

**‘Christianity without the mumbo-jumbo: the making of a secular outlook in  
modern Britain’\***

Dominic Erdozain, Lecturer in the History of Christianity, King's College London  
dominic.erdozain@kcl.ac.uk

It is a pleasure to speak on a topic of more than academic interest. There was a form of gallows humour among the history PhD students when I was here, grimly lamenting the irrelevance of our researches. Once the thesis is submitted, it was said, it will be good for dinner party conversation and no more. Six years on, I am still waiting for that dinner party.

Silence, or the fact that people don't want to talk about religion, can be an eloquent historical witness, however, and I probably have Richard Dawkins to thank for rescuing me from a predicament identified by the sociologist, David Martin, in the 1970s. Then, he felt, the scholar of religion was coming to be regarded as 'an academic deviant living by a non-existent subject.'<sup>1</sup> Hugh McLeod recalls attending a conference in 1975 at which a sociologist stated that many of his colleagues regarded religion as something 'unclean' – to study let alone to believe.<sup>2</sup> My experience has been more prosaic. By the time I studied for my PhD, the days of open contempt were over and the deeper problem of polite non-interest had set in. I recall giving a paper on religion and leisure to the prestigious social history conference in Belfast in 2001. The panel of speakers outnumbered the audience three-to-two.

It is in the muting of Christian voice, rather than its angry denunciation in the new atheism, however, that we find clues to the wider condition of secularity, which is what I want to discuss. I hope that my account can help to identify some of the different strands of this modern condition and perhaps to isolate the aggressive secularism that claims to stand at its head. The self-image of secularism as the child of scientific disenchantment, standing at the apex of history, is almost entirely mythical. The ferocity of Terry Eagleton's review of *The God Delusion* in the *London Review of Books* seemed to derive from this arrogant sense of historical entitlement – the kind of coercive thinking that true history has shown to be dangerous to say the least. 'Dawkins', Eagleton writes,

---

\* Paper delivered at Tyndale House, Cambridge, 24 April 2009, as part of a day conference on 'Responding to Secularism: Christian Witness in a Dogmatic Public Culture', co-sponsored by the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics and the Gospel and Our Culture Network.

<sup>1</sup> *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (London, 2005), 18.

<sup>2</sup> *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007), 116.

'turns out to be an old-fashioned Hegelian when it comes to global politics, believing in a zeitgeist (his word) involving ever increasing progress, with just the occasional 'reversal''. "Local and temporary setbacks", like the Bush administration, are mere 'aberrations', 'the progressive trend is unmistakable and it will continue', he claims.<sup>3</sup> To call someone a 'Hegelian' may strike you as a weak riposte to someone who has been ruthless in applying the language of scientific pathology to religious belief. But there is a powerful argument here, and one that applies far beyond the rhetoric of the new atheists. History is not a morality play in which truth triumphs over superstition; Christianity was no straightforward victim of 'enlightenment'. Sometime in the nineteenth century, as Owen Chadwick has demonstrated, there was a 'secularization of the European mind', but it had little to do with science and much less to do with any hidden laws of history.

It has become a cliché, among Christian and secular commentators, to quote the Nietzschean slogan, 'God is dead', but the phrase could hardly be less descriptive of the British experience – as Nietzsche well knew. Citing the determination of 'little moralistic females' like George Eliot to 'cling to Christian morality' after they had lost their Christian faith, Nietzsche was prepared to speak of an 'English consistency': 'In England', he complained, 'one must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is. That is the penance they pay there.'<sup>4</sup> Even for out-and-out intellectuals like Eliot, the loss of faith encompassed a pained attempt to re-house Christian instincts, and for those who never experienced anything like a crisis of faith, the process was more fluid still. The heart of it was the attempt to preserve Christian standards without actively pursuing God. The classic statement came in an interview with Clement Attlee shortly before his death in 1967. Asked if he believed in Christianity, he replied that he believed 'in the ethics of Christianity. Can't believe in the mumbo-jumbo' – that is, the theology. 'Is there an after-life, do you think?', his biographer pressed: 'Possibly'.<sup>5</sup> It is this vague disregard for theology, combined with the confidence that Christian ethics can be pursued on their own terms, that really distils the British retreat from Christian orthodoxy.

---

3 'Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching', Review, *The God Delusion*, by Richard Dawkins, *London Review of Books*, 19 October 2006. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/eagl01.html>

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols* (1888), quoted in Himmelfarb, *The Spirit of the Age* (New Haven, Conn. 2007), 17.

5 'MODERN BRITAIN'S CHIEF ARCHITECT', Review, Kenneth Harris, ATTLEE, *New York Times*, August 28, 1983.

