"A Picture Held Us Captive": Secularisation and the Christian Mission

It is one of the clichés of historical writing to say that ‘history is written by the winners’ – meaning that the story always looks different when you know how it ends, or think you know.[1] History doesn’t stop, but *histories* do. Which means that historians are like sportswriters having to file reports on matches that haven’t finished. If one side is on top, the temptation is to portray the whole encounter as a one-sided affair, exaggerating strengths and weaknesses to build a clear narrative from what may be a very fluid encounter. And when the game does finish, the temptation to ‘objectify’ the causes gets even stronger. You only have to look at ‘player ratings’ to see that the simple fact of being on a winning or losing side colours the whole perception of a person’s performance. We read events backwards. When we know who wins the game, the war, the election, we find it very hard to revisit the dynamics of the encounter with an unprejudiced eye. Try studying the struggles between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks in early twentieth-century Russia without dancing through the analysis to the statements of a certain ‘Lenin’, subtly aggrandising his interventions as those of one of history’s true players. Our analysis unconsciously favours the winner. In trying to explain important events we tell stories of inevitability which often bear little relationship to the true drama of events. This has been the church’s problem in the interpretation of modernity.

Although clearly this is not a game that has ended, the tipping of the balance between religious and secular influences in the modern age has led to grave ‘summarising’ on both sides of the fence, and the nurture of theories that religion was always ‘destined’ to die. The most influential is ‘secularisation’ – an almost gravitational certainty that religious ‘myths’ will fade under the floodlights of modernity. Scholars largely wince at the theory now, condemning it for making guesses about the presumed effect of processes like ‘urbanisation’ on religious belief, for pushing secularism under the guise of an objective theory.[2] But this sceptical consensus ignores one important fact which is the subject of this paper: the capacity of the theory to gain reality by influencing the church’s life and practice. While I agree with scholars of many disciplines that secularisation has never happened in anything like its predicted form[3], I believe it has exercised an extraordinary pastoral influence, almost paralysing Christian leadership, at

times, into positions of panic, submission or resignation. It has provided a sounding board for clerical decision-making even though its very existence as a coherent process has remained a matter of considerable doubt. It has formed a powerful backdrop to the church's self-image even though it is more often asserted than understood. I will start with two contemporary examples before tracing (I) the history of the concept, (II) its influence on the church, and finally (III) offering some counter narratives. Religious decline is not a myth (as some of the more bullish anti-secularisation writers now claim). But the causes are more complex than a simple tale of modernisation or 'growing up' would suggest. There is hope and opportunity in the chaos of real history. Yet any dissenting account needs to work hard to challenge the ingrained assumption of secularisation as something that simply 'happens' to the church and lies beyond our control. The theory has entered our vocabulary.

In a pastoral letter to Irish Catholics in the wake of the child sex abuse scandal, Pope Benedict recently sought to contextualise the Church's disastrous failure to deal with 'canonically irregular situations.' This tendency reflected a softening of clerical discipline in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, he suggested, as well as the erosion of Catholic teaching brought on by 'secularization'. The Pope explained:

In recent decades the Church in your country has had to confront new and serious challenges to the faith arising from the rapid transformation and secularization of Irish society. Fast-paced social change has occurred, often adversely affecting people's traditional adherence to Catholic teaching and values. All too often, the sacramental and devotional practices that sustain faith and enable it to grow, such as frequent confession, daily prayer and annual retreats, were neglected.[4]

It was not clear exactly whose neglect was being identified here, but the overall sense was that the storm should be interpreted as part of the climate change of secularisation. Culture shoulders at least some of the blame; perhaps most of it. A less grave but equally telling example comes from a response by Giles Fraser to a Church of England report on the implications of gay marriage for the relations between church and state. Dismissing the idea that being forced to conduct such ceremonies could have permanent implications for church and state, Fraser similarly invoked the wider spectre of secularisation – as if to say, don't fret over the deckchairs while the ship is going down! If Pope Benedict invoked the concept defensively, taking the heat off the Church, Fraser used it aggressively, telling conservatives to wise up and grasp the bigger picture: '"The greatest threat to the church in 500 years." Do us a favour. Worse than the dissolution of the monasteries? Worse than secularisation?'[5]

What is striking in both cases is the appeal to secularisation not to open a discussion but to close one. The idea that Christian responses to sexuality might be a constituent element in whatever is meant by 'secularisation' is not entertained. Indeed there is almost a sense of exoneration – an acquiescence in facts beyond our control. I take these examples not to engage questions of sexual ethics but as indicators of a far more widespread attitude to secularisation in the Christian mind. Religious cultures, like nations, are 'imagined communities'. They need a vision more robust than what their critics can tell them – especially when the advice takes the form of an exultant theory of religious extinction as yet unproven.

