

A Short History of Secularism

Graeme Smith

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

Contents

Acknowledgements		viii
<i>Chapter One</i>	Western Secularism	1
<i>Chapter Two</i>	Science: The New Technology	20
<i>Chapter Three</i>	Secularism and Social History	42
<i>Chapter Four</i>	The Reinvention of Christianity by Ordinary People	67
<i>Chapter Five</i>	Churchgoing and Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages	89
<i>Chapter Six</i>	Contemporary and Medieval Christian Life	117
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	The Enlightenment Effect	135
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	The Last Puritan Age	160
<i>Chapter Nine</i>	The Ethics Society	183
Notes		206
Bibliography		214
Index		219

Chapter One

Western Secularism

What does it mean to describe the West as secular? Does it mean that we are in the last days of Christianity? Is the Church facing inevitable and terminal decline? Has science and reason triumphed over superstition and myth in the culture of civilized peoples? Has the West progressed so far in its intellectual journey that it no longer needs the props and comforts of religion? Or is religion a strong and persistent facet of Western society? Is the twenty-first century, starting with that awful date 11 September 2001, to be the religious century? What are we to make of the fact that a majority in the West believe in God and tend to describe themselves as religious? It is after all a fact that, in a society which frequently describes itself as secular, a majority of people believe in God and call themselves Christian. The UK, which is often thought of as one of the more secular countries in Western Europe, illustrates the point. In its 2001 government-conducted census, 72 per cent of the population described themselves as Christian. In some regions, such as the North East and North West of England, this rose to an astonishing 80 per cent and 78 per cent, respectively. By contrast, 15.5 per cent stated they had no religion.¹ The data from the 1999/2000 *European Values*

Study reveals a similar picture across Europe. On average, 77 per cent of people stated that they believed in God. Those who called themselves a 'convinced atheist' registered at a mere 5 per cent, although a total of 28 per cent described themselves as 'not a religious person'.² And the figures for belief are higher for the USA. Such statistics are of course open to a variety of interpretations. For some the figures do not disprove the overall pattern of ongoing Christian decline, demonstrated by what they see as the more important and far lower numbers attending church services. They would argue that what people understand by Christian identity or belief in God is so vague as not to be meaningful. When comments about belief are made, what is intended is no more than a sense that they are good, decent people. For others the figures are evidence of a Christian persistence. They argue that ongoing belief in God requires an explanation. To say that religion is in decline is to miss an important part of the picture. Professor Grace Davie has argued that what the statistics show is that people have religious beliefs but they are not willing to belong to a church.³ Regardless of whichever of the many interpretations is preferred, the difficulty remains. When we seek to describe contemporary secular Western society, then we need to take account of a persistent religious belief.

What I shall argue in this book, in very general terms, is that secularism is not the end of Christianity, nor is it a sign of the godless nature of the West. Rather, we should think of secularism as the latest expression of the Christian religion. What form does this new Christianity take? Secularism is Christian ethics shorn of its doctrine. It is the ongoing commitment to do good, understood in traditional Christian terms, without a concern for the technicalities of the teachings of the Church. Instead the desire to be and do good is supported by a sympathetic feeling towards the idea of God. In Western secular society we talk about good deeds, and on the whole we are charitable to our neighbours and those in need. But in public we do not talk much about Christianity. We can be generous and caring without at the same time needing to

sort out the details of the doctrine of the atonement. Secularism in the West is a new manifestation of Christianity, but one that is not immediately obvious because it lacks the usual scaffolding we associate with the Christian religion.

Such an argument will not please those who think secularism is an ideology immersed in a life and death struggle with Christianity. For these secularists, who inhabit the rather polarized world of religious them and secular us, Christianity must be fought tooth and nail. The Church is a powerful enemy. It is deceitful and cunning, willing to employ all tactics necessary to maintain its elite status in society. Those who read this history and expect it to praise past secularists who nobly stood up for free thinking and scientific reason will be disappointed. However, neither does this book offer much comfort to the Church. Secularism is not presented here as the villain of the piece. Secularism has not corrupted Western society, leading its people away from the one true God into the false dawn of licentiousness and decadence. Secularism is not one of many sins, alongside materialism, consumerism and individualism, which demonstrate just how corrupt the West has become. In fact, throughout the book I challenge the sharp distinction between Church and world which the idea of secularism presupposes. Such a distinction is not at all helpful or even meaningful.