So foreign, however, are these facts from common perceptions of secularisation, I will start by expanding my opening remarks about religion and the imagined 'flow' of history. Richard Dawkins' rather unscientific notion of a 'zeitgeist', an essential spirit of modernity, is unfashionable but not uncommon. Few historians, sociologists or philosophers would speak in such generalities. And while we tread on thin ice in introducing the notion of 'post-secularity', the very existence of the term suggests that older teleologies of secularism have had their day. We may not live in a 'post-secular' society, but intellectual culture dismisses religion with less certainty than it did twenty years ago. The venom of the new atheism is partly the frustration of a self-appointed vanguard that has become detached from its would-be troops. There is a similar frustration in Karen Armstrong's complaint that, 'We have not yet learned to be entirely secular and continue to reproduce Christian patterns of thought and behaviour in secular ways.'<sup>6</sup> My point is that history, properly understood, provides no model or mandate for such a withering of Christian instincts. It is those who demand it, not the silent majority who continue to baptise their children in churches they never attend, that represent the historical exception. The authors of *Redefining Christian Britain* go too far in claiming the 70% Church of England figure from the 2001 census as evidence of Christian continuity, but the figure clearly confuses some of the myths of clinical secularisation.<sup>7</sup> A more scholarly example is perhaps *The Sun's* invocation of national prayer to heal David Beckham's metatarsal bone in May 2002. Facetious, this may have been, but as Rowan Williams will attest, there are visceral and vicarious religious instincts of which classical secularisation narratives make little sense. I will briefly summarise the state of academic reflection on these issues, before focussing on the loss of faith among the Victorian intellectual elite, including some of the architects of the welfare state. My own work is on secularisation at the less rarefied level of practical ministry but I am prepared to accept that intellectuals exist and, in these days of 'history from below', they deserve more attention than they receive.

It *used* to be assumed that modernity is intrinsically hostile to faith. The Enlightenment, characterised by Kant as man's release from 'self-incurred immaturity', was often an explicit assault on those 'Dogmas and formulas' that formed 'the ball and chain of his permanent immaturity'.<sup>8</sup> One theme was denial of the supernatural; another, characterised by Kant himself, was displacement: God pushed upstairs into 'noumenal'

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Gospel According to Woman* (London, 1986), ix.

<sup>7</sup> Garnett, J., Grimley, M., Harris, A., Whyte, W., and Williams, S., eds, *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives* (London, 2007), 1.

<sup>8</sup> 'What is Enlightenment?' (1784), quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, 1988), 366-7

abstraction, leaving the dignity of the rational agent to operate unencumbered. Either way, human autonomy was elevated as never before, and autonomy would be the death of spirituality. This was the theory. In the nineteenth century, the great fathers of modern sociology predicted that the process would spread spontaneously to the masses. Marx assumed that true thinkers had been secularised by reason in the eighteenth century, and the masses would experience it by industrialism in the nineteenth. The 'dull compulsion of economic relations', as he put it, would speak more loudly than any philosopher of the cold mechanics of the cosmos. Machines would grind out the truth about the human condition. 'Religion', he wrote in 1843, 'is ... the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has ... not yet won through to himself' – a false consciousness that would wither under the strong glare of economics.<sup>9</sup> Modernity was conceived as a collective growing up, the casting off of childish things. Max Weber was less triumphalistic, and his concept of 'disenchantment' carried a sense of pathos as well as realism, but he was no less certain of the outcome. Modernity, for Weber, was a child of religious discipline – the Protestant 'rage for order'. It had produced the rationalized, bureaucratized world that he famously termed 'the iron cage'. It had no room for its Maker, and no window to heaven. Allied to Durkheim's notion of 'differentiation' – the process of specialization that leaves fewer and fewer spheres under religious influence – this powerful trajectory has dominated social theory and, as John Milbank has shown, a great deal of modern theology.<sup>10</sup> Until recently.

Long before the fall of the Iron Curtain, the idea that history moves in one direction towards a single outcome was under serious assault. One of the most powerful attacks came in Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957). Popper, a logical positivist philosopher was in a good position to assail the hubris of the social sciences with their doctrines of determinism and their habit of underwriting political oppression. Human beings, said this philosopher of science, are not atoms or individual cells, and attempts to predict their behaviour, from Hegel to Lenin, have repeatedly failed, falling back on violence to supply the missing links in their chains. Scientific theories turn history into an essay in progress, legitimising the suffering of those who are deemed to be on the wrong side of it. The critical incident for Popper was seeing Communist friends of his shot dead by police in Austria in 1918. When he told the leaders of the Communist Party about this, they responded by stating that this loss of life was necessary in working

---

9 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy', Quoted in Denis Janz, *World Christianity and Marxism*, (New York, 1998), 11.

<sup>10</sup> *Theology and Social Theory, Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford, 1990)

towards the inevitable workers' revolution. The event forced him to think differently about Communism and then the whole notion of historical determinism. This, and Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), provides a helpful philosophical critique of the dogmatism that so easily attaches itself to social theory.

When I studied history as an undergraduate in the 1990s, it was taken for granted that historicism was dead, and history had killed it. Historicism is the notion that human decisions, culture and events are always created by wider and more powerful currents, such as economics. 'Men make history, but not in conditions of their own making'. By contrast, the holy grail of historical scholarship was to discover 'agency' – the true springs of social and cultural change. Intriguingly, however, religion was still trapped in the historicist net, cast as cultural product rather than active player. E.P. Thompson, the historian who almost defined true history as rescuing ordinary people from 'the enormous condescension of posterity' was brutal in his treatment of Methodism as a merely temporary psychosis – a distasteful imposition on the human spirit.<sup>11</sup> Only gradually, by a humble trickle of local studies, did the history of religion start to share in the bonfire of positivist vanities.