A Secular Modernity? The origins of the 'Secularisation Paradigm'

Secularisation was an assumption long before it was a theory. In fact it has been more influential as a habit of mind than as any sort of technical thesis. It is the idea that modern societies inevitably pull away from their religious roots, tolerating them only at the margins. Secularisation 'reads' from modernity's separation of religion and society an irresistible narrative of crisis and decay.

It is a story that grows out of real historical events, like the separation of church and state, into a kind of 'master narrative' which sweeps a welter of facts into a single story of 'decline'. It thrives on broad surveys rather than gritty detail, turning human experience into 'data', and projecting a simple transition from a medieval past to a modern, 'disenchanted' present. Origins are typically found in the Reformation.[6]

In his history of *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700*, John Bossy traces the emergence of the two categories of 'religion' and 'society' out of the common fabric of Christendom. At the beginning of the period there was an almost seamless integration of belief, community and Church. But after protracted conflict between nations, churches and confessional traditions, Christianity was effectively reconceived as 'doctrine'. Faith became a set of beliefs or, at worst, 'propositions.' As a consequence of this process of 'confessionalisation', carrying with it the grim legacy of religious warfare, a literature of control and containment developed in the hands of writers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, Bayle and Locke. Each attempted to limit religious conflict by increasing the power of the state. In Britain and America, a separation of powers did not imply secular disdain, but in parts of Europe where a single church dominated (eg. France) the process involved strongly anti-Christian sentiment. This was where the secularisation idea emerged, acquiring an almost religious sense of 'overcoming' a shameful past.

At the heart of it was the idea that history was proceeding in 'stages', leaving the superstitions of the nursery behind. The sense of relief intellectuals felt after the nightmare of the wars of religion was generalised into a theory of historic change. The future would be brighter, less violent. Although scientific understandings were brought to bear in these discussions, the thrust of secularisation was moral and political. This is why advocates of secularisation have tended to be so dogmatic, dismissing counter-examples as exceptions that prove the rule. Secularisation was a story that Europe's intellectuals – from Voltaire to Comte, Mill, Marx and, finally, Max Weber – told themselves to make permanent the precarious gains of a fragile secularism. It was a story more often 'invoked' than demonstrated. But it came about for a very good reason. Early modern religion, even more than medieval Catholicism, was bloodstained. The secular exit strategy was itself deeply religious, as Carl Becker's fine but now neglected study on the *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (1932) demonstrates. Secularisation was always a theology of overcoming, though Christian theologians sometimes treated it as fact.[7]

Yet to engage the great prophets of secularisation is to see how Christian minds were seduced. No one can read Max Weber's haunting reflections on the 'fate' of modern man, 'destined' to toil in an economic machine of his own making, without a sense of melancholy and awe.[8] Weber was the high priest of secularisation theory and his chilling vision of a 'disenchanted'

modernity, driven by a pitiless economic cycle, has been hugely influential. Marrying a wealth of data to a sophisticated theory of the role of Protestant discipline in the forging of a 'worldly' outlook, Weber was the thinker who, more than any other, succeeded in putting a 'full stop' at the end of church history. Protestantism had built an 'iron cage' of economic compulsion that rendered religious sentiment redundant. Like Marx, but for different reasons, he believed that men and women of the industrial cities could never be religious. Cities would negate the sense of providence that sustained rural life, offering pleasure and sensuality as synthetic 'surrogates'. This was mainly guesswork, of course, because some of Europe's most dramatic religious revivals took place in the very urban settings that were supposed to nullify them.[9] But, like the sense of Enlightenment relief in the dawning of religious toleration, there was enough circumstantial evidence to build the case. The cities *did* prove to be enormous pastoral challenges, and capitalism *was* disruptive of traditional religious life. The conceit of secularisation was to assert that these disruptions were final. Religion was living on borrowed time. The world had been 'disenchanted.' The process of separation that had started in the Reformation was complete: society ruled. It is not difficult to see how the editorialising of the intellectuals, combined with the facts of social and intellectual change, could have mesmerised the church into the idea that the growing pains of modernity were the death pangs of Christianity.

