

Dancing to the Music of Time: Modernity, Secularization, and Incarnation

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*I*n his response to Steve Bruce's latest defence of secularization (Bruce, 2011), William McKelvy cleverly deflects a charge levelled against his book, *The English Cult of Literature: Devoted Readers, 1774-1880* (2007), and aims it squarely at the sociologist. McKelvy laments the fact that his own work has been seen, not as having ploughed uncharted waters, but as having instead remained shore bound – rather like the narrator of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," listening to the "melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" of an already changed and prevailing historiographical tide (Arnold, 1867, 1.25). Turning the tables, McKelvy cheekily asserts that Bruce is neither breaking new ground nor restating an authentic 1960s mantra in his book. Instead Bruce is rehearsing teleologies formulated and articulated by his Victorian forebears. That Bruce should – apparently – be unaware of this happy coincidence, McKelvy argues, is because he is an intellectual inheritor of imported Weberian sociology rather than the follower of home-grown social theory articulated in the nineteenth century by both secularists and religionists.

McKelvy is surely right to draw the comparison between Weber's methodological approach and that of later twentieth-century exponents of traditional secularization theory such as Bruce. For Weber, "concepts, or leading ideas" provided the "necessary framework for any account of the past." The ideas of the "present day analyst" were to hold sway over "the

ideas adhered to by past actors” (Ghosh, 2003, 184). Such an approach is also more broadly reflective of disciplinary differences between those McKelvy denotes as sociologists – who remain more willing to work within paradigmatic frames of reference that marshal and manipulate the massed statistical evidences of populations – than cultural historians and literary scholars whose areas of investigation tend to be much more particularized and more accommodating of dissonance in the debates of the past.

Just as in the case of John Henry Newman’s ultimate rejection of the probabilities of Anglicanism for the certainties of Rome, much of this later debate comes down to a belief in – or at least a certain conceptualization of – objective truth. The insistence that sceptical materialism has to be recognized as modern society’s default setting, rather than its being one narrative that has its own diachronic existence in historical time, transforms it from an hypothesis to an article of dogma. Moreover, the supposition that religion or belief will wither and decline under the intense heat of rigorous scientific objectivity is grounded upon a particularly narrow definition of religious faith, *viz.*, as a system of belief that at all times requires absolute and unwavering adherence to a unique set of inflexible principles, enforced by an authoritarian form of church or state government. In other words: faith is fundamentalist and scientific versions of the truth, when provided, will instinctively prove more attractive and provable to all that hear them.

One of the significant problems, of course, with the maintenance of a “hard” secularization theory in the context of the modern world is the fraught question of what “the modern” actually signifies. Secularization theory, whether voiced by McKelvy’s Victorian spokespeople Lecky and Spencer, or re-presented for the twenty-first century by Bruce, is indissolubly wedded to a “Whig” narrative of history that sees Western “advances” in rationality, reformed religion, liberalism and industrialization as representing the acme of human progress and the ultimate achievement of the state of modernity. It is this Eurocentric and self-satisfied conception of modernity that Mark Elvin – an historian of China – ques-

tions in a short but important article in *Past & Present* (Elvin, 1986, 209-13). Based on his scholarly work on a culture and society far removed from, and frequently contemptuous of, Western attempts to lay claim to the accolade of being the most "modern," Elvin argues "any attempt to formulate 'modernity' simply in terms of some sort of increased 'rationality,' whether in economics or politics or religion, meets what are probably insurmountable difficulties." Instead he argues for an understanding of modernity "not based on chronology," thus escaping "the confusion caused by continuous updating" (*Ibid.*, 209). Modernity, suggests Elvin, has more to do with the ability to create, wield, and access power (*Ibid.*, 210) and to exhibit "the capacity to change the structure of systems" (*Ibid.*, 211) than it does with the passage of time.

The awkward process of pushing back the "moment" when secularization finally tipped the scales in its favor is a recurrent – and ever changing – feature of this debate's literature. If we look at the recent critiques of secularization theory (as it relates to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain) offered by Callum Brown and McKelvy, we observe that both theses maintain elements of the "whatever is most recent is the most modern" fallacy within them. Thus Callum Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800-2000* (2000), whilst it challenges the accumulated literature describing nineteenth-century secularization and integrates the revival in church attendance during the 1950s as an important part of his pre-1960s argument, sets up the target date of 1963 as a provocatively precise moment for Christianity's tipping point into decline in modern British society and culture (Brown, 5-7). And whilst McKelvy's own *English Cult* forcefully argues for the continued force of religion in the nineteenth-century literary sphere, it simultaneously and equally vigorously argues that secularization, defined as the conscious and formally legislated separation of church and state, had occurred in the British polity by the mid-1880s (McKelvy, 3, 32, 169). Indeed, the secularization of the British state was, he argues, in many ways necessary for the creation of a vital, public sphere of religious literature "characterized by an expansion of readers theologically unin-

structed by the state" (*Ibid.*, 1, 7, 255). Beyond 1880 for McKelvy, and beyond 1963 for Brown, the social, cultural, and spiritual landscapes are not only characterized but dominated by types of liberalism and rationalism which preclude religion as a powerful political force. There is no place for co-existence, dialogue, or revival once these key points have been reached and passed.