Stephen Yeo excoriated the arrogance of secularisation theory, which seemed as distant from human decision-making as the weather, and a school of self-styled revisionists undermined the long-standing view of modern history as a slow and steady disenchantment. The nineteenth-century cities were more hospitable to faith than eighteenth-century villages;<sup>12</sup> the 'warfare' of science and religion was a virtual fabrication; and, far from a charter of unbelief, the Enlightenment furnished Christians like John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Chalmers with the very language of 'experimental religion'.<sup>13</sup> The most interesting text was Boyd Hilton's *The Age of Atonement* (1988), subtitled 'the influence of Evangelicalism on social and economic thought, 1785-1865'. It shatters the idea that the 'inward turn' of the Enlightenment was intrinsically hostile to faith. An entire public philosophy, dominant from the French Revolution to the 1850s, was built upon a fusion of evangelical and Enlightenment epistemology. Thomas Chalmers, and the Scottish 'common sense' school, were the key

---

<sup>11</sup> *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1980), 12, 43, 404.

<sup>12</sup> Callum Brown, 'Did urbanization secularize Britain?' *Urban History Yearbook* (1988), 1-14.

<sup>13</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), chapter 2.

players. Christianity was thus integral to the culture of modernity, and no mere 'midwife' to a secular present, as had been said.<sup>14</sup>

By the later 1990s, then, it was said with some glee that 'religion ... has returned to the agenda'.<sup>15</sup> Secularisation gave way to de-secularisation and the British revisionism that had started by postdating the religious crisis to the mid-twentieth century came, in some cases, to reject the notion of decline altogether. Late-modern religion is implicit, non-institutional, non-creedal, but it is still religion, it is argued. Thus emerged a new paradigm of rediscovery and reinvention, moralised as scholarly 'optimism', but often elusive in terms of content. The moral argument that secularisation theory tramples all over the complexity of the past wears thin when the rescuers of religion ignore the categories that define it. The problem of secularisation is solved by redefining religion in non-supernaturalist terms and, suddenly, it is everywhere. This is the weakness of Callum Brown's recent work, stretching the religious revival to the 1960s, far beyond the era of conversionism, activism and regular worship.<sup>16</sup> The real roots of decline are to be found much earlier.

The awkward fact for the new, post-secularisation literature is that Britain is not America. The tones of liberation from an imagined problem are misplaced. 'Committed secularism remains', as Grace Davie notes, 'the creed of a relatively small minority',<sup>17</sup> but this is largely because here, unlike America, there is little by way of a theocratic target for such a thing. *Secularism* is not widespread and pronounced because a more diffuse *secularity* has already done its work, neutralising the Christian voice in the public square by quietly assuming its mantle. This distinctly British mentality emerged as a moral judgement on Christian doctrine, and its chief weapon was a kind of secularised *agape*: a confident sense that the moral heights of the Christian tradition could be best fulfilled without the barbarities of atonement theology. The reason concepts like Brown's 'discursive Christianity' and Davie's 'believing without belonging' are such weak rejoinders to the charge of secularisation is that they substantiate it. As Charles Taylor argues in *Sources of the Self*, modern moral consciousness does not represent a clean break with the Christian past so much as the 'mutation' of its 'master ideas' beyond their 'theistic origins.' 'Secularization', he writes, 'doesn't just arise because people get a lot

---

<sup>14</sup> For this view, see Harold Perkin, *The origins of modern English society 1780-1880* (1969), 196ff.

<sup>15</sup> J. C. D. Clark, *English society, 1660-1832: religion, ideology and politics during the ancien regime* (1985: 2000 edn.), 28.

<sup>16</sup> *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (London, 2001)

<sup>17</sup> *Religion in Britain Since 1945*, 69-70.

more educated, and science progresses. This has some effect, but it isn't decisive. What matters is that masses of people can sense moral sources of a quite different kind, ones that don't necessarily suppose a God.<sup>18</sup> Chief among them is the moral self. The first stage is a kind of sub-Christian Stoicism, 'sidelining' rather than denying supernatural grace; the second is the Romantic or Epicurean revolt from this virtuous ethic in the late twentieth century. The real break from orthodoxy, however, is the slide into non-theistic virtue. Just as Kantian ethics, rooted in German Pietism, retained what von Balthasar termed a 'Christian sensorium, which, however concealed, still has knowledge of the Cross',<sup>19</sup> the British revolt from orthodoxy bears the stamp of the evangelicalism from which it emerged: an intense moral seriousness, a consciousness of sin, an aching for atonement. 'The paradox', Taylor writes of American evangelicals who quietly rejected the Bible in their quest to abolish slavery, 'is that a religious impulse and vision may sometimes drive people out of religious belief'.<sup>20</sup>

This has been the British experience. It is significant that the neologism 'agnosticism' was coined by Darwin's so-called 'bulldog', T.H. Huxley, in 1869, as a moderate alternative to 'atheism'. 'Agnostic' implied detachment rather than hostility and his championing of the sciences were initially free of anti-Christian polemic. 'The sciences', he advised an audience at the Young Men's Christian Association, are 'neither Christian, nor Unchristian, but are Extra-christian'. They certainly ought to be 'unsectarian', he said. In 1868, F. D. Maurice's Christian socialists appointed Huxley principal of a new south London working men's college on the Blackfriars Road, a post he held until 1880. Science, it is true, was his diet; and here was a man who could not accept miracle; yet his moral zeal earned him the nickname 'Pope Huxley'. Later, his relations with theology turned sour and he 'began', as his biographer puts it, 'the mythologizing of the 1860 encounter with Wilberforce.' Huxley, of all people, demonstrates that the binary 'warfare' between science and religion never was: it had to be invented.<sup>21</sup> Another case is Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-discoverer of natural selection, who 'publicly embraced spiritualism' in 1866. His defences of spiritualism became 'his most reprinted works'.<sup>22</sup>

---

18 *Sources*, 313.

