

Religion and the Secular in Victorian Prose: In Dialogue with William R. McKelvy

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In his essay “Children of the Sixties,” William R. McKelvy challenges those theories of secularization that “link the advent of modernity to forms of religious decline” and find clear evidence of this “religious decline” in Victorian England. According to McKelvy, these secularization narratives not only misrepresent the role of religion throughout Victoria’s long reign, they also mislead contemporary, “post-secular” scholars of Victorian studies. This is especially the case when scholars trace the roots of secularization theory “as a primary explanatory model for the nineteenth century and its signal cultural products” back to the Victorian period itself. By contrast, McKelvy notes that current historical scholarship finds clear evidence for “the vigor and vitality of religion throughout Victorian and Edwardian times” and dates “the birth of today’s dominant secularity” to the 1960s, the same decade in which Peter Berger, Bryan Wilson, and others produced broadly influential sociological theories of secularization.

While I entirely agree with Mr. McKelvy that the Victorian period in both Great Britain and the United States percolated with all manner of religious belief and practice, I wonder whether the broad brush strokes of “decline” versus “vitality” quite capture what I, at least, find most interesting about the relation of religion and the secular in the modern transatlantic world. To remind myself of just what it was that captured my interest, I pulled a couple of Victorian books off the shelf: *On Heroes, He-*

ro-Worship, & the Heroic in History (1841), by Thomas Carlyle, and *Jane Eyre* (1847), by Charlotte Brontë. Both books were published early in Victoria's reign, while Mr. McKelvy calls our attention to texts from the 1860s to 1880s. Readers of *Nineteenth-Century Prose* will doubtless be able to lengthen the McKelvy-Gilpin list with their own choices. Reflection on these two books, in turn, led me back to contemporary secularization theory and its pertinence for scholarship on the nineteenth century, with which I conclude this brief response to Mr. McKelvy.

Despite their many differences, Brontë and Carlyle share a common Victorian propensity for introducing questions of religion early in their texts. *Jane Eyre* begins with ten-year-old Jane beleaguered by her disapproving relatives, the Reeds. In an arbitrary act of punishment, the exasperated Mrs. Reed has ordered the young orphan to be locked in "the red-room." Jane's kindly uncle, Mr. Reed, had died in this very room, and his final wish had been that Jane, the daughter of his deceased sister, would be reared and maintained by his wife "as one of her own children." Sitting alone in the room, Jane "began to recall what I had heard of dead men, troubled in their graves by the violation of their last wishes, revisiting the earth to punish the perjured and avenge the oppressed." But the thought that Mr. Reed's spirit "might quit its abode – whether in the church vault or in the unknown world of the departed – and rise before me in this chamber," while perhaps "consolatory in theory," Jane felt "would be terrible if realized." Her bold effort to gaze confidently about the gloomy room was disrupted when, suddenly, "a light gleamed on the wall" and then "glided up to the ceiling and quivered over my head." After ruling out the naturalistic explanations of moonlight or the gleam of a lantern from across the lawn, Jane found her nerves shaken and "thought the swift-darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down" (1).

Although far different from Brontë's novel in its rhetorical effect, the expanded lecture series that Thomas Carlyle published under the title

On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History likewise began with the matter of religion, which Carlyle summarily asserted was "the chief fact" with regard either to an individual or a nation. By religion Carlyle emphatically did not mean the profession of articles of faith: "We see men of all kinds of professed creeds attain to almost all degrees of worth or worthlessness under each or any of them. This is not what I call religion, this profession and assertion." Instead, "the thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough *without* asserting it even to himself, much less to others); the thing a man does practically lay to heart, and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there, that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest. That is his *religion*; or, it may be, his mere skepticism and *no-religion*." Carlyle concluded that religion represented an elemental stance toward the universe by an individual or by a whole nation and, if one could identify that stance, "I say, if you tell me what that is, you tell me to a very great extent what the man is, what the kind of things he will do is" (2).

For present purposes, I would call particular attention to three features of these two richly textured passages. First, they evoke the supernatural and humanity's "vital relations to this mysterious Universe" in ways that place such experiences beyond the boundaries of traditional institutions and orthodox teaching. Second, they represent religion as centrally concerned with character and ethics; were ghosts to return to this earth, it would be in order to "punish the perjured and avenge the oppressed." Third, both Brontë and Carlyle gesture toward "the unknown world of the departed" and the "mysterious Universe," but they do so obliquely and without naming a deity whose purposes may invisibly guide the course of the universe in ways that exceed human knowing. The "disenchantment" of secularization theory does not quite seem to capture their world, which instead seems open to enchantment – even desirous of it – but agnostic about its forms and meanings. Summing up these three features of Victorian religious sensibility, the quintessential American Victorian William James famously defined religion as "the feelings, acts,

and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” From this indispensable core of personal religious experience, James argued, “theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow” (3).

