale laïque* in French schools and a growing interest, beyond the Ethical Movement, in civic education in the USA.<sup>44</sup>

From its inception, the MIL associated moral instruction with creating citizens. An early pamphlet was entitled *Our Future Citizens*. Other publications explained the nature of this association in detail. Writing on behalf of the MIL, Gould defined citizenship not as a “general sentiment of fraternity towards all mankind” but “the feeling of responsibility and the habit of service” within “a definitely organized community”. The “modern state” had “developed a highly complex demand upon the citizen’s devotion”, and therefore needed to work through its schools to “[form] the habits, and [construct] the ideals, of the citizenship on which its very existence depends”.<sup>45</sup> The MIL also referenced a wider “humanity” beyond the nation state, presaging the world citizen of the interwar years.<sup>46</sup> Preparing pupils for citizenship so defined would, for the MIL, best be achieved through systematic moral instruction in schools; “the formation of personal good character” was “the condition ... of good citizenship”.<sup>47</sup>

The MIL’s linking of individual character and a unified community of citizens was uncontroversial. It echoed the broadly idealist conceptions of citizenship so popular in social-policy discourse at the time, as well as older versions of Christian civic morality, and republican traditions of moral virtue.<sup>48</sup> Basing moral instruction lessons only on “the strictly human reasons for right conduct”, however, was less typical. Forming citizens of the state in schools, the MIL claimed, required a core of moral sanctions acceptable to all members of that state, “people of all theologies or none”. Sanctions deriving from a Christian God were not acceptable to all members of the state. Religious instruction lessons were, therefore, an inappropriate vehicle for teaching citizenship in schools. Moreover, these lessons failed to address important moral subjects relevant to early twentieth century social life, including hygiene, industry, and civic life in a modern democracy.<sup>49</sup> And interdenominational conflicts over religious instruction, for the MIL, absorbed the churches’ attention; busy fighting over “shadowy religious questions”, they neglected to teach “the duties of citizenship”.<sup>50</sup>

Yet the universal moral code that the MIL proposed as an alternative, outlined in its *Graduated Syllabus* and recommended moral instruction texts, did not deviate far from standard Judaeo-Christian morality. Desirable moral qualities were expressed as a series of abstract nouns. Teaching for Infants to Standard II was to address personal traits, such as kindness, truthfulness, and self-control, but framed so as to embody the notion of duty towards others, these traits could form the basis of civic virtue. Social themes like justice, humanity and patriotism were to be covered by children in Standards III to V. Complex and potentially controversial subjects – for example, cooperation, peace and war, ownership, and ideals – was reserved for pupils in Standards VI and VII; it is in relation to these themes that the left-leaning and (sometimes) pacifist views of MIL activists are revealed.<sup>51</sup> Much of the content for younger



students was uncontentious, and in keeping with other teaching texts of the period. Under the heading of patriotism, for example, students were encouraged to recognise positive national characteristics (freedom of thought and action, democracy) and to serve their country. Exemplars of patriotic virtue, nearly all men, included English historical and military leaders, alongside a few international figures: Wellington, Nelson, Alfred the Great, General Gordon, Joan of Arc, and Washington. But references to Irish and Indian claims for self-rule as a form of patriotic expression are less typical and embody wider secularist ambivalence about imperial expansion.<sup>52</sup>