19 *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics*, v, *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern World* (Edinburgh, 1991), 513.

20 *Sources*, 400.

21 Adrian Desmond, 'Huxley, Thomas Henry (1825–1895)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, May 2007 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14320, accessed 21 April 2009]

22 Charles H. Smith, 'Wallace, Alfred Russel (1823–1913)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36700, accessed 22 April 2009]

Crude expressions of materialism, such as Feuerbach's, 'Man is what he eats', or the later claim that, 'The death of the animal is like the death of the motorcar', were both rare and unproductive of unbelief. As Chadwick commented, 'No doctrines whatever would persuade ordinary people that the death of an animal was like the death of a motor car.'<sup>23</sup> Faced with a truly disenchanted universe, Victorian intellectuals groped for the metaphysical like frightened children. This is the point of Tim Larsen's recent book, *Crisis of Doubt* (2006), and we even find the phenomenon in John Stuart Mill. The *enfant terrible* of philosophic radicalism of the 1840s was, by 1870, writing sympathetically of 'Theism', and defining his task as 'not to subvert Christian belief but to strengthen it, by offering the possibility of an alliance with "good ethics and good metaphysics"'.<sup>24</sup> This was a long way from the stark utilitarianism of his youth, and a long way from the mythology of an unstoppable 'march of intellect', pounding religion into the dust.

It is true that principled secularism did surface in this period, through the National Secular Society, from 1866, and the campaign of its president, Charles Bradlaugh, to secure admission to parliament as an atheist in the 1880s. Yet even here, in the tiny epicentre of secularist ideology,<sup>25</sup> there was caution, restraint and the trademark Victorian quality of trying to out-Christian the Christians. 'Secularism' was chosen as a more neutral alternative to 'Infidelity' and the ethos of the movement bordered on the monastic. The *Westminster Review* termed it a new, 'physical Puritanism', and Brian Harrison has written of the almost sacramental role of teetotalism for its leaders. Bradlaugh, he notes, learnt his secularism in a temperance hall, and the emerging model of holy living bore the stamp of ascetic Nonconformity.<sup>26</sup> Many secularists, Chadwick observes, were 'not very secular, in the original sectarian sense': meetings in 1858 revolved around issues like Sunday recreation rights and equality for Jews.<sup>27</sup> Their animus was not against religion in the general but an evangelical form that had become relentless in pursuit of its moral goals, a pure Sabbath in particular. Susan Budd's research into the motives of 150 Victorian freethinkers found that ideas from geology,

---

<sup>23</sup> *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975), 180.

<sup>24</sup> Jose Harris, 'Mill, John Stuart (1806–1873)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Oct 2008

[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/18711>, accessed 20 April 2009]

<sup>25</sup> Membership peaked at around 60,000 in 1883. Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914* (London, 2000), 164.

<sup>26</sup> *Drink and the Victorians: the Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872* (London, 1971), 184.

<sup>27</sup> *Secularization of the European Mind*, 91.

evolution, and scientific historiography were, on the available evidence, influential in only three cases of loss of religious faith.<sup>28</sup>

Even for someone like John Ruskin, who wrote explicitly of his faith, 'being beaten into mere gold leaf' by the 'dreadful hammers' of 'the geologists', made his break from orthodoxy after hearing a particularly uncompromising rendering of predestinarian theology in Turin in 1862.<sup>29</sup> His 'unconversion' was an unusually sudden instance of that 'sensed incongruity' between a 'hopeful' nineteenth-century 'meliorism' and 'the doctrinal legacy of the Christian tradition' by which H.R. Murphy defined the crisis of faith.<sup>30</sup> Yet we can be more specific: unconversion was typically a reaction to *evangelical* accounts of Christian doctrine and its representatives, according to Michael Bartholomew, 'were typically people who had been reared in evangelical households'. A paradox emerged, whereby 'the radical criticism of Christianity seems to have been a direct product of Christian values'.<sup>31</sup>

The problem, in short, was the conscience, not the cosmos. The God who was notionally destroyed by the geologists' hammers and Darwin's finches was, it has been said, an eighteenth-century invention: William Paley's Indefatigable Tinkerer, a largely distant Deity who specialised in feats of invention. This was not the God that people feared. Much as Paley remained central to the university curriculum until 1870, his rather glib 'evidences' were decisively eclipsed in the age of Chalmers and Wilberforce – both of whom disdained his naïve, Panglossian optimism. The bombshell was Malthus' *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), a vision of struggle and disorder that re-wrote all natural theology. Chalmers was deeply influenced and built a new apologetic around the moral law within. He described his own conversion as a journey 'from the felt experience of a judge within the breast to the inference of a Judge above and over us, who planted it there', thus evangelicising the potentially autonomous 'moral sense' of the Scottish Enlightenment.<sup>32</sup> 'The conscience', said Chalmers, 'places us on firmer vantage ground for the establishment of a natural theology' than the cosmic optimism that blushed in the face of trial and suffering. He was making almost exactly Voltaire's

---

28 S. Budd, 'The Loss of Faith: Reasons for Unbelief among Members of the Secular Movement in England, 1850-1950', *Past & Present* 36 (1967), 106-25.