And grow they did. The range and energy of Victorian religion is stunning. Reform societies, revivals, world missionary movements, benevolent enterprises, and experimentation with religious ideas and practices gathered from every corner of the British Empire created a veritable salvation army – including, of course, the Salvation Army. This patchwork quilt of Victorian religiosity shaped nineteenth-century culture in manifold ways that simply cannot be captured by the tacitly monochromatic language of “religious decline” versus vitality. It was not a simple narrative of one single thing being displaced by another single thing.

Recent versions of secularization theory seem to me to be much more nimble in describing the multiple phenomena of nineteenth-century (and twenty-first-century) religions than are the displacement theories in the lineage of Peter Berger. The global resurgence of religion has prompted fresh thinking about secularization and new models for understanding it. In the current renewal of interest in theories of the secular, I find that the emphasis falls not on the transference of authority but on the creation of a space (4). Like models of religious decline and secular ascendancy summarized by William McKelvy, spatial renderings of the secular also look back to the early modern centuries for the generative episode of their narrative, but they focus attention on a different set of factors: religious difference, ideological conflict, geographic displacement, and violence in the relations among Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, and Muslims. In this spatial reading, modern forms of secularism arose in close connection to the rise of the European nation-states and the efforts of these states to establish a stable polity that would bring an end to the catastrophic wars of religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Early modern social philosophies accommodated the presence of conflicting religious groups by establishing a “secular space” that pro-

vided "a ground of coexistence." According to an influential essay by the philosopher Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism" (1998), this process of "defining a space of the secular" initially took two forms. The first emphasized the space created by the overlap of what differing religious groups held in common, in order to create an arena for civic cooperation among different religions. The second form attempted "to define a political ethic independent of religious convictions altogether," in order to insulate politics from sectarian violence and to protect religious minorities from political coercion. These two strategies became the basis of "two rather different ways of understanding the grounds of peaceful and equitable coexistence between people of different faiths, or different fundamental commitments" (5).

Talal Asad opens *Formations of the Secular* with a critical meditation on Taylor's essay. Asad is in general agreement with Taylor's characterization of secularism but deeply skeptical about Taylor's proposal that "liberal democracy ushers in a direct-access society" that accentuates citizen participation. Instead, Asad insists that "the modern nation as an imagined community is always mediated through constructed images," arising from statecraft, pressure groups, and the mass media and aimed at making citizenship the unifying identity that encompasses conflicting perspectives. Neither Taylor nor Asad regards secular spaces as neutral or uninfluenced by the dynamics of power inequities, but Asad is the more insistent of the two on the power of the nation-state in establishing the secular as a political goal. Most importantly for my purposes, Asad emphasizes that secularism is not only an intellectual answer to questions about social peace in situations of religious diversity and dispute but also a set of practices, behaviors, and sensibilities. As a set of practices, secularism redefines and transcends "particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion," by subsuming them in the comprehensive "secular" practices of citizenship. Consequently, Asad is particularly interested in "the attempt to construct categories of the secular and the religious in terms of which modern living is required to take place" and which "mediate peo-

ple's identities, help shape their sensibilities, and guarantee their experiences" (6). In short, the social spaces of the secular promote forms of secularism that are at once a philosophy of life and a way of life, both ideas and practices.

Both of these narratives – the one represented by Peter Berger and Steve Bruce and the other by Talal Asad and Charles Taylor – have useful points to make; neither represents a comprehensive theory of the place of the secular in modernity. In drawing a contrast between them, my principal aim is not to evaluate the merits of either interpretation but instead to call attention to the quite different ways in which the earlier and the more current narratives describe *the problem of the secular*. In the transfer of authority model, the secular represents a framing worldview that challenges the religious worldview and, in the modern West at least, supplants religion as the comprehensive interpretive framework. In the spatial model, the urgent difficulty to be addressed is hostility, oppression, and violence sanctioned by differing religious convictions or ideologies, and the secular establishes spaces within which these differences can be negotiated. The earlier model asks about the continuance of religion in the modern world. The more current model is all too aware of religion's continuance and asks how different forms of religion interact with one another and operate within the modern polity.

When nineteenth-century prose addressed the matter of religion, as it so frequently did, Victorian society provided the *secular space* in which religious differences could be negotiated, religious perspectives debated and experimented with, and religious practices and commitments brought to bear on the structures of civil society. The struggles of Jane Eyre with issues of social class and Carlyle's fascination with different modes of heroism and leadership reflected the epoch's sense that a comprehensive worldview was fragmenting but also the sense that a cultural space – a secular space – was available in which the religious implications of that fragmenting could be the subject of imaginative literature and philosophical essays.

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Notes

¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Michael Mason (1847; London: Penguin, 1996), 23-24.

² Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, notes and introduction, Michael K. Goldberg (U of California P, 1993), 4.

³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902), 31 (italics deleted).

⁴ The following three paragraphs present in condensed form the argument of my essay "Secularism: Religious, Irreligious, and Areligious" (March 2007), which may be accessed at The Religion and Culture Web Forum of the Martin Marty Center, the University of Chicago Divinity School.

⁵ The citations in this paragraph come from Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford UP, 2003), 2, 27; and Charles Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998), 32-34.

⁶ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 4-5, 25, 14.