Commentary of the time endorsed the MIL's emphasis on moral education and character training. There was also support for addressing "the relations of the individual to the State and to society", and for basing teaching on "an ideal of personal and civic obligation".<sup>53</sup> The MIL's purely human morality, however, proved controversial. It attracted favourable comment from some teachers,<sup>54</sup> and a cross-section of Christians, who identified themselves as "modern" or "inclusive", and deemed inter-denominational rivalry in education inimical to the interests of their faith.<sup>55</sup> However, a wider educational and general public were, more frequently, sceptical. For a core of Christians that crossed denominational boundaries, the MIL's association with organised secularism rendered it "anti-religious",<sup>56</sup> and its proposals were incomplete and inadequate. Children needed to learn not only duties towards other people, which the *Graduated Syllabus* covered, but also duties towards God. Only Christianity, with its promise of future reward and threat of future punishment, would motivate pupils to be good. The MIL's "virtuous men and women", Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury, claimed in 1903, were no substitute for the ultimate moral exemplar, Jesus Christ.<sup>57</sup> Reference was also made to a national community with shared Christian origins. For Mr Robert Duncan, Conservative MP for Glasgow, speaking in a House of Commons debate on moral instruction in 1909, it was only by the Bible that a "Christian nation" would "proceed to prosperity in the future".<sup>58</sup> The MIL's proposals, he argued, would not suffice.

The MIL was willing to cooperate with and accommodate Christians, to an extent. The MIL's object, as stated at its first business meeting on 26 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 all school life". By 1902 the demand that religious teaching should be removed had gone.<sup>59</sup> MIL activists, and commentators outside the organisation, deemed this change responsible for a growing following outside organised freethought, particularly among liberal Nonconformists and broad church Anglicans. Unitarian minister Charles Peace promoted the MIL's cause through the correspondence columns of the

*Manchester Guardian*.<sup>60</sup> Reverend Hugh Chapman was a prominent Anglican advocate who invited Gould to give demonstration lessons in his chapel at the Savoy.<sup>61</sup> The MIL also sought Christian allies in its parliamentary activity, courting Nonconformist support when seeking to influence the Liberal Party's 1908 Education Bill, and appreciating the patronage of a few Anglican and Roman Catholic MPs in its campaigns to influence the 1906 *Code*.<sup>62</sup> Sophisticated schemes encompassing both religious and moral instruction emerged as a direct response to the MIL's educational proposals and materials. Canon E. R. Bernard's 56-page *Scheme of Moral Instruction*, devised for Salisbury Diocesan Board of Education in 1907, referenced the MIL's efforts, and aimed to facilitate "systematic moral teaching". This teaching was to be illustrated by the Bible alone, and the scheme had as its foundations "God ... the power of prayer ... and judgment to come".<sup>63</sup> Bernard's syllabus, the MIL noted, demonstrated that Christian educators could learn from secularists and adopt some of their suggestions.<sup>64</sup> But in so doing, Bernard and others offered a competitor model likely to appeal to many Christian teachers.

Christian critics might have been surprised at how deeply matters of religion divided secularists within the MIL itself. Ethical Movement activists frequently wanted to align their promotion of moral instruction with their understanding of religion (as distinct from "theology"). Moral instruction, one claimed, would create a "religious spirit" in schools which could "spring as holy and undefiled from lay and secular sources as from priests and Churches".<sup>65</sup> The Bible was valued as a source of illustration for moral instruction lessons which contained valuable historical and ethical content; its "theological" elements could be ignored.<sup>66</sup> Harrold Johnson went further than others, experiencing a "crisis of doubt" and returning to the Christian fold.<sup>67</sup> Johnson had trained as a Unitarian minister before he joined the Ethical Movement. Over time he came to question the efficacy of moral instruction without a Christian foundation. In 1913, "developments in his religious views" led him to resign as Secretary of the MIL, and he resumed his Unitarian ministry.<sup>68</sup> NSS members, on the other hand, rejecting ideas of an equivalent religion, argued that all instruction in schools should be "secular", dealing only with "the demonstrable facts of life".<sup>69</sup> The MIL's emerging stance on the Bible was objected to as an Ethical Movement formulation which failed to satisfy other secularists. Any use of the Bible in schools was "opposed to the principle of secular education", the NSS Executive argued in 1899, and on these grounds it terminated its formal organisational affiliation with the MIL.<sup>70</sup>

There is truth in a contemporary critic's assessment that the MIL's influence on educational policy and public debate was "out of all proportion with [its] modest resources". Yet it failed to achieve all that it set out to.<sup>71</sup> Its favoured pedagogical method of direct moral instruction was, as already noted, at odds with more fashionable "indirect" approaches. Some

might, potentially, also have been troubled by radical views on empire in some of its teaching materials, though this attracted scant comment. It was the MIL's attitude to and relationships with religion, and specifically Christianity, that proved most controversial. For critics, a Christian rather than a "human" morality should be taught in schools. Secularists, on the other hand, could not agree among themselves over the appropriateness of "religious" texts or concepts. The MIL stimulated debate and curriculum development, and gained some support, but many politicians and teachers, and even some secularists, remained unconvinced that its approach was the right one. A unifying civic morality proved elusive.