Marching to the beat: the church's acquiescence in secularisation

The secularisation narrative arguably had its first home in the structured pragmatism of nineteenth-century 'home' mission, pioneered by Thomas Chalmers in Glasgow in the 1820s. Chalmers' approach involved anything but resignation. His model was characterised by 'aggression' and an almost physical urge to claim the streets for Christ, but it was not long before his heavily statistical methodology reduced the grandeur of the vision to a form of crisis management. Chalmers was an extraordinary example of an evangelist who took theology into secular spheres, demonstrating the salience of Christian teachings about work and charity for the new discipline of economics. He proved that theology could be an 'export economy' in the most robust of social contexts.[10] But many of his successors lacked the same confidence, coming to see the cities as more than a challenge: an impregnable frontier. Statistics seemed to 'objectify' the problem, bringing endless details of the practical nature of the Christian task and encouraging a policy of piecemeal relief. Christian social thought majored on analysis and diagnosis rather than remedy. Sometimes it seemed as if the gospel were an impertinence in the grim conditions now unfolding. Sober practicality took over from zestful evangelism. By 1850 it was clear that the urban population was neither Christian nor atheist. It was assumed, therefore, that irreligion could be explained by the spectrum of 'pleasure' and 'temptation' available in the cities. The people were, in a famous phrase of the period, 'unconscious secularists', living for beer and betting. The classic response was to accept the scale of the problem and to manage it with Christianized alternatives. The urban context essentially redefined mission.

Journals such as the *British Weekly* published tables of statistics on everything from church attendance to numbers of betting shops and gin palaces by neighbourhood. The facts brooked no argument: the church had to meet the challenge on the ground. There was a stampede for practicality. And for an era increasingly impatient of formal theology, there was a strange

dogmatism in the new orthodoxy: when an evangelical journalist was asked to preach in a prominent London church on the subject of Melchizedek around 1890, he refused. His rationale was telling: 'You have round you drunkenness, lust, oppression,' he noted. 'Melchizedek may wait till you have got rid of these.'[11] Drink, in particular, became an obsession. When it was suggested that Jesus might not have approved of the turn to teetotalism as a necessity of mission, the response was withering: 'Jesus did not live in Shoreditch in the nineteenth century.' At a mass meeting for men at the Albert Hall in 1890, the leading Methodist of the day insisted that organisations that were idle in the work of attacking London's drinking culture 'did not represent Jesus Christ.'[12] The urban challenge seemed to define Christ, as well as the gospel. The old language of sin and salvation was sometimes dismissed as a mockery of the true conditions of the people. Rather than a dynamic integration of theology and economic theory of the kind masterfully (though controversially) achieved by Chalmers, late-Victorian mission was characterized by the paradox of energetic resignation: enormous effort expended in defiance of problems that were simultaneously declared insurmountable. It is not exaggeration to say that the pastoral orthodoxy of the period privileged the narrative of urbanisation and decay over the bible, and it ran out of steam. Church Congress reports of the period convey a mastery of social detail and an often-poignant sense of depression. Martha had triumphed over Mary, as one Baptist put it, and she was flagging.[13]

The nineteenth-century discourse on the city was an example of what the philosopher, Charles Taylor, has termed a 'social imaginary': the background picture that conditions social thought and moulds identity. Taylor quotes Wittgenstein to suggest the subtlety with which a social imaginary can become oppressive: 'A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.'[14] This was the nineteenth century, in a nutshell – where the religious problem was articulated so often that damage limitation started to seem like the only option; when the idea that theology scares away the young became unquestioned orthodoxy. It was a burial rather than a betrayal of the gospel; a loss of nerve rather than a loss of faith, constituting what one writer in 1888 termed a new condition of 'Ecclesiastical Pathology' – brought on by 'empiricists within and without the churches.'[15] It was the triumph of context.

In the twentieth century we find a clearer alignment between theology and explicit theories of secularisation. Here secularisation was two-pronged: it combined a Weberian assumption that cities and industrialism had cut the ground from religion with the more intellectualist conviction that modern thought had torpedoed faith. Here Kant and Darwin assumed a grand if rather fuzzy pride of place, followed by icons of an insouciant modernism such as Virginia Woolf, Bertrand Russell and James Frazer. Frazer was the author of *The Golden Bough* (1925), a work of 'armchair' anthropology which scandalously likened Christ to the 'dying gods' of the Aztecs, appearing to drown Christianity in a sea of atavistic mythologies. In the 1920s the currents of intellectual orthodoxy appeared to flow against Christianity as never before. Yet the prevailing response seemed to be an urge to 'get right' with them. Christian leaders fell over backwards to accommodate the new agnosticism, not realising that they were backing horses that would soon have run their courses. The new 'giants of modernity' were treated with awed respect. Frazer was invited to lecture at Didsbury Methodist College in Manchester. It was like inviting Richard Dawkins to teach church history at Ridley Hall. He declined the offer, apparently miffed that his provocations had been so comfortably assimilated.[16]