29 Quoted in Edward Alexander, *Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and the modern temper* (Columbus, Ohio, 1973), 71.

30 'The Ethical Revolt against Christian Orthodoxy in Early Victorian England', *American Historical Review*, July 1955, 801.

31 Michael Bartholomew, "The Moral Critique of Christian Orthodoxy" in Gerald Parsons (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain: Volume II Controversies*, 167.

<sup>32</sup> Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (Oxford, 1988), 176-9, 183.

complaint of *Candide* (1759), but from an evangelical perspective. As Boyd Hilton has shown, it was this sin-centred philosophy that eclipsed 'the eighteenth-century anodyne' in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The Victorian religious boom was no last hurrah of a state-imposed Christendom, it was the relatively new product of the so-called 'salvation economy'. Its crisis was when conscience, the psychological foundation, started to work free from creed.

The best account is perhaps Josef Altholz's article, 'The Warfare of Conscience with Theology', where the conflict is presented 'not as a struggle of faith against its external enemies, but as a crisis within religion itself', leading to the startling speculation that: 'Perhaps the Victorian religious revival had made men too moral to be orthodox, too humanitarian to be Christian.'<sup>33</sup> Altholz does not disregard the influence of science and biblical criticism, but he regards them as essentially 'stimuli and rationales for minds already unsettled and alienated on ... moral grounds.' The 'ethical challenge preceded and transcended the scientific challenge', he insists. Even those who had the strongest credentials for a purely intellectual rejection of Christianity articulated their revolt in such terms. He quotes John Stuart Mill's statement that, 'I will call no being good, who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures, and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.'<sup>34</sup> To this one could add Darwin's famous statement from his *Autobiography*. Having offered a rather watery account of 'disbelief' creeping over him 'at a very slow rate', he landed what for many of his contemporaries was the telling blow: 'I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine.'<sup>35</sup>

George Eliot was a more difficult case. Here we do see an intellectual subjecting a highly personal faith to intense scrutiny. Eliot's piety as a young woman was said to be 'remarkable even in an age of pious evangelicalism.' As she wrote to a friend, aged twenty: 'How beautiful is the 63d Psalm. "Because Thy loving kindness is better than life my lips shall praise thee. Thus will I bless thee while I live."' Eliot, or Marian Evans to use her real name, knew Christianity from the inside. The conventional view is that she became interested in historical accounts of the Bible, translated one of the first of the

---

<sup>33</sup> 'The Warfare of Conscience with Theology', *Religion in Victorian Britain, IV, Interpretations* ed. G. Parsons and J. Moore (Manchester, 1988), 151, 158.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 157.

<sup>35</sup> *Autobiography* (1887), 87.

German 'demystifying' texts, Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1835-6), and emerged as a convinced humanist.

This is partly true, but her conviction remained that Christianity was based on 'mingled truth and fiction', and it was the attempt to extract the truth that dominated her vision.<sup>36</sup> And rather than a dry, cognitive exchange between her mind and the sources, the whole process was conditioned by first-hand experience of some of the cruder tenets of evangelicalism. Her anonymous articles in the *Westminster Review* illustrate profoundly that the crisis of faith was not a scientific gun held to the believing head, but a beauty contest in which creedal Christianity was losing to a more intuitive sense of virtue. The force of her devastating article on the popular preacher, Dr. Cumming, in 1854 was contemporary *abuse* of revelation rather than revelation per se. The prose suggests 'someone with an unusually personal engagement with the issues'.<sup>37</sup> The tone is of someone who wants to believe but is driven to distraction by a world in which 'platitudes [are] accepted as wisdom, bigoted narrowness as holy zeal'; where preachers are 'less expansive on the blessedness of faith than on the accursedness of infidelity.' The evangelical pulpit, she claimed, had become the home of 'gratuitous assertions', 'invented' illustrations, a 'prodigality of misstatement' and the routine misrepresentation of its critics. She is as incensed by the slandering of 'Romanists' and 'Puseyites' as the 'ready repl[ies]' for 'Infidels': replies that do not even consider the possibility that scepticism could be a position held honestly. All this is illustrated with lavish quotation from Cumming's published works. It rings true.