### **F. J. Gould and the world citizen**

After 1919, concepts of citizenship permeated educational discourse, perhaps to an even greater extent than before, but were to take on new forms.<sup>72</sup> The First World War had revealed the dangers of excessive military aggression and nationalism. Commitments to nation state and Empire were still expressed, but with a greater emphasis than previously on benevolence and moral duty,<sup>73</sup> and these commitments were supplemented by an emphasis on a broader international sphere. Schools, according to many interwar-years educators, should produce citizens not only of the nation state, but also of the world. Internationalist interests were expressed through efforts to include more international content in existing subjects, notably history and geography.<sup>74</sup> Outside the formal curriculum, new, internationally-oriented, youth movements, such as the Junior Red Cross, were often attached to schools, and a greater international focus became evident in the activities of existing events (Empire Day) and movements (Boy Scouts and Girl Guides).<sup>75</sup> Particularly ambitious initiatives were devised in connection with the League of Nations. The League of Nations Union was established in November 1918. It aimed to promote the newly-formed League of Nations among politicians and the general public, and, more broadly, to "foster mutual understanding ... and habits of co-operation ... between the peoples of different countries".<sup>76</sup> From late 1919 an Education Committee campaigned for what contemporaries called "League teaching" in English schools. It lobbied central and local educational authorities, school governing bodies, training colleges and educational associations, produced curriculum materials and teaching aids, organised events for teachers, and co-ordinated a range of extra-curricular activities. League teaching was intended to develop knowledge about the aims, structure, and activities of the League of Nations, and to create in pupils a sense of "world citizenship". The Board of Education reported in 1932 that all but a very few LEAs provided League teaching of some form. International events from the mid-1930s, however, led to a decline in public support for the League of Nations and the LNU's

pressure group tactics, and the Education Committee was reconstituted as the semi-autonomous Council for Education in World Citizenship in 1939.<sup>77</sup>

World citizenship proved difficult to define precisely, lacking the familiar legal and political frameworks, patriotic sentiments and cultural markers associated with the nation state. The LNU emphasised less than the MIL the development of personal moral attributes. Its proposals for world citizenship, however, would develop in pupils “a positive desire for international justice and a sense of world loyalty”, and the recognition of “a moral obligation towards every other being in the world, irrespective of colour, race or creed”.<sup>78</sup> For many within the LNU, an organisation with a predominantly Christian “spiritual core”,<sup>79</sup> it was assumed that the ideological foundation of such attributes would be Christian. The LNU’s Christian Organisations Committee targeted the church hierarchy and worshippers on the ground. The League of Nations, it was argued, enabled the world to come closer to ideals of the Christian faith, namely world peace and a universal brotherhood of man; English commitment to the League, therefore, should rest on Christian foundations.<sup>80</sup> A Christian moral framework is similarly evident in Education Committee publications. In 1938 William Temple, then Archbishop of York, was commissioned to write the annual Armistice Day message. There are brief, but telling, references in other texts. “The children of our Father in Heaven”, wrote Lillian Dalton in her *League of Nations Stories* in 1924, should “[learn] to know and love each other better”.<sup>81</sup> The Education Committee, it appears, thought it acceptable and appropriate to convey explicitly Christian messages through material issued to schools.