But as Adrian Hastings has argued, there was great cost in Christian acquiescence in 'modern thought' – a mood of tired capitulation that reached a shocking climax in the fad for 'eugenics'. This was a scheme that would have prevented 'unfit' members of society from reproducing through a programme of forced sterilisation, justified under Darwinist assumptions. A startling number of senior clergy supported the Liberal government's Mental Deficiency Bill of 1912, though it never became law.[17] But for critics such as G.K. Chesterton, it illustrated the perils of theological resignation: 'we betray our own feeble-mindedness by calling them Unfit', he complained, turning the demeaning category of eugenics against its advocates. It is hard to sympathise with the Christian imagination that entertained the scheme but it is another example of bending the knee to the present. It is no accident that one of the supporters of eugenics, Ernest Barnes, who was bishop of Birmingham from 1924 to 1953 was an avid subscriber to the intellectual narrative of secularisation. 'The teaching of traditional Christians of course makes no appeal to men and women of modern education', he wrote in 1949.[18] For people like Barnes and other supporters of eugenics such as W.R. Inge, Dean of St. Paul's from 1911 to 1934, history would not wait for idealists. Indeed, if history is moving in such a clear direction, then it may be a Christian duty to ease its course. I use the example not as a toxic slander on secularisation theory but as an extreme case of a 'scientific' theory that looked antique as soon as its glare of plausibility faded. Like the rather patronising 'evolutionary' anthropology conducted from elegant Edwardian studies, eugenics was a thing of its time. It took a 'beneficent bomb' like Chesterton to shatter the illusion. His Catholicism, which made him very much an outsider even in the early twentieth century, undoubtedly galvanised his dissidence.

Clergy and theologians were similarly mesmerized by the expansion of the welfare state – a more benign phenomenon, but one that had serious implications, according to Franck Prochaska, for the Christian social conscience and the surviving infrastructure of Victorian charity. Like Hastings, Prochaska is highly critical of William Temple, whose Hegelian conception of the flow of history caused him to underestimate the value of religious voluntarism and to parcel off the family silver to the 'omnicompetent state'. This is not a debate that can be explored here except to note the language of destiny that influenced Temple's thought. Of the rise of the state, he wrote: 'The process is inevitable; it is not likely to be reversed.'[19] He didn't say how or why this 'process' had become inevitable. It just was. Critics were living in the past. Temple saw God in the rise of the state, certainly. But this deepens rather than resolves the problem of appropriation: it runs the risk of adding a sacral certainty to essentially autonomous rhythms. This is how God is at work in history ... by not working; by outsourcing the difficult tasks to specialists. This was the essence of the so-called 'radical' theology of the 1960s, which was not really theology at all. It was sociology.

David Sheppard's autobiography shows how the present-worshipping mentality influenced clerical thinking in the 1960s. This was the heyday of a highly technical theory of secularisation, presented in glistening, tabular form. Where was Wittgenstein when you wanted him! If the urge to subject human experience to the logic of mathematics was, in his view, a kind of 'cruel superstition' conjuring 'illusions of certainty', the polished secularisation thesis of the 1960s was superstition in a tuxedo. It made bold predictions for the future. It offered teasing words of sympathy for huddled religious minorities, bound to feel uncomfortable under the bright lights of the secular city. It told the churches to wake up and breathe the secular air. In many cases, they did.

Sheppard complained that nearly all of his superiors seemed to have bought into the narrative of crisis. Taking over as Bishop of Woolwich in 1969, he received earthy advice from his predecessor: 'Bishop John Robinson said he did not think there would be any visible church in the inner-city in ten years' time!' Meanwhile, his diocesan bishop, Mervyn Stockwood, advised him that congregations 'are likely to be small.' The Church had to 'face the facts'.[20]

When David Watson took up his first incumbency in York in 1965 he received a visit from two members of the hardly inspiring 'Redundant Churches Uses Committee', who informed him that his church of a dozen or so regulars would not survive and that he could have a year's grace before being moved. The writing was on the wall. Watson confessed that his spluttered optimism came across as arrogance as he begged to differ.[21] But this was the legacy of depression and demoralization: the challenge of the social environment had morphed into the challenge of the half-believing church. You had to penetrate both. Sheppard wrote of a 'chronic collapse of confidence' in these years, a dismal certainty of diminishing returns among some of the church's highest officers, adding that, 'even if it were not true, they acted as if it were.' Reflecting on a malaise that also affected his social ministry, he wrote: 'Christians too often think "the others" are stronger, and lack the confidence to see how much we can bring about change if we stand together.'[22] But it is hard to stand together when a narrative of disintegration has been thoroughly internalised.