The theme is not that 'the criticism and philosophy of the nineteenth century' has disproved Christianity, but that leading Christians, in so scorning their enemies, have made it impossible for lovers of truth to respect them. And moving from truth to charity, Eliot's concluding section is a sustained exposure of the contrast between the 'moral effect' of Cumming's 'sermons' and what she regards as a true sense of love. 'The love thus taught,' she claims, 'is the love of the clan.' It is artificial and confined; real love can never be so domesticated by creed or party or institution. Finally, Eliot moves from particular provocations to the doctrines that appear to underwrite this 'perverted morality.' Again, however, her attack is on the theology of fallenness not supernatural belief as such. She urges 'the contemplation of Jesus as "God manifest in the flesh"' as the

---

36 Rosemary Ashton, 'Evans, Marian [George Eliot] (1819-1880)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, May 2008

[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6794>, accessed 22 April 2009]

37 *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (New Haven, Conn., 2009), 2.

higher road to human sympathy. Creeds are fine, so long as they do not 'counteract' the moral aspiration of 'human nature'.<sup>38</sup> This was the heart of the so-called 'crisis of faith', which was really a crisis of conscience. Reconstruction, not rejection, was the theme.

How did the pained rebellions of the mid-Victorian elite evolve into the default secularity of the early twentieth-century elite? Moral revolt reached a wider circle. It lost the frisson of scandal and the necessity of anonymity; it found a home in politics and social service. Disenchantment of Eliot's kind was, Hempton writes, 'a minority pursuit'. By the 1880s this was no longer the case. We find the beginnings of an *aesthetic* reaction to orthodoxy, epitomised by Edmund Gosse's searing memoir, *Father and Son* (1907), and taken on in the twentieth century by the likes of Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group, D.H. Lawrence, and, finally, the 'dionysian spontaneity' of the 1960s. Yet Stoicism still ruled, especially among the ruling classes. A highly influential novel of 1888, *Robert Elsmere*, contains both themes, each pulling away from the evangelical parent. Catherine Leyburn represents the older Puritanism of charity, evangelism and self-denial; her sister, Rose, a talented violinist, yearns for Bohemian liberation; while the eponymous hero represents the new Puritanism of 'this-worldly' sacrifice. The novel incorporates a strong theme of the era, which is that selfless service, with no cosmic strings attached, represents a higher form of virtue than the calculating instrumentality of Christian 'charity'. This is the start, as Frank Prochaska suggests, of the gradual indictment of private charity as self-congratulating 'do-goodery', and a shift towards the corporate virtue of institutions. The outcome was a mentality that saw 'charity', in the words of Richard Crossman, secretary of state for Health and Social Security in 1968, as 'an odious expression of social oligarchy and churchy bourgeois attitudes', or, as Gordon Brown described the charitable sector in *The Times* in 1988, 'a sad and seedy competition for public pity'.<sup>39</sup> Yet, unlikely as it seems, the welfare state had Christian roots. Its architects even conceived their project as the construction of a 'New Jerusalem'. One of the most important was Beatrice Webb.

Webb was a Fabian socialist whose writings helped negotiate the early-twentieth-century shift from an explicitly Christian Liberalism to an implicitly Christian collectivism. She wrote admiringly of the evangelical piety of her Lancastrian cousins, but as a Comtean Positivist, she believed that such comforts were 'destined to pass away'. Like Eliot, she redirected her spiritual instincts. Speaking for herself and her

---

<sup>38</sup> 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming', *Westminster Review*, 64 (October, 1855), 436-62.

<sup>39</sup> *Christianity and Social Service in Britain, The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford, 2006), 152, 165.

milieu, she summarised the political vision as springing from ‘the transference of the emotion of self-sacrificing service from God to man.’<sup>40</sup> ‘Why this demand for State intervention from a generation reared amidst rapidly rising riches and disciplined in the school of philosophic radicalism and orthodox political economy?’ she reflected in 1926. The answer was to be discovered in ‘a new consciousness of sin among men of intellect and men of property’ – ‘a growing uneasiness, amounting to conviction, that the industrial organization, which had yielded rent, interest and profits on a stupendous scale, had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for a majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain.’<sup>41</sup> Churches, those bitter fruits ‘of middle-class soil’, were thus judged by this ‘Christian’ standard. The real arena of salvation was politics. Similarly, the ‘ethical socialism’ of Keir Hardie, the first leader of the parliamentary Labour Party, was all about exposing the ‘Mammon worship’ of organised religion and manifesting the true religion of Labour.

Hardie was at the head of a distinguished tradition of Labour leaders who learnt their socialism in the New Testament, and demonstrated it with their disdain for the dialectics of Continental Marxism: figures such as Arthur Henderson, Philip Snowden and George Lansbury, as well as Attlee who imbibed a vague Christian socialism working in an East End settlement. Combined with the solid, undemonstrative Anglicanism of the three-time Conservative Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, such men ensured that, ‘The rhetoric of [inter-war] politics still had a strong flavour of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer’.<sup>42</sup>

There is grist, here, to the revisionist mill, and one could latch onto statements from both Blair and Brown that suggest survival. However Clarke is right to speak of ‘rhetoric’ and the ‘residue’ of the age of Gladstone rather than a profound continuity.<sup>43</sup> The Christian voice was rarely free in this era, as Cosmo Lang, Archbishop of York, lamented bitterly having ventured some disastrous remarks about Christianity transcending national divisions, including those between Britain and Germany. His hair turned prematurely grey as he waded through the letters of reproach. Christianity within the limits of British decency alone, was the unhappy principle. And looking at the recent revival of Christian rhetoric, we can see that the nineteenth-century model of judging Christian orthodoxy with Christian benevolence lives on. Gordon Brown’s Labour Party

---

<sup>40</sup> *My Apprenticeship*, vol. 1, (London, 1926), 153.