Some provision, also, was made within the LNU for other faiths, and for secularist bodies. The LNU’s Religion and Ethics Committee, never particularly active or powerful, included, alongside Christians, representatives of different world faiths, spiritualism, theosophy, and the Ethical Movement (but not the NSS or Positivists).<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the Ethical Movement was, out of the major freethought organisation, the most consistently supportive of the League of Nations project. But individual NSS members joined in local LNU branch activity, whilst criticising local branches’ prayers and church services.<sup>83</sup> And Gould, his MIL demonstration work having been terminated in 1915, worked during the interwar years, through the LNU’s Education Committee, to promote his Positivist-flavoured version of world citizenship. Gould’s primary secularist allegiance by this point was with Positivism. He ran a small Positivist group in Leicester from 1908 to 1910, and after moving to London in 1910 lectured and produced pamphlets for the Positivists there. He resigned from London Positivist Society in 1926, a body by then in terminal numerical and organisational decline, but continued to elaborate his version of the Positivist creed in his writings until his death in 1938. Gould’s approach to Positivism

involved adapting the teachings of Comte to the changing needs of the age, and working through existing institutions to realise the advance of the Religion of Humanity.<sup>84</sup> The League of Nations, for Gould, was an ideal institution for these purposes. With its emphasis on “cooperation and conciliation” it had an affinity with Positivist aims.<sup>85</sup>

Gould was not one of the well-connected educational intellectuals, administrators, and representatives of teachers’ organisations who made up the mainstream of the Education Committee; indeed, he was never a full Education Committee member. It is not clear how he first became involved with the LNU. A possible scenario is that fellow Positivist F. S. Marvin, Inspector of Schools from 1890 to 1924 and Education Committee member 1919 to 1939, brought him to the notice of others. Marvin’s school and college friend, the Oxford classicist Gilbert Murray (vice chairman then chairman of the LNU 1923-38), could, presumably, have pulled strings if necessary.<sup>86</sup> Through the 1920s, Gould toured the country giving “League story-talk[s]” to pupils, and wrote pamphlets on the League for use in schools.<sup>87</sup> And from 1924 till shortly before his death in 1938, he edited, and wrote much of, *League News*, a newsletter for pupils published three times a year.<sup>88</sup>

The moral basis of the League, for Gould, rested in the “ethical consciousness of all mankind”, which included people of “all types of faith” and those who had “no theological beliefs”. An undue emphasis on Christianity in common LNU local branch practices, including church services, he suggested, might encourage “habits of intellectual divergence”, in turn creating a “spirit of war”. Against this backdrop, he aimed to create in *League News* an “all humanist” alternative which “[treated] World Faiths and Moral Movements with equal respect”.<sup>89</sup> Gould described his LNU work as “within the circle, liberally interpreted, of Moral and Civic instruction”.<sup>90</sup> His narrative approach to League teaching was an extension of the methods that he developed in his earlier moral instruction work. The machinery and activities of the League of Nations, he suggested, should be embedded in a deep knowledge of the “environment, traditions, and ideals” of each country; this would reveal “the essential likeness in the souls of men all the world over”.<sup>91</sup> *League News* contained information about the League and its member states, illustrated with photographs, pictures and maps. Gould wrote about historical figures, and linked their activities with the current work of the League. He noted the humble background of William Randall Cremer (1828-1908) of the International Arbitration League. Elizabeth Fry’s (1780-1845) efforts to improve conditions in prison were linked to women’s involvement in the League of Nations penal reform committee.<sup>92</sup> He devoted considerable space to non-Christian and non-European League members. In 1932, for example, he described Afghanistan’s entry into the League of Nations and the joyful response of other Arab members.

This commentary on current League affairs was preceded by a moral tale (about a tribal Afghan boy's kindness when returning a stray mule to its owners at an English army base) and discussion of the country's geographical features, industries, social conditions, and religious beliefs.<sup>93</sup> Whilst retaining distinctions between primitive and civilised peoples common among his contemporaries, Gould's inclusion of all countries and all religious traditions challenged, albeit implicitly, what he deemed an undue Western and Christian emphasis within the LNU at large.

