

CHRISTIAN IDEALS IN BRITISH CULTURE

STORIES OF BELIEF IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY | DAVID NASH

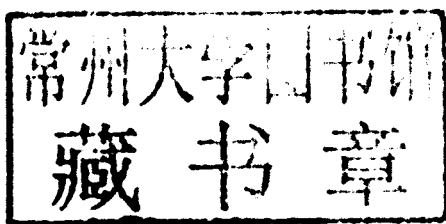


Christian Ideals in British Culture

Stories of Belief in the Twentieth Century

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Christian Ideals in British Culture

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*For Joanne and Bella
Thanks for love, companionship and help*

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1

Restoring the Balance – Religious Stories and the Secular World¹

The House of Lords Select Committee, which met in 2003 to consider the issue of incitement to religious hatred, heard a great variety of evidence from a bewildering array of religious and other interest groups. Its final recommendations could scarcely avoid recognising this variety, alongside other imperatives that spoke of peace, order and the urge to empower and protect communities. The United Kingdom, in the new millennium, by now hosted many different religious traditions from its colonial past and from its status as a nation with open borders within a religious and ethnically diverse European community.

The urge to endorse a still developing multicultural agenda hung over the committee's deliberations and its membership was a showcase for the different traditions and new ways in which the 'faith communities' of Britain were represented. Yet the committee was starkly surprised at how it was confronted by vocal, organised Christianity represented by individuals, congregations, groups, denominations and traditions. All served to make the voice of modern Christianity heard on this seminally important matter. From these profound, yet different, pressures the Select Committee's conclusions contained the bald and unequivocal statement that Britain was still 'a Christian Country'.² This book is a sustained attempt to unravel the meaning and importance of this statement in the wider academic context of debates within religious history. An arm of government was prepared to declare that Christianity was a central plank of British culture at the same time that statistics, impressions, argument and academic analysis appeared to prove that the country had witnessed religion growing progressively less important by the year. As such this book is an attempt to analyse what this mismatch of observations actually means.³ To do this it analyses religious history and traces its use, misuse and relevance (predominantly in the twentieth century) to prise open the debate about just how religious the English actually were, have been and might yet remain.

This last statement is especially important because this book does not seek to be dragged into one or other corner of the long raging secularisation

debate. It acknowledges that organised Christianity has, according to a number of measures, lost ground during the twentieth century in Britain. However, it remains sceptical of some of the claims of secularisation theory and inferences drawn from observing the process of secularisation. Such scepticism questions the irrevocable nature of supposed changes and precisely what this means for the future (and the past) of Christian religion in Britain. It is equally not an extended and simple denial of the idea of secularisation, although in the course of this book the concept scarcely escapes criticism.⁴ As I hope will become clear such a simple denial invites further discussion around an enduringly frustrating argument which masks more than it illuminates about religious history or the history of religion in Britain.⁵ This is perhaps because sociological, theory driven, secularisation-style history and more conventional religious history have, up to now, largely been operating with separate agendas.

To create much more of an integrated history this volume hopes to instigate a discursive movement away from simple questions of when Britain was religious, and a focus upon the corollary of this statement that it has ceased to be so. Instead it wants to inspire a new scholarship, which looks at precisely *how* societies have been religious in the past and how both religious professionals and individuals in their own lives have striven to make this a reality. This particular story has, without doubt, been eclipsed by the dominance of the secularisation thesis and the attempts to establish secularisation as an observable process.

As such this book walks into something of an historiographical minefield. The history of religion has been recently rejuvenated to some effect through the realisation that many previous forms of analysis around religion equated this myopically with Christianity – and specifically organised Christianity.⁶ This led to many of the narratives of religion describing one-dimensional decline and to sometimes emphasise a ‘post-Christian Britain’ or a ‘secular world’. Such decline narratives offered various versions of the ‘secularisation’ thesis, generally with an attendant concentration upon Christianity facing species of irreversible decline. Likewise there has also been a description of a theoretical realignment of Christianity’s place in modernity through descriptions of a ‘secular age’ to which it has responded in various ways.⁷

Decline-infused history has often described increasingly remote religious institutions alongside a fading and arguably understudied private piety.⁸ Versions of this decline paradigm root Christianity firmly in the historic past, yet also this has a profound and largely unexplored influence on the contemporary perception of religion. This state of affairs was initially propelled by the secularisation thesis but has been exacerbated by both an oft-repeated description of decline and the failure to study religion alongside many aspects of modern history. An especial feature of this history has been an overwhelming pessimism, often driven by the agendas of empirical historians.⁹