<sup>41</sup> *My Apprenticeship*, vol. 1, 203-6.

<sup>42</sup> *Hope and Glory, Britain 1900-2000* (London, 2004), 159-60.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

conference speech of 2007 is suggestive: 'We all remember that biblical saying: "suffer the little children to come unto me." No Bible I have ever read says: "bring just some of the children."' 'I don't recall all the sermons my father preached Sunday after Sunday', he continued, but he could recall the gist of them: 'we must be givers as well as getters.'<sup>44</sup> Christianity without the mumbo-jumbo.

If public doctrine was thus characterised by what Taylor terms, 'an unacknowledged Christian ontology', maintaining stern values 'without their Christian names',<sup>45</sup> the wider twentieth-century theme was a relaxing of Victorian rigour. Only occasionally did this spill over into hedonistic revolt. Bertrand Russell's quip that the Ten Commandments looked increasingly like 'an examination paper' from which 'not more than six [questions were] to be attempted' reflects some of the mingled insouciance and seriousness of the era. The First World War dealt a blow to the Victorian synthesis of faith, civilisation and national identity, yet it survived. Again, it was the Christian *association* with the conflict, turning Christ, for one critic, into 'a mere tribal deity', which furnished disillusionment. Unofficial religion gained while official religion stumbled. There was no general retreat from belief. Rather: a loosening of bonds and a widening of options. Comparative religion, and Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922) in particular, did its work, seemingly drowning Christianity in a sea of like 'mythologies', though again the accent is on moral superiority to primitive barbarities: the Aztecs sacrificed a 'human god' at 'Easter or a few days later'. Discover for yourself, then, if Christianity could be unique!<sup>46</sup>

For the social elite, the 1920s were the heyday of a casual and unapologetic agnosticism, still Protestant, but no longer conscious of a need to out-moral the Christians. The Victorians gained their reputation for 'Cant' and serious Christianity gained its near-fatal association with 'the past': a 'foreign country' where things are done 'differently.' In *Brideshead Revisited*, Charles Ryder explained his position with cool detachment:

I had no religion. I was taken to church weekly as a child, and at school attended chapel daily, but, as though in compensation, from the time I went to my public school I was excused church in the holidays. The view implicit in my education was that the basic narrative of Christianity had long been exposed as a myth, and that

---

<sup>44</sup> [http://www.labour.org.uk/conference/brown\\_speech](http://www.labour.org.uk/conference/brown_speech)

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Martin, *On Secularization*, 8, 126.

<sup>46</sup> James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1922), 50.

opinion was now divided as to whether its ethical teaching was of present value, a division in which the main weight went against it.<sup>47</sup>

In London and Oxford, perhaps, but not in society at large before the 1960s. Before that decade we witness a spread to the church-going middle classes of so-called 'diffusive Christianity', traditionally the reserve of working people. The formula was straightforward: attend church for the rites of passage, do unto others as you would have them do to you, and avoid any kind of religious enthusiasm. As Thomas Heyck writes, 'the penumbra of diffusive Christianity grew. This penumbra, not secularism, was the alternative to official religion.'<sup>48</sup> The phenomenon was described by a Mass Observation report in 1947 as 'religion with God relegated to the background, the stress on everyday actions . . . belief in standards of behaviour . . . a philosophy rather than a theology, a coherent way of life rather than a faith.'<sup>49</sup> In 1951 Lavers and Rowntree unearthed the same phenomenon: 'The Christian ethic', they wrote, 'is so deeply impressed upon peoples' minds that, *even for those who would not call themselves Christians*, it is in fact the Christian solution to any practical problem that ... they instinctively recognise as the right one.'<sup>50</sup> Do we side with George Kitson Clark in speaking of a mere 'Stoicism making use of Christian phraseology',<sup>51</sup> or with the 'optimists' who regard this as evidence of robust Christian survival? I go with the former, for as the revisionists admit, this almost instinctive Christian ethic was largely independent of the spirituality that once nourished it. Christianity without the mumbo jumbo had gone national. The reason 'Christian Britain' put up so little fight when its house was besieged in the sixties is that it was already a shadow of its former self. Serious, creedal Christianity had been sub-cultural for some time, although that is a bigger story than the one I have told. This was secularisation. It is only that the ongoing culture of moral seriousness, typified by Leslie Stephen's determination 'to live and die like gentleman',<sup>52</sup> despite having lost his faith, makes it difficult to detect the profundity of the transition.

---

<sup>47</sup> Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited* (1945: 1960 edn.), 98. My thanks to Jeff Cox for this reference.

<sup>48</sup> 'The Decline of Christianity in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 28 (1996), 446.

<sup>49</sup> *Puzzled People. A study in popular attitudes to religion, ethics, progress and politics in a London borough. Prepared for the Ethical Union by Mass Observation*, London 1947, 147.

<sup>50</sup> Seebohm Rowntree and G.R. Lavers, *English Life and Leisure: A Social Study* (London, 1951) 371-2.