With his talks, pamphlets, and *League News*' regular circulation of up to 35,000, Gould's views reached a not insignificant audience.<sup>94</sup> But it is difficult to gauge the response to what he proposed. In contrast with what Gould experienced within the MIL, there is no clear evidence of disapproval of his stance on religion from within the LNU or from *League News* readers. What this lack of evidence signifies is hard to interpret. His position might have been accepted, or partially accommodated. Or, conversely, maybe his perspective was tolerated as a harmless minority one from an ageing educator on the fringes of the Education Committee who could be quietly ignored.

### **Conclusion: educating the secular citizen**

Through these educational campaigns, secularists aimed to challenge prevailing orthodoxies about the foundations of citizenship and to influence young people in English schools. Theirs was a field of activism which reached beyond their admittedly small organisational limits. Secularists' interventions ensured that alternatives to the dominant narrative of a Christian version of English citizenship were presented to a wide audience. In response, Christian narratives were re-shaped, sometimes in subtle ways, or re-stated, with claims of business as usual. Existing secularist narratives were, similarly, affected in different ways. Not only was there a contest between religious and secular conceptions of citizenship, but Christians and secularists were divided among themselves. The intended secularising of English citizenship proved to be a complex, partial, and fragmented process. Yet campaigners had some, albeit limited, influence on policy and practice; why this was the case is a matter for debate. Was it the tenacious and skilful activism of secularists? Or was it more that their proposals chimed, partially, with currents of popular thought (idealism and internationalism), or, alternatively, that some within influential intellectual and governmental elites were disposed to countenance some secular morality in schools? Beyond the scope of this article, questions remain. We can ascertain campaigners' intentions and, particularly for the MIL, responses to their suggestions on the part of the minority of teachers whose views were published. But the extent to which campaigns influenced a wider cross-section of teachers and pupils in schools remains impossible to determine.

The MIL and F. J. Gould, through the LNU, intended to use schools to impart in the rising generation a form of national and international citizenship which was founded on secularist principles but which was accessible and appropriate for all, including Christians. By emphasising so strongly this one form of citizenship, albeit an inclusive one, secularist educators over 41 years rejected the possibility that different models of citizenship might coexist. And in this they were more like the Christian educators they criticised than they might have cared to admit. Secularism, moreover, like Christianity for other educators, provided organisational resources that enabled the development and dissemination of educational proposals. But it was also a component of wider cultural currents – to use Gilbert Murray’s words it “got abroad”. Yet differences over time should also be recognised. The MIL condemned, explicitly, during a period of intense interdenominational rivalry, a purely Christian basis for the teaching of citizenship. It drew an equally explicit critical response from many, but its proposals for including all faiths and none attracted some moderate Christians. Gould’s “all-humanist” version of world citizenship was offered as an alternative to the LNU’s predominantly Christian offer. Any challenge was implicit rather than explicit, and responses are equally unclear. The role of secularist organisations and ideas in activists’ thinking and activities also changed. The Ethical Movement offered an organisational framework and field of educational experiment which the MIL could draw on. Gould, within the LNU, drew on Positivism less for organisational support than for ideas and personal spiritual inspiration.

Like other secularists at the time, the MIL, and Gould within the LNU, perhaps underestimated, or at least downplayed, the extent to which Christianity remained a significant cultural and ideological force in educational and other spheres. They were, ultimately, unable to overturn the apparently widespread conviction that citizenship for the English, whether of the country or the world, had Christian foundations. This was not to change, in the short term at least, after 1939. During the Second World War, Churchmen and politicians alike suggested that only a Christian country could withstand secular Nazi aggression, and a lobby of Christian educators proposed that this could only happen through religious education in all schools. The 1944 Education Act, with its provision for compulsory religious instruction and a daily act of worship, affirmed within government policy a Christian vision of English citizenship. Secularist educators, and individual teachers beyond the secularist organisational fold, criticised such developments. But there was not a sustained pressure group campaign, wartime exigencies hindering the Secular Education League’s efforts in this direction.<sup>95</sup>