It is a commonplace to describe the West as a secular society. Religious leaders, journalists, sociologists, politicians and most people with a passing interest in its religious and cultural identity, both within and beyond its boundaries, assume the West is secular. Of course, exceptions are noted. Minority groups, especially immigrant communities, are recognized as having strong religious identities. But these exceptions are exceptions because of the assumption that the West is secular. One of three things is usually meant when the West is described as secular. The first, known as the secularization thesis, argues that institutional Christianity is in decline. The numbers of those attending Church Sunday by Sunday is down, as are membership figures. Fewer people turn to the

Church when they want to get married, baptize their children or bury their loved ones. Alongside the statistical decline is a loss of social status. Church leaders are rarely consulted as authoritative public voices. If they are, it is to talk about one limited topic, personal morality. So Bishops are asked about abortion, divorce or same-sex partnerships. However much this may frustrate Church leaders, who want to talk about poverty, the war in Iraq, conflict in Israel and Palestine or penal policies, the media consults them on matters of private behaviour. Studies show that the pattern of Church decline is not the same in each Western country. France differs from Italy, Sweden from Poland, and the USA is an exceptional case which needs special explanation, but generally the assumption is that the Church is coming to the end of its life. Sociologists and historians argue about the timing of the decline and about its causes, but these discussions do not affect the overall pattern. The Church as an institution is in meltdown.

The second way to describe the West as secular is to talk about the secularism of the public forum. By public forum. I mean the discussions and debates that often occur in the media, in schools and universities, and generally between people in the workplace and at home. These discussions are based upon secular assumptions. So religion is often treated as a matter of private opinion not public truth. Religious belief lacks the intellectual credibility of both natural and social science. There is a permitted relativism in private belief. It is sufficient to claim a religious belief as 'true for me' for it to be recognized as in some way valid. But the same does not apply to public truths such as scientific statements. The notion that the laws of gravity are a matter of private opinion, and therefore might be believed or not, rather than scientifically accepted public truth, is dismissed as nonsense in Western society. More controversially so is the idea that the earth and all living creatures were created in six days. The latter might be a matter of private belief, but the accepted normal view in the media is some form of evolution. The distinction between private religious beliefs and public truth and reason has led to

the exclusion of theology, except in the small number of issues previously mentioned, from the media. Instead, public discussions are dominated by science. If there are technological advances, medical innovations or health benefits, then the predominant scientific voices are from the natural sciences. If the issues relate to society then sociological, economic or political voices predominate. This is the case even if the topic being discussed has obvious religious dimensions. One interesting illustration of the dominance of social scientific expertise was the reaction to the biographies of the London transport bombers of 7 July 2005. One of the bombers, the oldest member of the group, Mohammad Sidique Khan, was married, worked in a local primary school and community centre, and reportedly did not express controversial religious or political views in public. As such he appeared socially integrated. This left the media at something of a loss when it came to attributing reasons for his involvement in the attacks. Sociological reasoning could not provide a cause for his actions except to posit that the appearance of social integration was itself the deceit. Theological reasons were not deemed to be of themselves sufficient cause for his political alienation and consequent extreme violence. There was no expectation that a report on Khan's biography should begin with a discussion of his theology, because, until he participated in the bombings, this was a private matter. What this illustrates is the extent to which our public discussions are secular. They are based on assumptions which confine religious and theological matters to the private sphere, whilst shared public truths are scientific. The reasons for this development are often attributed to the rise of liberal philosophy and modern scientific method stemming from the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Important liberal and scientific Western thinkers, ironically themselves often faithful Christians, undermined the intellectual power of medieval Christianity.