<sup>51</sup> *The English Inheritance: an historical essay* (London, 1950), 132-3.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Himmelfarb, *The Spirit of the Age*, 17.

Let me conclude. I hope it is clear that the 'God-is-dead' formula is a very imperfect summary of the British experience – even among the loftiest thinkers. Another statement of Nietzsche's gets closer to the matter: 'Who among us would be a freethinker', he asked in the *Genealogy of Morals*, 'were it not for the Church?'<sup>53</sup> This is historical reasoning. However spiritual in origin, unbelief is always cultural in form and its 'proximate' sources – emerging from the *discrediting* of the Christian witness more often than scientific disproof. It is not what is 'rational' that determines the credibility of Christianity so much as what is reasonable. Just as the 'utter secularism' of continental Europe was a sword forged against the whetstone of fierce religious establishments, the 'mere secularity'<sup>54</sup> of the British was moulded by what G.M. Young termed the 'imponderable pressure of Evangelical discipline' – a force Victorians experienced 'at every turn.' Evangelicalism, with its 'profound apprehension of the contrary states: of Nature and of Grace', and the ability to subject everyday life to the scrutiny of 'the eternal microscope', was the chief architect of Victorian religiosity and also its nemesis.<sup>55</sup> It produced a sublime moral righteousness that could be devastating when turned on the 'foul iniquity' of the slave trade, or the scandal of state-endorsed prostitution, and devastating when turned back on the imperfections of its ecclesiastical parent – the calumnies of anti-catholicism, the injustices of Sabbatarianism. Christianity was on the wrong side of its sharpest weapon: the inflamed conscience. 'The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad', Chesterton observed in 1908.<sup>56</sup> Arguably they live on in such phenomena as Richard Dawkins' secular Ten Commandments (an updated version of Bertrand Russell's 'Liberal Decalogue' of 1951<sup>57</sup>). Even 'scientific' atheism holds a stake in the bank it arraigns. Modern thought made it harder to believe in God but it possessed no powers of veto. 'Nature allows no leaps' was the mantra of scientific naturalism: no interruptions in the flow of force and matter. Something similar was true of the concatenation of experiences we call history: 'history allows no leaps'.

If there was a decisive frontier between belief and unbelief it was within the human breast, as Chalmers identified in his sermon, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*

---

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975: 1993 edn.), 250.

<sup>54</sup> This distinction is Martin Marty's. *The modern schism: three paths to the secular* (1969), 5. I am grateful to David Kettle for alerting me to this.

<sup>55</sup> G.M. Young quoted in Hilton, *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People?: England, 1783-1846*, Oxford 2006, 176.

<sup>56</sup> *Orthodoxy* (1908: 1995 edn.), 35.

<sup>57</sup> *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 3: 1944-1969 (London, 1969), 71-2.

(1818). Christianity is an appeal to the affections as well as the mind, he argued, and the appeal is frustrated by the new tendency to bully people into conformity. An abrasive, fault-finding moralism, he warned, is the best inoculation to the gospel there is. To demand standards rather than proclaim grace was to leave people, 'like the children of Israel in the land of Egypt, when required to make bricks without straw.'<sup>58</sup> They would either rebel or they would drift away, confident that they could meet the demands of decency on their own. Newman was alert to this, more subtle, danger, complaining that temperance, in particular, represented a challenge to be holy without God: 'we are having a wedge thrust into us which tends to the destruction of religion altogether', he warned Henry Manning in 1878.<sup>59</sup> Alienation was common among intellectuals; the wider pattern was a drift into self-sufficient decency.<sup>60</sup>

For Christians, the encouragement is that unbelief is not hardwired into history; the challenge is that it is often provoked by the 'soft tissue' of religious encounter. David Bebbington told the story of an Oxford undergraduate who went on a Christian Union house party where the importance of absolute truthfulness was strongly emphasised. The student decided to have a word with his college chaplain, whom he addressed as follows: 'I am bound to tell you that you are the worst chaplain in the University.' He may, or may not, have had evidence for the assertion. But such events could be definitive. The medium is the message. I will finish with a quotation from George Dawson, an independent minister who preached a sermon in 1871 entitled, 'The Folly of Abuse'. It brilliantly identified what I term the 'chemistry' of unbelief and articulates a response that is more 'ethos' than 'agenda'. 'We must do what we can', Dawson urged, 'to prevent any man being driven to atheism by our theism. In the presence of justice, rebellion grows unholy; in the presence of tyranny, it is a virtue. ... Let it be ours not to get angry with such as are so unhappy as to have lost their faith. ... Let us strive when we use the name of God to keep it righteous, and to force no man into doubt by the unloveliness of our faith.'<sup>61</sup>

**© Dominic Erdozain 2009**

Please address all correspondence to: [dominic.erdozain@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:dominic.erdozain@kcl.ac.uk)

---

<sup>58</sup> *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection* (1860 edn.) n.p.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Brian Harrison, 'Religion and Recreation in Nineteenth-Century England', *Past & Present* 38 (1967), 125.

<sup>60</sup> See my forthcoming book *The Problem of Pleasure* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009) for this argument.

<sup>61</sup> 'The Folly of Abuse', *The Birmingham Pulpit*, 22 July 1871, 3.