Similarly an over-enthusiasm for secularisation theory-based approaches inadequately explains many aspects of Christianity's enduring importance beyond institutions both in this historic past and the contemporary world.¹⁰ Therefore this book addresses this by investigating the surprising longevity of Christian ideals and portrayals, sometimes beyond traditionally studied religious forms. However, it also portrays the attempts of some of the most apparently intransigent and anachronistic religious institutions to make themselves relevant and address the problems confronting Christianity in the twentieth century. It is also evident that in some areas these institutions were capable of limited or even surprising levels of success. Studying these attempts provides new tools of analysis to shape the history of religion's place in people's lives. Thus this is a work which begins to chart a history of religion in Britain apart from, and beyond, the influence of histories of religious decline. It also aims to provide some answers to the problems that have beset the more conventional secularisation-shaped views of Christianity and its history. In particular it develops an agenda advocating a religious history which investigates religious ideals as beliefs and practices individuals used to mould and explain their lives. This moves the study away from conventional measures of religiosity and looks at the meaning and consequence of religion within wider social and cultural history. By default this also makes it a sustained critique of models that portray religion and beliefs associated with it as firstly somehow culturally inescapable and secondly 'hard wired' into the human consciousness.¹¹

The history of modern Christianity in Britain will hopefully use these conclusions to look at a perspective beyond doctrines, denominations and demographics. Instead they point to the widespread and re-occurring relevance of central Christian stories around which individuals have organised their lives. However, during the twentieth century these did cease to be the exclusive and regulated property of Christianity itself, although Christianity could still exert influence over them. Once available, through widespread idioms, they became capable of reiteration, reinterpretation and reuse in a number of guises. Charting these illuminates not only a wider history of belief, but also the cultural history of other episodes in other branches of the discipline of history. Thus this approach focuses upon believers and audiences more than the doctrines, denominational histories and demographic approaches, which have focussed on how conventional religion was 'supplied' to individuals and taken up by them.¹² This has hitherto been the failing of the separated ecclesiastical history and social science inspired histories of religion over the *longue durée*.

I Secularisation theory and its unresolved issues

At this point we should note that modernism's assumption of its own triumph saw late nineteenth-century rejection of religion as an immediate rejection

of all Christianity and religious forms for all time. This scarcely considered the possibility that dissatisfaction with Christianity was a dissatisfaction with existing forms or was episodic, merely generational, or the symptom of changing needs among the religious. It is salutary in this instance to note that sociologists of religion interested in fringe and cult religious groupings routinely start from the assumption that they are instigated by the failure of more conventional religious forms. Indeed one of the traditional modernisation narratives can sometimes be turned on its head. Two writers in 1988 noted how 'The pervasive secularisation of society in the nineteenth century, assisted by rapid industrialisation and the even swifter pace of innovation, provided for the effective weakening of traditional values and social bonding.' This was not the prelude to the conventional secularisation narrative, but instead a premise for viewing weakened social bonds as an instigator of strong motives for 'conversion' specifically as an active antidote to such pressures.¹³

Secularisation theory and the history of the secularisation process also encourages an overt obsession with pessimistic chronology. This is forever in pursuit of the critical moment that can be identified as the start of irretrievable decline, which is accompanied by a periodisation of such decline. Thus a function of this book is to demonstrate that ideas such as the assertion of a sudden 'age of indifference' and a secularisation 'moment' or 'decade' is overstated and given too great an emphasis. Christian ideals prevalent in society still exerted considerable influence both upon the faithful and the indifferent over the wider twentieth century. This suggestion engages critically with the previous suggestions that there was an 'age of faith' and an 'age of indifference', since these polarities scarcely offer a viable explanation of religious history's realities in Britain.¹⁴

Secularisation (as theory or process) has an inbuilt obsession with decline, which begs other questions. Why, for example, should churchgoing's gradual replacement by private unstructured (and less visible) spiritual devotion be automatically labelled a diminution, dilution and definitively more secular way to behave?¹⁵ The last of these, it should be acknowledged, potentially spawns deeper religiosity among some individuals, alongside a much more often discussed and recorded indifference. This catalogued indifference is obvious to those who rely upon statistical evidence, which has been central to the construction of the classic model of secularisation as theory and observation.¹⁶ But the conclusions from these sources nonetheless need to be tempered with a greater range of questions and analysis about the nature of religiosity.¹⁷ This is especially pertinent since the twentieth-century, social science inspired, history rashly assumed that private belief was a profoundly modern invention. The historical past produces evidence of such phenomena existing side by side with conventional modes of adherence – readily indicating that such polarisation is something of a modern assumption.¹⁸ Moreover it is now less obvious why

such changes should be signposted as somehow permanent and a dismal milestone on a unilinear downward spiral from belief to secularity.¹⁹ This is before we consider, for instance, the startled disappointment of past commentators such as Erasmus, who observed those following specific occupations, or having particular preoccupations, praying to specific saints. What contemporaries dismissed as instrumentality looks to us like the considered and rational 'use' of religion.²⁰