The third way in which the West is described as secular is through the critical comments of religious bodies, not only the Church but also, importantly, Muslim theologians and

leaders. The secularism of the West makes it the exception to global religious trends. To call the West secular is in part to make a comparative judgment. Christianity is a powerful cultural and political force in many countries in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Christianity is growing in these countries, not shrinking, albeit in markedly different forms from the West. In other African, Asian and Middle Eastern countries, Islam is a powerful force shaping cultural and political identity. What is interesting in terms of our analysis is that leading commentators from these religious groups, be it African Christians or Middle Eastern Muslims, share a common critique of the West. Those who condemn the social and cultural behaviour of the West bundle up a number of criticisms. These include, at its most extreme, Western secularism, alongside: militarism; imperialist capitalism; consumerism; personal moral breakdown; pornography; family neglect, especially of older generations; excessive and offensive liberalism; individualism; and materialism. Not all commentators equally condemn all aspects of Western society, nor are all those who condemn the West from outside its borders. Some Christian leaders and more conservative theologians in the West are also critical of its liberalism and its secularism. However, with varying degrees of venom, religious commentators describe the West as secular, something which is not regarded as a good thing.

In the next two chapters I shall investigate these three pictures of Western secularism in more detail. What should be noted here is the diverse range of people who describe the West as secular. In any study of society and culture, of Christianity and of global political relations, the designation of the West as secular is a common shared belief. It is the very assumed and commonplace nature of this description that makes secularism such an important subject for investigation. However, the description is far from unproblematic.

The study of contemporary secularism is the study of the religious and cultural identity of Western society. A number of options are available to the scholar wanting to pursue such an

investigation. They might utilize sociological tools, and this has been done effectively by many, or cultural theories or historical analysis. These are all profitable ways of exploring the subject and have been employed successfully by many notable scholars. My intention in this book is wide-ranging. I wish to pursue a particular argument which explains the secularism of Western society. Therefore, aspects of different methodologies will be used for the study, including sociological analysis, historical work, cultural theory and, importantly, theological study. Throughout the study it will become clear how I have depended on the work of leading scholars in each field. It is by bringing the results of these different aspects of the study together that I hope to gain an accurate picture of the West's secular and religious identity.

There are four ideas which are central to my argument. They are: (i) Christianity has always been a religion with a fluid, evolving identity – it has a history of changing shape; (ii) medieval Christianity functioned in ways which are very similar to contemporary Western religion – the similarities are as striking as any differences; (iii) at the Enlightenment the major intellectual and cultural event was the separation of Christian ethics from Christian doctrine – and what is left is ethics practised in a Christian way; (iv) the Victorian era was an exceptional period of religious activity – it was by no means a normal time for the Church. I shall explain what is meant by these four ideas in more detail below. They are developed in response to the story that is normally told about the emergence of secularism. This starts with the premise that we can easily identify what Christianity actually is, that is, we know what not to believe anymore. If secularism is not Christian belief then there should be some sense of what this Christian belief is that is no longer believed.

The historical account of the emergence of secularism begins with the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages are seen as the golden era for Christianity, when all believed and went to Church. It is from this position that the Church has declined and society has become secular. The explanation for the decline

of Christianity begins with the Enlightenment. During this period, atheism and anti-clericalism emerge as serious intellectual, social and cultural forces. The arrival of reason and science push religion out of the public square and into the realm of private opinion. That Christianity is in decline is confirmed by the statistics. The first important figures come from the Victorian era. All significant measures show that compared with the nineteenth century, the twentieth century has been a period of falling numbers. My argument challenges each of these aspects of secularism's traditional story in turn. Christianity is changing, often extremely rapidly, and has no permanent, static core. The religious activity of the Middle Ages was highly complex, by no means universally Christian and devout in any sense we would recognize today. It is in fact surprisingly similar to contemporary religious behaviour. At the Enlightenment there was a shift in the position of religion. What happened was not the triumph of atheism but instead the removal of doctrinal concerns from the public forum. This went alongside the persistence of ethics carried out on traditional Christian grounds.

Finally there has been institutional decline in Christianity since the Victorian era, but this should be understood in light of the exceptionally high levels of religious activity during the nineteenth century. What the figures show is not the decline of Christianity but its reversion to a normal status, something akin to what was happening during the Middle Ages, after the astonishingly high levels of Christianity displayed by the Victorians. The consequence of these historical processes is what might well be called the 'ethics society'. It is a society with an ongoing religious identity, in some ways very similar to the medieval period, a distinctive sympathy towards the idea of a God, conceived of in vaguely Christian terms, and an overriding concern with ethical issues. The ethics that this society practises are based on Christian premises. Such a society is of course contemporary Western society and it is what we now call secular. Whether the description has a long-term suitability is open to question. Also open to question is the

capacity of the Church to respond to the new manifestation of its faith. However, before discussing these issues, the four central ideas need to be looked at in more detail.