It is difficult to prove direct links between the secularisation literature and clerical comment but it is striking how often a Weberian language of 'destiny' surfaced in the more extreme theological liberalism of the period.[23] And Sheppard is surely right to sense a connection between clerical resignation and the deepening of the crisis. Just as Victorian clergy talked their way into secularisation by reconstructing their mission around the hydra of 'temptation' – losing heart as they struggled to compete with 'worldly pleasure' – twentieth-century clergy seemed to succumb to fatalism: a modern version of that condition of sorrow and weariness that medieval writers termed 'accidie.'[24] It is a wearying thing when you believe that history has reached its terminus – that, in the war poet's lament, 'as things have been, things remain.' The Victorians were right about the *physicality* of Christian mission. Preoccupation with the 'problem' sapped the church's energy.

In a celebrated critique of models of prediction in the social sciences, *The Poverty of Historicism*, Karl Popper insisted on the irreducible complexity of human cultures: their innate and merciful resistance to the totalising determinisms of left and right. Responding to the kind of certainty that could lead Engels to claim that Marx had discovered 'the law of development of human history, just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature', Popper coolly observed that: 'the human sciences are yet to find their Galileo.' Master-keys to history nearly always turn out to be propaganda, Popper observed, gaining traction not because of their inherent logic but through their capacity to influence the events they describe. The only element of prediction that Popper, a rigorous philosopher of science, was willing to entertain related to what he termed the 'Oedipus effect' – the power of a prophecy to contribute to its own fulfilment (based on the legend of Oedipus who killed his father as a direct result of the prophecy which had caused his father to abandon him as a child).[25] Having observed the indifference with which Austrian Communists interpreted the death of comrades as 'necessary' casualties of the class struggle, Popper was acutely sensitive to the capacity of theory to

sidestep questions of personal responsibility. I suspect he would have regarded the secularisation thesis as another attempt to force the chaos of history into a tool of domination.

At the very least, clerical appropriation of the thesis would suggest something of his 'Oedipus effect.' Forty years after setting out an interpretation of secularisation in *A Sociology of English Religion*, David Martin reflected that he had not 'anticipated how enthusiastically the churches would collude in their own demise' – jettisoning so much religious content in the hope of imitating secular culture.[26] Not everyone read secularisation literature but the concept operated at the level of a 'social imaginary'. It established a language of permanence in areas of real fluidity, ignoring revivals just as nineteenth-century theorists explained away Methodism as some sort of temporary aberration.

The fact is that permutations of Christian worship and denominational affiliation in Britain bear almost no relation to the secularisation theory with its organising contrast between a 'religious' past and a 'secular' modernity. Secularisation theory has been critiqued and debunked from many angles. The literature is now vast.[27] Peter Berger's *Desecularization of the World* (1999) was a brave, if slightly misleading, statement of sociological repentance. Religion never went away. It is impossible to talk of a single process of 'secularisation' spanning the globe like a scene from an ecological disaster movie. And even if the thesis were accurate, it would not justify the eschatological despair that has too often been its theological corollary. While some people were busy writing the church's obituary, others were sublimely indifferent to rumours of their demise.

Subverting history: Christian counter-narratives

Figures such as David Watson, and the flourishing ministry that followed his brush with ecclesiastical realism, are more than mere exceptions to prove the rule. The latest incarnation of the secularisation thesis posits the 1960s as the true crisis decade, suggesting a final meltdown of 'Christian Britain'.[28] But ministries such as Watson's, fluid in their appropriation of the arts and the cultural mood of that supposedly fateful decade, suggest otherwise. The church has been growing while it appeared to be dying. The story is richer than the 'bottom line' of decline from giddying Victorian heights. There has been substantial revival within an overall picture of stasis and decay. Watson's, *I Believe in the Church*, is a clear and deliberate counter narrative to an ecology of doom. In the section that leads up to his meeting with the church-closing officials he excoriates some of the belittling pessimism about the Church of England that circulated in television and newspapers, citing caricatures of a 'bourgeois cult' peddled by figures as distinguished as Malcolm Muggeridge. There is also a bristling defiance as he rejects 'academic' fashions in theology and ecclesiology, and patronising stereotypes in the media. This is not someone trying to 'get right' with the times. Watson's response was to deepen the concept of the church to embrace a more holistic and dynamic sense of community; to urge renewal before evangelism. Belief alone was not enough. Identification with a tradition, a creed, a *church*, was a matter of survival. Individualism had been the evangelical sin. Watson's ministry is a striking corrective to both the sweeping élan of the secularisation theory and the fatalist inertia of many of his contemporaries. David Goodhew's recent volume on *Church Growth in Britain, 1980 to the Present* (2012) provides numerous parallels. The 1960s may have been a turning point or a 'hinge' in the history of the modern church, but as Goodhew

observes, 'hinges can turn both ways.'[29]