Simon Green's recent re-creation of the secularisation thesis argues that only 'a few eccentrics', fail to acknowledge the 'underlying dynamic' of religion fading from the West. But Green also, however, notes that the throwing of the religious baby out with the secularisation bathwater creates, by default, the marginalisation of religion. Significantly Green seeks to locate religion back as a driver of social and cultural change to produce what he terms 'a social history of religion in Britain'. Such a reorientation is necessary because Green also notes an 'intellectual fragmentation and descriptive deficiency', which has potentially led to the divorce of 'the social history of religion from ecclesiastical and even intellectual historiography'.²¹ The barriers to the integration of religion and social history are primarily constructed by a rarefied view of religion concerning 'highbrow debates concerning the proper content of justifiable fate' and the separate division of "'popular" religious culture'. In many respects it is worth considering how far the judgments inherent in secularisation theory narratives inherit this bias.²² Within this paradigm such scrutiny involves unpicking changing practice to represent it either as a dilution of a previously higher form of the religious/sacred, or equally as a re-affirmation of an idealised past.

What Green calls the anti-secularisation thesis is still substantially criticised for the apparently overwhelming evidence in the opposing direction. Likewise 'It presumes too much because its blanket repudiation even of the possibility of a historical process of secularisation effectively denies most of the putative content of religious history *tout court*'.²³ Criticisms of this anti-secularisation thesis suggest its advocates assume a constant 'religious economy' in which institutions and affinities are actively replaced by new forms to preserve this economy's apparent 'size'. This, as critics of anti-secularisation point out, would make it different to any other economy we are likely to analyse.²⁴ However, it remains interesting that anti-secularisation, as a theory, finds it essential in some measure to posit a numerically equal replacement of lost religiosity. Pursuing a numerical counter argument again demonstrates the sheer pervasiveness of the secularisation thesis and its analytical approaches. The urge to count trumps the need to research the changing nature of religiosity, which should, at the very least, remove the confidence from secularisation theory's assertion that it tells the whole unequivocal story. Thus it is not anti-secularisation theory that ignores the 'putative content of religious history' but actually secularisation theory itself.

Secularisation theory's ambition and its impact upon religious history is perhaps exemplified in Simon Green's restatement of the central thrust of its explanation.

Secularisation, according to this understanding, meant the systematic and inexorable decline of the social significance of religion: systematic, because religious beliefs and religious practice no longer possessed the capacity significantly to affect either the efficient organisation or the intellectual apprehension of society: inexorable, because the process provided for no element of, indeed admitted of, no opportunity for, its substantive reversal.²⁵

Versions of secularisation theory also artificially impose a destination upon religious history. The secular becomes an end time or 'death of the sacred' (a formulation scarcely without its own problems) with a finality that casts an unwarranted shadow upon all that comes before it. Forms of religious revival are either dismissed, labelled as postmodern (or otherwise post-something) legacies are liable to be described as another species of false consciousness. Interestingly secularisation theory can no longer describe developments and changes in the nature, character and organisation of the secular itself. It is as though history itself has come to some form of Fukuyamian end time in which everyone must always have secretly wanted to live in a morally and socially relaxed secular society – defining those at odds with this vision as the ultimate species of discontented. This might be seen by some as postmodernity's highpoint describing the achievement of the secular as the pinnacle of free and informed choice – a life beyond metanarratives of piety, confessionalisation and perhaps of belief itself.²⁶

Secularisation theory's claim to offer overarching explanations evoked broad and homogenising processes, yet historians examining the interplay of beliefs and motivations have increasingly exposed the poverty of such assumptions. Thus our historical knowledge about religious belief and practice, of legal jurisdiction, of power and of cultural changes with a religious dimension are increasingly at odds with conventional secularisation theory. This is a particularly strong argument for writing religiously informed history without becoming embroiled directly with a further critique of secularisation theory 'head on'.²⁷ Writing from within the secularisation debate Callum Brown has suggested that it has 'destroyed the conceptual validity of religious history'.²⁸

Thus the reshaping of religious history should now commence. Increasingly scholars who study the religiosity of individuals and groups conclude that we should cease empirically assessing the supposed 'viability', 'orthodoxy' and 'purity' of such beliefs. Such insights are altering the definition of religion in fruitful ways and have widened the places we are persuaded to look for it and appreciate its relevance. A sorely needed focus upon the laity and

non-institutionalised religion effectively alters the landscape and viewpoint of the observer. We should be allowed to ask forcefully whether an historically artificial, remote, high attendance, 'Church and Chapel' climate for religion makes it constitute, by definition, a more 'religious' society than the possible alternatives. Likewise does it remain acceptable to undervalue the inchoate and unorthodox practices of those whose religion does not conform to crude attendance models?