The first proposal is that Christianity has always had a fluid and changing identity. What we think of now as Christianity is not the same as what would have been called Christian in the medieval period or during the days when the faith first came to Northern Europe. The question of Christian identity is a missionary question. It was as Christianity travelled, as it crossed national borders, that it changed. The social and cultural settings into which Christianity entered affected its beliefs and practices. This raised important questions. What elements of the faith belonged to specific local contexts, and might be jettisoned in alternative contexts, and what was permanent? What within Christianity was essential to the integrity and identity of the religion? Must you have the resurrection or the faith that Jesus is Lord or a commitment to a Church with a threefold order of bishops, priests and deacons? Most Christians want to insist that there must be an essential core of the faith to give it identity, although they do not agree on what that core would be. The problem for those who argue for an essential core is one of language and meaning. If there is an essential core of Christian belief which has a non-historical, static and discernible meaning, then there needs to be a way of talking about this core which can be understood by local people. It will be the context which will provide the cultural and linguistic tools necessary to make sense of the central beliefs and values. You cannot talk about the essential core of Christian belief, and be understood, without employing the local language. The local language is meaningful because of the social and cultural context in which it operates. So separating the essential core from the local is impossible because the core beliefs cannot be spoken about and heard without using local language. It is not possible to separate the ahistorical and transcendent from its immediate local expression. The consequence of this linguistic problem is that when the local cultural framework changes, so then does the essential core

element which gives Christianity its identity. Christian identity is fluid because it changes whenever it enters a new context. As we shall see in Chapter Four the Church's history demonstrates this point repeatedly. At best each culturally and historically local church establishes afresh its view of what is meant by the core values of Christianity.

Equally problematic is the argument that Christianity has no core identity which is independent of a cultural and linguistic context. How can we talk of Christianity, and for that matter secularism, if it is impossible to identify what it is we mean? It cannot be the case that everything which claims to be Christian actually is Christian. There are too many diverse and opposing claims for this to be coherent. This does not mean that individual people and churches are not clear about what they think it means to be Christian or what is the essence of Christianity according to their theology. Rather, the confusion comes because there is no consensus amongst the competing and conflicting theologies and, perhaps more importantly, no consensus about what criteria exist to make decisions about the integrity of Christianity. The division between liberal and evangelical Christians over the issue of human sexuality is a contemporary illustration of this point. This discussion is rooted in vexed questions of biblical authority and interpretation, and this is only the tip of a very large iceberg.

At this point the dilemma of Christian identity is ecumenical. The ecumenical movement is the place where the Church has struggled with the question of how diverse Christianities can coexist without a destructive pursuit of theological or Church power and control. How can the churches survive without being dominated by what might be called a theological will to power? For some the very raising of questions of orthodoxy and heresy is itself illustrative of a fundamental error. The theological task is to assert the historical continuity of their version of the Christian tradition, usually by reference to biblical sources. For more liberal theologians the alternative position is to shift the discussion to questions of procedure and process. Christian identity is found in a

willingness to cohabit with those with whom one cannot agree. It is conceded that agreement on matters of content is impossible. This means church communion is a methodological problem for those who wish to coexist and converse with doctrinal aliens. My examination of these issues will occupy Chapter Four.

The second idea to be examined is the notion that medieval Christianity functioned in ways which are very similar to contemporary Western religion. In Chapters Five and Six, I shall look at questions of medieval Christianity such as church attendance, the importance of the supernatural in everyday life and the extent of Christian belief. The assumption which underpins these chapters is that human beings are in some sense essentially religious and that the lived-out expression of their religion tends to be similar whether lived-out during the medieval period or today in the West.