What I find compelling in Watson's account is the confidence and articulacy of a Christian mind quietly sure of its ground. It is the pessimism of the bureaucrats, not his own faith, that is out of kilter. Watson evokes Chesterton's breezy but deeply grounded confidence in a Christian narrative bigger than the pressures of the hour. Neo-orthodox theology, especially in the hands of Karl Barth, epitomises this virtue, even if it sometimes sets Word and world harshly at odds. More recently one could cite the bracing independence of a figure such as Stanley Hauerwas who simply refuses to think in the categories presented to him in the academy, and who grasps the centrality of the church for theology: the need to be rooted in a living tradition not a set of abstract principles. The issues he confronts in America are very different to those in post-Christendom Europe, but his response to 9/11 and its aftermath was a stunning example of a Christian mind working along a different axis to both 'religious' and 'secular' orthodoxies. When the crisis came, his perspective was strikingly biblical:

I knew we were in deep theological trouble as soon as politicians and commentators made the claim that September 11 had forever changed the world. Most Americans, Christian and non-Christian, quickly concluded that September 11 was a decisive event. That was exactly the problem. For Christians, the decisive change in the world, the apocalyptic event that transformed how all other events are to be understood, occurred in A.D. 33 … it was clear to me that September 11 had to be considered in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.[30]

The example I wish to develop confirms my conviction that the best way to undermine secularisation narratives is to 'provincialise' them. They need to be understood as a fairly localised story that European elites told themselves about the shape of the future. It is not the business of historians to predict the future. We have our hands full trying to change the past. But my guess is that the robustness of Western Christianity will depend on its willingness to learn from *non-Western* narratives of Christian vitality. One such narrative is a history of African-American spirituality entitled, *Setting Down the Sacred Past*, by Laurie Maffly-Kipp. It is a dynamic example because it specifically relates to the role of history in the nurture and liberation of a Christian culture. Here the oppression of a controlling narrative was not secularisation as such, but a racialist ideology that diminished black people by erasing their past, often under a spurious fog of theology. But the extraordinary thing was that many enslaved and partially-emancipated African-American Christians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not discard the Christian narrative that had been instrumental in their subjugation. They *reinterpreted* it in ways that 'fragilised' racism and bondage as temporary setbacks, like the enslavement of Israel or the Babylonian captivity. They took the long view, treasuring small steps of liberation and empowerment as the unfolding of a surer story of liberation.

Many of African-American leaders cited were obsessed with histories – personal, institutional and national. As Maffly-Kipp shows, they developed a powerful historical and theological literacy that enabled them to stand up to their oppressors, refusing to be bullied into stereotypes of passivity – a process that she links to the rise of Barack Obama. In this tradition, the sacredness of the past was not a source of misty nostalgia: it was a legacy of spiritual capital, a repository of a thousand fulfilled promises that pointed to a larger hope. Setbacks were interpreted through a

biblical lens of redemptive suffering, the clarity of exile. African-American historians cultivated a 'double consciousness' – a combined sensitivity to the present and to a bigger story controlled by God. This was so pronounced that some African-American Christians spoke of having 'two souls'.[31] Yet this was no story of dualistic escape, of pie in the sky. It was an intensely practical mentality built around a theology of resistance. It re-wrote history because it needed to. It subverted the narrative of Western individualism in ways that were often angry but rarely without a compelling rigour. Corporate histories were a living support not a collection of extraneous facts. They provided a sense of spiritual momentum and a powerful counterweight to what one writer has termed 'the narcissism of the present.'

In *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama rooted his own leadership credentials in this corporate history of active Christianity:

Out of necessity, the black church had to minister to the whole person. Out of necessity, the black church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation. It had to serve as the center of the community's political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities. I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world.[32]

Obama's vision of faith as 'an active, palpable agent in the world' is doubly significant for its subversion of secular as well as 'Euro-American' (white) master narratives of containment. Secular commentators were caught napping as the theocratic vision of the Bush years was challenged not by Al Gore's cool pitch for rationality, in his now-forgotten volume of 2007, *The Assault on Reason*, but by a newly-vibrant and hopeful religiosity.[33] Here was an example of Christian dissidence and a metaphor for it: a story of political reinvention that could be a model for ecclesial renewal. The black church, as Obama identified, was a potent antidote to the individualism of the mainstream. It was a tradition that refused to be talked into retirement.