Yet the triumph of a Christian education for citizenship was not assured. Mass Observation’s *Puzzled People*, published in 1947, noted confusion over personal religious beliefs

and limited understanding of Christian doctrine and tradition. Christian teaching in schools was favoured, it was suggested, simply because few people had experienced alternative approaches to moral and civic education. This observation might suggest that, despite reaching a wide audience and stimulating debate, secularist campaigns between 1897 and 1939 had limited long-term impact. Since the 1960s, the British Humanist Association (BHA), the organisational descendant of the Ethical Movement, and the NSS have campaigned for a school curriculum which adequately represents secular perspectives, and does not privilege Christianity or other faiths. They have achieved some recognition among educators and politicians, but have been, and, arguably, remain, less influential than the Christian churches and the representatives of other religions.<sup>96</sup> English schools remain a site of contest between religious and secular conceptions of citizenship. But, with recent surveys suggesting that those professing no faith outnumber those who define themselves as Christian, the secular conceptions which were a minority perspective might now reflect the views of a larger proportion of the population. The BHA proposes, on lines recognisable from its predecessor's suggestions, a "moral education of pupils across the curriculum" based on "shared human values" that will prepare pupils for adult life in a pluralist society. It notes the need to challenge the "still widespread assumption that morality depends on religious belief".<sup>97</sup> Elements of continuity and change discussed in this article can be traced through to the present.

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\* Acknowledgments: I would like to thank David Aldridge, Mark Freeman, Bill Gibson, Annie Haight, Anne-Marie Kilday, John Stewart and Lucy Vickers for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts.

<sup>1</sup> Connection with the National Secular Society is indicated by capitalisation (Secularist), whilst 'secularist' (lower-case) denotes those attached to a range of freethought organisations (this article is particularly concerned with the Ethical Movement, Positivists, and the National Secular Society) and agnostic or atheist ideological positions.

<sup>2</sup> "NSS Executive Annual Report," *The Freethinker*, June 3, 1927, 357–8; G. Murray to F. S. Marvin, January 24, 1936, MS.Eng.Lett.c.268, fol. 95, Papers of Francis Sydney Marvin, Special Collections, Bodleian Library.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Michael Rectenwald, *Nineteenth Century British Secularism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Liz Lutgendorff, "Agents of Secularisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century". Paper presented at the International Society for Historians of Atheism, Secularism and Humanism



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Inaugural Conference, Conway Hall, London, June 4-5 2016; T. R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> B. Beaven and J. Griffiths “Creating the Exemplary Citizens: The Changing Notion of Citizenship in Britain 1870–1939,” *Contemporary British History* 22:2 (2008): 203–25; J. Romein, *The Watershed of Two Eras. Europe in 1900*, trans. A. J. Pomerans (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2009) argues for an essentially ‘Christian’ nation during this period.

<sup>6</sup> For a parallel emphasis on dialogue between the religious and the secular, and shifting alliances, see David Nash, *Christian Ideals in British Culture: Stories of Belief* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Rectenwald, *Nineteenth Century British Secularism*; John Seed, “‘Secular’ and ‘Religious’: Historical Perspectives,” *Social History* 39:1 (2014): 3–13.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Lammers, “‘The Citizens of the Future’: Educating the Children of the Jewish East End, c.1885–1939,” *Twentieth Century British History* 19:4 (2008): 395–6; Stephen Heathorn (1995) “‘Let us Remember that we, too, are English’: Constructions of Citizenship and National Identity in English Elementary School Reading Books, 1880–1914,” *Victorian Studies* 38:3 (1995): 313; Alun Howkins, “The Discovery of Rural England,” in *Englishness: Politics and Culture, 1880–1920*, ed. Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 62–88.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Hulme, “Putting the City Back into Citizenship: Civics Education and Local Government in Britain, 1918–45,” *Twentieth Century British History* 26:1 (2015): 26–51; Helen McCarthy. *The British People and the League of Nations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Charmain Cannon, “The Influence of Religion on Educational Policy, 1902–1944,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 12:2 (1964): 150–2; Rob Freathy, “The Triumph of Religious Education for Citizenship in English Schools, 1935–1949,” *History of Education* 37:2 (2008): 295–316; Stephen Platten, “The Conflict over the Control of Elementary Education 1870–1902 and its Effect upon the Life and Influence of the Church,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 23:3 (1975): 286–93.