The evidence we have of religious activity during the medieval period is incomplete. Many of the conclusions reached about medieval religious life depend upon sources which are difficult to read and interpret. We do not have the statistical data or sociological detail which informs our understanding of Christian practices and beliefs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What we do have are historical records which throw up some illustrations of how medieval people behaved. Historians have then to make sense of the evidence as best they can. To do this they develop a story about the Church, Christianity and society which takes account of the existing historical data. The narrative which dominates historical accounts at the moment is that of high levels of medieval Christian belief and practice, certainly compared with the levels manifest in contemporary Western society. During the medieval period, Christian belief, especially belief in the supernatural, was the only intellectual idea with credibility. Church attendance was a common, if not quite universal, activity. Church leaders exerted political and social influence, especially through the instrument of excommunication. The contrast with Western secular society is all too

apparent. So what has happened is that Christian belief and practice has declined since its medieval heyday.

Underpinning this story of medieval religious belief and practice is the assumption that everyone in medieval society was a religious activist. The only alternative to activism in the Middle Ages was heresy, and heresy led to excommunication and social and political exclusion, or worse. But such a picture seems unlikely. It suggests there must have been an enormous shift in human consciousness and behaviour between the medieval and the modern periods. Of course, some argue that the Enlightenment was such a shift. At the Enlightenment the intellectual atmosphere changed from the theological to the rational, scientific and technological. That the supernatural was no longer an effective explanatory tool demonstrates the changed mindset. The difficulty with this argument is that the current sociological data does not support it. A majority of people in contemporary Western society still believe in God, whatever they mean by this, and identify themselves as Christian. They have not abandoned the supernatural, nor, as Professor Steve Bruce, a leading advocate of the secularisation thesis points out, do they think or behave in especially rational ways:

Increasing knowledge and maturity cannot explain the decline of religion. There are too many examples of modern people believing the most dreadful nonsense to suppose that people change from one set of beliefs to another just because the second lot are better ideas. The history of the human ability to believe very strongly in things that turn out not to be true suggests that whether something is true and whether it becomes widely accepted are two very different questions.⁴

In his book, Steve Bruce goes on to ask what sociological reasons can be given to explain the decline of Christian belief. I shall explore this in the discussion in the next chapter. However, there is a question to be asked prior to that about

the decline of Christianity, which is: is decline the most accurate, valuable or informative analysis which can help us explain the contemporary religious landscape and account for the historical data?

An alternative account would be to argue that medieval religious behaviour is in fact very similar to that in the contemporary West. What we have today is minority Christian activism, the 15 per cent or so who attend church, alongside majority passive Christian support, the 70 per cent and more who claim some sort of Christian identity and express a vague support for the idea of a God. Medieval Christianity was the same. A minority were very serious about their Christianity, whilst a majority were supportive but from a distance. They did not want to make Christianity the centre of their lives, but nor did they want to challenge or abandon it. The majority have understood being Christian, whether in the contemporary or medieval period, as a matter of sharing a general sympathy for the beliefs and values of the Church. An important element of the sympathy towards the Church's values is the perception that the Church was a force for ethical conservatism. The role of the Church was, and is, to protect familiar social structures through its advocacy of conservative ethical behaviour, especially its emphasis on personal morality. An individual need not adhere to the Church's moral teaching to be glad that it exists and fulfils a conservative social function.

The notion of minority religious activism and majority support realigns Western Europe with the rest of the world. The narrative of Western European religious decline was simultaneously a story of its religious exceptionalism.⁵ Nations outside of Western Europe, with the USA being the most controversial case, appear to be populated by large numbers of religious activists. The sociological story of Church decline had to explain what factors made Western Europeans essentially different from the rest of the world and, to confuse the picture, internally so variable in church attendance.⁶ A narrative of minority activism and majority support begins from the straightforward notion that people are generally and

essentially the same. They will of course be affected by social and cultural factors, but these will not produce a new, previously unrecognized *homo religio* or *homo non-religio*. Instead, what sociological factors explain is the balance between the minority activism and majority support, namely how large is the majority or how substantial the minority. Sociological factors will also explain the different types of passive majority support which exist throughout the world and, when the evidence in the medieval period is examined, the different types of majority support at different points in history. This is a far less difficult and ambitious task than seeking to explain why some countries in Western Europe are exceptionally secular. However, it leaves open the question of what did happen at the Enlightenment.