The connecting link between the negative examples I have used, and the flaws of the secularisation theory, is an exaggerated sense of the power of context: the conviction that social and cultural change 'rules' religious faith. The common thread within the narratives of dissidence is a confidence that the Christian hope transcends the tyranny of circumstances. Christianity can survive the ebbs and flows of cultural 'hospitality'. Max Weber once speculated as to what it was in the social structure of the first century that created the impetus for a 'salvation religion' such as Christianity. The truth is: very little. Christianity's arrival in the ancient world was, in David Bentley Hart's luminous phrase, 'like a meteor from a clear sky[34].' Conditions did not create the Christian faith, nor can they destroy it. This is not to say that cultural analysis is unnecessary for Christian mission, but there is a profound difference between *attentiveness* to social change and *obedience* to it. Scholars and practitioners alike need to be careful before sanctifying descriptive labels as prescriptive models. Deference to notions of 'postmodernity', or the peculiarities of the so-called 'millennial' generation, may risk reprising the kind of deference to master narratives that we have seen in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – 'paradigm' thinking that swallows the individual within the assumed whole. Christianity and good history have one thing in common: they proclaim the sanctity and dignity of people, not the power of paradigms. The Incarnation, argues Mark Noll, is the starting

point for the proper study of cultures: a scandal of particularity. Christ 'truly entered into ordinary human history' – rendering it anything but ordinary.[35] The Christian 'revolution' was an essay in small beginnings. If the rise and fall of the secularisation thesis illustrates anything, it is that generations do not behave in uniform or expected ways. Individuals make a difference. What Diarmaid MacCulloch has written of early church martyrs such as Perpetua could apply to many other periods of history: 'Christian obedience repeatedly plays a troubling wild card.'[36]

The challenge, then, is to respect cultural dynamics but to respect the Christian narrative more; to look frankly at the demise of Christendom without despairing for Christianity. The triumph of a figure like Thomas Chalmers was the ability to apply first hand knowledge of a changing context to a providential cast of mind supple enough to interpret challenges in Christological terms. The same was true of the African-American Christians who 'desired meaning beyond what whites were willing to bestow';[37] who screened out the buzz of an oppressive present by tuning into a broader wavelength. Not everyone will become a world-class contrarian like Chesterton or Hauerwas but anyone can develop the kind of theological dissidence that hesitates before dipping into the reservoir of truisms; that backs away from cliché and commonplace – even though it may not have a comparably clear alternative. What Hauerwas has written of suffering might apply to the crisis of decline: it calls for a response rather than a watertight 'explanation'[38]. Histories will illuminate but they will never fully explain. The human sciences may not have found their Galileo but it is not the church's task to invent one. The church lives by faith not sight. Institutionally, I would urge some sort of integration of theological and historical literacy: a weighted interplay of theology and textured human history, so that we could have, for example, less talk of 'the Enlightenment project' and more understanding of the Enlightenment; fewer paradigms, more people. On a personal level, I would suggest the value of reflection on the daily influences that mould the consciousness. There is nothing like moving to a new country to discover the battery of meanings that assault you through ostensibly benign media: the constant reinforcement of values that only strike you as 'values' in the new environment. It is easy to move abroad and roll eyeballs at the television and the advertising. But the question arises: is our diet any better? Am I any more immune to 'gospel amnesia' than the twentieth-century liberals who substituted journalistic 'science' for Christian hope? Does my understanding of time and change bear any correlation to my Christian faith? Not everyone will want to study history but every Christian needs a sense of it, to know that the church is not lurching from a golden era to an unprecedented crisis: it is walking the same path of inspired improvisation and gracious failure that has always been before it. The last thing history should bring on is an inferiority complex. But open it up, allow it to breathe and the history of the church will always provide something more invigorating than the narcotics of secular discourse. Even when the story is sobering, the encounter with real Christians in different times and places will serve to confuse stereotypes and to inspire a sense of faith as collaboration: of muddled 'religion' as the living tradition of Christian faith. There is value in this, however prosaic it may sometimes seem. As the great Victorian writer, George MacDonald, once put it: 'Theory may spring from life, but never life from theory.'[39]

1.

Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 231. [?]

2.

Jeffrey Cox, “Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularisation: A Progress Report,” in *Secularisation in the Christian World: Essays in Honour of Hugh McLeod*, ed. Callum G Brown and M. F Snape (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). [?]

3.

Dominic Erdozain, “‘Cause Is Not Quite What It Used to Be’: The Return of Secularisation,” *The English Historical Review* CXXVII, no. 525 (March 1, 2012): 377–400, doi:10.1093/ehr/ces017. [?]