<sup>10</sup> For example, P. Yeandle, *Citizenship, Nation, Empire: The Politics of History Teaching in England, 1870–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 83–7.

<sup>11</sup> This organisation changed its name three times. For clarity, Moral Instruction League is used throughout this paper. An emphasis on England rather than Britain, arises from the chief focus of MIL and LNU activities, and the Anglo-centrism of contemporary citizenship debates (on the latter see Matthew Grimley, “The Religion of Englishness: Puritanism, Providentialism and National Character,” *Journal of British Studies* 46:4 (2007): 891–2).

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- <sup>12</sup> Robert Nicholas Bérard, “The Movement for Moral Instruction in Great Britain: the Moral Instruction League and its Successors,” *Fides et Historia* 16:2 (1984): 55–73; F. H. Hilliard, “The Moral Instruction League 1879–1919,” *Durham Research Review* 12 (1961): 53–63; R. J. W. Selleck, *The New Education, 1870–1914* (London: Pitman, 1968), 299–328; B. J. Elliott, “The League of Nations Union and History Teaching in England: a Study in Benevolent Bias,” *History of Education* 6:2 (1977): 131–41; McCarthy, *British People*, chapter 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Space only allows for a couple of examples to indicate the use of this term, across disciplinary and geographical boundaries, and from the 1970s to the present. See, for example, E. S. Miller, “The Christian Missionary: Agent of Secularisation,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 43:1 (1970): 14–22; Matthew Grimley, “Law, Morality and Secularisation: The Church of England and the Wolfenden Report, 1954–1967,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60:4 (2009): 725–41 (at 740). Use of “agents of secularisation” with particular reference to secularists is more recent, see Lutgendorff, “Agents of Secularisation”.
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- <sup>17</sup> Malcolm Quin, “The Death of Christianity,” *Positivist Review*, October 1924, 186–90; “NSS Executive Annual Report,” *The Freethinker*, June 15, 1930, 372–5.
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University Press, 2007); S. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark, c.1880–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 87–104. A few defend secularisation in this period (see Steve Bruce, *God is Dead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011)).

<sup>19</sup> Peter Brierley, “Religion,” in *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, ed. Albert Henry Halsey and Josephine Webb (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 650–74; Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 161–9; C. Field, “Gradualist or Revolutionary Secularization? A Case Study of Religious Belonging in Inter-War Britain, 1918–1939,” *Church History & Religious Culture* 43:1 (2013): 57–93. Aggregate data illustrating long term trends inevitably masks inter-denominational, social class, gender and geographical distinctions, and shorter-term peaks and troughs.

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<sup>21</sup> McLeod, *Religious Crisis*; Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*; Green, *Passing of Protestant England*.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Morris, “The Strange Death of Christian Britain: Another Look at the Secularisation Debate,” *Historical Journal* 46:4 (2003): 963–76.

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- <sup>37</sup> Bérard, “Movement for Moral Instruction”, 59–60.
- <sup>38</sup> Harrold Johnson, *Moral Instruction in Elementary Schools in England and Wales* (London: David Nutt, 1908), xi–xii.
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- <sup>93</sup> *League News*, February 1935, 1–2.
- <sup>94</sup> Hayward and White, *Last Years*, 264.
- <sup>95</sup> Keith Robbins, *History, Religion and Identity in Modern Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), chapter 14; Freathy, “The Triumph of Religious Education for Citizenship in English Schools”; S. Wright, *Morality and Citizenship in English Schools. Secular Approaches 1897-1944* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 192–9.
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<sup>97</sup> British Humanist Association (BHA), “BHA Education Policy – A Summary,”  
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