II Reasons for leaving secularisation theory behind

Before we embark upon the exploration of the alternatives it is worth thinking further about the longevity and ambition of this secularisation theory metanarrative and why seeking to unravel its supremacy is especially valuable. Simon Green argued that secularisation at a particular moment explained much to religious historians.²⁹ It also provided credible analytical rationalisations for the retreat of religion from the state, for the collapse of institutionally linked religious adherence, as well as the related phenomena of ecumenism and accommodations with the secular world.³⁰ The authority of this theory and its implications was noticed by Hugh McLeod, who in 2000 gave a formidable description of its footprint across not simply religious history but the social history of the nineteenth century:

Clearly the dominant version of the story at present is that which sees the central theme as secularisation. Crucially important here has been the fact that since the 1960s the churches in most parts of Western Europe have suffered a severe decline. Anyone writing in Western Europe during the last thirty years or so on modern religious history has inevitably been keenly aware of this fact, and the temptation has been strong to study the nineteenth century mainly in order to trace the origins of this decline.³¹

Latterly Steve Bruce has restated the theory's teleological ambition with the recent statement that 'the secularization paradigm provides an overarching sociological explanation of the history of religion since the Middle Ages'.³² Importantly religious history, under the shadow of secularisation as theory and observation, is not simply shaped in a predetermined historical direction but also conducts a strange series of predictable and morbid dialogues about its own eclipse. This is because the theory emerged as a species of triumphalism, and this should remind us this was a work of utopian aspiration as much as one offering empirical analysis.

Delving deeper we find that other aspects of secularisation theory's assumptions produce unhelpful confusion. Steve Bruce's representative restatement of the secularisation thesis unwittingly highlighted many of the shortcomings of this interpretation.³³ Firstly secularisation, as stated in the Bruce volume and earlier works, focuses crudely upon the idea of belief

actively embraced (and, incidentally, actively avoided), simultaneously by individuals, institutions and whole societies. Thus the decline inherent in secularisation theory continually investigates the fluctuating numerical status of such belief alongside assessments of its quantity, quality and supposed level of commitment.³⁴ This is an unhelpful form of sociologically driven ideal type, which, to historians of many other belief systems, looks scarcely admissible. Cultural and micro-historical investigations have elsewhere revealed belief to be a complex interplay between social, cultural and psychological factors, which generally undermines attempts to categorise it in such empirically systematic ways. Although Bruce accepts diverse 'contemporary spirituality exists', he is profoundly sceptical of its numerical importance and asserts that the individualisation it exhibits actually supports the secularisation thesis. However, this is because he remains wedded to an ideal type vision of institutionalised Christianity as the only touchstone of religiosity.³⁵

Secularisation theory also insists that it alone constitutes the solitary explanatory framework within which to embrace the long-term history of religion – arguably its greatest failing of all! This has forced historians to articulate their positive or negative views of the theory and to thereafter live with some uncomfortable problems associated with these respective positions.³⁶ Those who reject the precise chronology and timing of the theory are simply bounced into postponing its inevitable impact. However, those who show suspicion of the crudeness of empirical decline risk being readily and unfairly dismissed as ungrounded collectors of narratives and discourse. Secularisation theory frequently sees its triumph linked to the historical process of rationalisation, but the perceived implications of this for religious responses are rather more ambivalent. The rationalist mission sought to provide answers for the previously unknowable through scientific and technological developments, which made society both comfortable while providing new diversions for it. However, this same process also produced new media of communication and expression, which stimulated fear and concern about moral collapse. This has regularly produced historical episodes in which governments, private organisations and individuals have reaffirmed forms of religious belief in the face of the moral abyss.³⁷

Shifting focus should create a history that is less interested in precisely what people believed and far more interested in what they did with their beliefs; stretching our definition of religion to embrace more varied and articulated practices, and the examination of places where religion enters and leaves public and private spaces. It also opens the door for us to study the responses of believers mediating their beliefs with modernity and a desire for the prosperity and future of these. Sarah Williams' conclusions were some of the first to lead us away from the empirical measurement of orthodox religious commitment to embrace new insights.³⁸ Conventionally based secularisation theory-style histories of church attendance and religiosity