4.

“Full Text of the Pope’s Letter to the Catholics of Ireland on Child Sex Abuse,” *The Guardian*, March 20, 2010, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/20/full-text-popes-letter-ireland. [?]

5.

Giles Fraser, “The Church of England Says It Is Against Gay Marriage. Not in My Name,” *The Guardian*, June 12, 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2012/jun/12/church-of-england-gay-marriage. [?]

6.

A classic account can be found in Peter L Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990). [?]

7.

On this theme see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Basil Blackwell, 1990). [?]

8.

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001). [?]

9.

Callum G. Brown, “Did Urbanization Secularize Britain?,” *Urban History* 15, no. 1 (1988): 1–14, doi:10.1017/S0963926800013882. [?]

10.

Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought*, 1795-1865 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988). [?]

11.

British Weekly 31 March 1892, 365. [?]

12.

Hugh Price Hughes, quoted in the *Report of the Conference of British Young Men's Christian Associations*, London, 1893, 18. [?]

13.

I recognise that this analysis sounds highly reductive. For a fuller treatment of this argument see Dominic Erdozain, The Problem of Pleasure: Sport, Recreation and the Crisis of Victorian Religion (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010); Dominic Erdozain, "The Secularisation of Sin in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62, no. 01 (2011): 59–88, doi:10.1017/S0022046909991321. [?]

14.

Alice Marguerite Crary and Rupert J. Read, *The New Wittgenstein* (Routledge, 2000), 232. [?]

15.

British Weekly, 27 July 1888, 213. [?]

16.

See Timothy Larsen's forthcoming book on Christianity and Anthropology for more information on Frazer. [?]

17.

Churchill was an advocate, telling Asquith that 'the multiplication of the feeble-minded' could not go on, and arguing for compulsory sterilisation rather than the more expensive option of incarceration. For a discussion of a high-level clergyman's involvement in eugenics, see Matthew Grimley's article on, "Inge, William Ralph (1860–1954)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: OUP, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34098 [?]

18.

Quoted in Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-2000*, 4th ed (London: SCM Press, 2001), 491. [?]

19.

Quoted in F. K Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain: The Disinherited Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95. [?]

20.

David Sheppard, *Steps Along Hope Street: My Life in Cricket, the Church and the Inner City* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), 121. I am grateful to Frog Orr-Ewing for conversations on the relationship between secularisation and clerical policy in this period. Frog has cited examples of parish closures and key decision-making in connection to what appears to be versions of the secularisation thesis. His doctoral research on Thomas Gaster and All Saints church in Camberwell (now Peckham) promises to be a bold counter-narrative to such

teleological thinking. [?]

21.

David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 16–17. [?]

22.

Sheppard, *Steps Along Hope Street*, 140. [?]

23.

Episcopal Bishop of Newark, John Shelby Spong declared in 1998 that the old ‘theistic’ God ‘is doomed to die, no matter how frantically or hysterically people seek to defend it. It will not survive’. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Rutgers University Press, 2005), 275. [?]

24.

"Accidie" *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. Ed. John Bowker. Oxford University Press, 2000. [?]

25.

Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (Routledge, 2002), 10–11. [?]

26.

Steve Bruce, “Secularisation in the UK and the USA,” in *Secularisation in the Christian World: Essays in Honour of Hugh McLeod*, ed. Callum G Brown and M. F Snape (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 207. [?]

27.

For a classic article, see Rodney Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.,” *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 249–273, doi:10.2307/3711936. [?]

28.

Callum G Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2000). [?]

29.

I owe this phrase to a seminar presentation of David Goodhew’s research, delivered at the Institute of Historical Research, London, 29 February 2012. [?]

30.

Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s child: a theologian’s memoir* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 264. [?]

31.

Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, *Setting down the sacred past: African-American race histories* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Belknap, 2010), 276. [?]

32.

Quoted in ibid., 276. [?]

33.

For an intriguing discussion of the religious significance of the 'Obama phenomonenon', and its implications for traditional polarities of religion and secularism, Right and Left, see Wendy Brown, “The Sacred, the Secular, and the Profane: Charles Taylor and Karl Marx,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig J Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010). [?]

34.

David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, 1st ed. (London: Yale University Press, 2009), 169. [?]

35.

Mark A. Noll, *Jesus Christ and the life of the mind* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2011), 18. [?]

36.

Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Allen Lane, 2009), 163. [?]

37.

Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, *Setting down the sacred past : African-American race histories* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Belknap, 2010), 19. [?]

38.

Stanley Hauerwas, *God, Medicine, and Suffering* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 1. [?]

39.

George Macdonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, (1889), 152. [?]