Apart from some occasional figures in classical antiquity, the traditional heroes of secularism lived during and after the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It was at the Enlightenment that science and reason began its campaign against the fallacies and superstitions of religion. According to time-honoured historical accounts, everything changed at the Enlightenment: religion began its decline and secularism, especially atheism, moved to centre stage. There are, however, two problems with this version of history. First, atheism has never won anything but paltry support in the West. Second, Christianity was not removed from the public square. What happened was that doctrine ceased to be a topic of major concern, but ethics, and by this is meant Christian ethics, continued to dominate public discussion. So, and this is the third idea which shapes this book, at the Enlightenment what happened was not the success or even the beginning of the success of atheism, but the public transformation of Christianity from a religion of doctrinal orthodoxy to a religion of ethics.

One feature of contemporary Western secular society is the failure of atheism. The numbers of those who identify themselves as atheists or who belong to organizations such as the Secular Society or the American Humanist Association are extremely low. *The European Values Study* for 1999/2000

reported that on average 5 per cent of Europeans identified themselves as atheists. The country with by far the highest number of atheists was France with 15 per cent (the only country with more than 10 per cent), whilst many countries such as Britain, Austria, Italy, Greece, Finland and Russia reported numbers of 5 per cent or less.⁷ What this means is clear. In the West people have not switched from Christianity to atheism. Insignificant numbers of people declare they do not believe in God. However, paradoxically, it does not mean that people see themselves as religious. In the same survey, 54 per cent of British people and a similar number of Swedes (7 per cent of whom described themselves as atheist) stated that they were not 'a religious person'. This drops to numbers in the 30s for countries such as Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, and is lower for many other European nations, the average being 28 per cent. Again we are faced by the problem of not being sure what people mean when they give these answers. They are probably not saying they are bad people, in contrast to the good folk who believe in God and think of themselves as Christian. What is likely is that they mean they are not committed to an institutional expression of religion, even though they do think of themselves as Christian. But this is speculation. What is apparent from the evidence is that whatever may have happened at the Enlightenment, it was not the start of the relentless march of atheism leading to a godless Western society. Given the statistical evidence, almost the opposite occurred; after the Enlightenment people affirmed their belief in God at least as much and possibly all the more.

If one feature of the Enlightenment is ongoing failure of atheism then a second is the continuing importance of Christianity. A number of political theorists and philosophers have argued that the ethics of the Enlightenment are based on Christian beliefs.⁸ Historically this is a fact. Ideas of individual human worth and dignity, shared public reason, the progress of human society through history, and the ability of humanity to investigate its world, can all be traced to Christian theological sources. In some cases the foundational

figures of liberal ideology and natural science were explicit about the Christian theological basis of their ideas. John Locke is a well-studied example. In other instances the pervasive presence of a Christian framework shaped the ideas which emerged during the Enlightenment. Individualism and human rights are classic examples of the ways in which Christianity provides the substantial ethic for public ideas. Still other Enlightenment thinkers did not expect there to be a clash between their ideas and their Christian faith; Immanuel Kant is the example oft cited here. It could be argued that whilst certain Enlightenment liberal and scientific ideas have their roots in Christianity, they have now travelled so far as to say they are no longer recognizably Christian. The Enlightenment began a process of change through which Christian notions were gradually separated from their theological origins to the point whereby they should no longer be called Christian. Any reply to this takes us back to the disputed territory of the identity of Christianity. It will depend on when the question of what is or is not to be counted as Christian gets fixed once and for all. It is apparent that I have argued that Christianity's identity has the fluidity and flexibility to accommodate the shifts being suggested here. This said, it is clear that some change did occur at the Enlightenment. We do not live in the same theological culture as the Middle Ages.

So what did change at the Enlightenment? To answer this we have to recognize what is missing from public debates after the Enlightenment. And the answer is 'doctrine'. Whilst contemporary ethics have a Christian heritage, it is equally the case that public discussions in Western society are not influenced by theology. The Church's debates about the nature of God, Christology, ecclesiology, the Bible, soteriology, salvation history and pneumatology do not concern sociologists, political theorists, economists, philosophers or cultural theorists. If there is explicit public interest in the Church's teaching, then it is usually around questions of personal sexual morality such as same-sex relationships, abortion, and divorce and re-marriage. What this absence of doctrine means for our

history is that if public ethics is shaped by a Christian heritage then at some point in the West's history this was divorced from doctrinal questions. It has become possible to discuss an ethics derived from Christian belief without also discussing the doctrinal origins and implications of these beliefs. The point of that separation was the Enlightenment. Considered from the Church's perspective, it means that one of the missionary tasks in Western society is to decide the extent to which it is necessary or important to reconnect ethics and doctrine. This does not mean that the Church should seek to reclaim the Western ethical discourse as its own. Rather, it may mean that the Church has to recast its doctrine in light of the development of an ethics beyond its control.

The fourth and final idea to be examined states that the Victorian period was one of exceptionally high levels of religious belief and practice. This is central to our explanation of why contemporary sociology is dominated by the idea of Church decline. So far I have suggested that the religious activity of the medieval period was very similar to our own, a pattern of minority activism and majority support. The Enlightenment removed Christian doctrine from public discourses, but not from an identifiable Christian ethics. The question then is as follows: if our analysis is correct how do we account for the consensus amongst sociologists that the Church has by all measures declined? The notion of decline would seem to challenge the history I have so far presented. The answer to this question is twofold.

The notion of decline is a comparative notion. For there to be decline it must be from one thing to another. What this means is that you could have decline, but this decline might not be a sign that things are terminal, merely that they are returning to normal after an exceptionally high level. Decline might be a reversion to normal stable levels. This is what has happened with Christianity. The decline from the Victorian period to today is a decline, but one from an exceptionally high level to a more normal level. The exceptional religious activity of the Victorians reinforces the idea that contemporary

Christianity is in decline. Sociologists concur that measured against the Victorian era, Church membership, attendance and support is reduced. Horace Mann's national Census of Religious Worship of 1851 is taken to be the benchmark. Steve Bruce argues that 'about one-third of the British people attended church on the census Sunday in 1851'. Some put the figures higher, nearer 40–50 per cent of the population. By the 1980s this had declined to 'in Scotland 17 per cent of the population, in Wales 13 per cent, and in England 9 per cent'.⁹ Other indicators such as clergy numbers and Church membership demonstrate a similar pattern of decline. It is notable that even at its peak, church attendance was not a universal activity. But this is not what reinforces the idea of decline. Rather, the demonstrable and dramatic indicators of diminishing support means that an assumption of decline achieves unquestionable status. In fact, as Bruce notes, the major dispute amongst sociologists and social historians is about the timing and causes of decline rather than its existence.

The nineteenth century was a period of exceptionally and uniquely high church attendance and support. The Victorian century was a Christian century like no other. It was an era of near equal Church activism and passive support. The widespread extent of Church activism meant that the public discourse was infused with Christian ideas and terminology. But the Victorian period was exceptional. It is no measure for contemporary religious belief and practice. Furthermore, its exceptionalism calls into question the idea of contemporary Church decline. The language of decline is entirely inappropriate to the contemporary Church. What would be better is the language of reversion. The Church has reverted to normal levels of religious belief and behaviour similar to the medieval period after the extremism of the Victorians. This is not necessarily of comfort to the churches, as they have an infrastructure to finance which depends on high levels of Church membership. The institution does not benefit from any reassurance that contemporary religious behaviour is not a

condemnation of its practices. What it does do is make the Victorian era the oddity which requires explanation, not our own period and place. We may be less Christian than the Victorians, but they were far more Christian than anyone else.

I have in this long introduction set out the narrative which will guide this study. This has been necessary because this is not a straightforward history with a beginning, middle and end. Rather, I am using history, as well as social analysis and cultural theory, to understand the nature of contemporary Western secularism. My aim is as much popular and polemical as it is analytical. The discussion of my four central ideas form the basis of this history of secularism. It might seem that by focussing so much on the Christian religion I am doing a disservice to secular ideology's uniqueness and integrity. This is a danger. However, the focus on the paradoxical nature of contemporary belief as both Christian and secular recognizes not only the shared history of the two systems of thought, but also their joint importance for understanding the West's identity. It would not be possible to describe Western society as only secular without ignoring the significant religious indicators picked up regularly in surveys. Nor, however, can we describe the West as Christian – the picture is far more complex than that. It is by understanding the identity of Western society through a narrative which recognizes the interrelated strands of secular ideology and Christian theology that we achieve a history which makes sense of our contemporary religious, cultural and philosophical landscape.