In contrast, Elvin's re-modelled modernity, based on power relations rather than chronology, "enables one to see societies as varying combinations of both 'modern' and 'non-modern' elements" (Elvin, 209) rather than societies purged of their "non-modern" elements. "Such a coexistence," he suggests,

may be in fact essential, as one may suspect that, for most people, undiluted modernity is psychologically unbearable. ... Pursuing this line of thought, it becomes quite unparadoxical to argue that, in general, the transition to "modernity" is more easily and effectively achieved when there is a degree of mutual support between some continuing "traditional" cultural values and those that we have defined as being specifically "modern"; and, conversely, that an uncompromising antagonism to the "non-modern" may be in many respects counter-productive. (*Ibid.*, 212)

The ability of religion to revive, mutate, and re-enter political negotiation at key points in the history of modern Britain is a characteristic that needs to be fully acknowledged in McKelvy's story. He notes here that his critique of the traditional secularization thesis was neither controversial nor attracted criticism; however, his maintenance of the 1880s as a key tipping point for political secularization of Britain was eminently so. In a limited capitulation from the hard line taken in the *English Cult*, McKelvy here acknowledges that spiritual and temporal powers were coordinated "in limited ways in Britain in the 1880s and beyond" (23). If he were to acknowledge fully the important national political role the Anglican church (which is the denomination in which he is most in-

terested) played during the twentieth century, delineated in Matthew Grimley's detailed and persuasive study *Citizenship, Community, and the Church of England* (2004), he would find that many of the intellectual trends he identifies in the 1860s were continued into the inter-war years and beyond.

While British sociologists may have rejected Liberal Anglican traditions in English political thought, there were others, both inside the Christian churches and outside – who were prepared to carry forward and re-state such tenets throughout the twentieth century, maintaining Christianity in general and Liberal Anglicanism in particular at the forefront of English political thought into the postwar era (Grimley, 4-5). One of the key messages of Grimley's thesis is that the twentieth-century Anglican church repeatedly took the initiative in politics. One of the significant problems with secularization theory that McKelvy highlights here, is its assumption that religious institutions were unwilling or unable to respond to what was being done to them; in other words, that religious individuals, groups and institutions lacked any meaningful agency within a truly "modern" society. On the contrary, such actors were not simply the unresponsive objects of legislative change or progressive abandonment by the increasingly enlightened or increasingly disillusioned (two categories that are frequently simply elided). They made decisions and took actions which both ameliorated – and harmed – their standing in the modern British polity. I mention the failures deliberately, to underline the point that any apologist enterprise in an historical context, whether for or against the measurable success of spiritual or secular worldviews, is busying itself with the wrong questions. As historians, we should be far more interested in why historical actors responded in the ways that they did than we are in judging the results of their endeavors against our varied collection of moral yardsticks.

These questions of motivation are overlooked far too frequently whether we are analyzing the advocates of faith or its detractors. What was it about their experience of living in Victorian Britain that convinced men like Lecky and Spencer that secularism was continuing its onward

march? What was it about their beliefs that persuaded men like Richard Tawney to urge the continued relevance of an ancient faith?

McKelvy's mention of Tawney, and his intellectual, political and spiritual debt to Charles Gore, offers an opportunity to dwell briefly on a case in point. Charles Gore (1853-1932) was one of the key 'bridges' between the Liberal Anglicanism of the nineteenth century and the Christian socialist/welfare state impetus of the twentieth. Gore's attempt to relate his Christian faith to modern life offers some important insights into why some Liberal Anglicans felt impelled to interact with other denominations, and with representatives of what they would have called secularism or materialism, on a distinctively "modernist" agenda. Moreover, Gore's ideas are suggestive of how both proponents of Liberal Anglican ideas, and those who saw such a world view as outdated, might have co-existed (rather than the one simply replacing the other) in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Gore's *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry draws attention to the impact upon him, as a fifteen-year-old Harrow school boy, of hearing a sermon delivered by Assistant Master Brooke Foss Wescott (later inaugural president of the Christian Social Union and later still bishop of Durham) on "Disciplined Life" in which the preacher enunciated his belief that a monastic vocation, a "life of absolute and calculated sacrifice," could be "a spring of immeasurable power" in the modern world (quoted in Wilkinson, 2004, online edn.; see also Patrick, *idem*). Wilkinson quotes this sermon because of the unmistakable echo of it that exists in Gore's own later writings and ecclesiastical career. When, two decades on, Gore edited, introduced, and contributed an important essay to *Lux Mundi: a series of studies in the religion of the incarnation* (1889), a text focused on the relevance of the incarnation of Christ to modern life, he was arguing that Christianity and theology had roles to play in the shaping of modernity. The volume's aim, was, in Gore's words, "to attempt to put the Catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems" (Gore, 1889, vii). Whereas this project might be seen through the lens of secularization theory as a largely

futile enterprise, attempting to relate a redundant and old-fashioned notion of divine intervention to a modern world now habitually sceptical of such miraculous storytelling, it is very much worth while trying to understand why Gore and his fellow contributors considered the incarnation as a relevant (and potentially revolutionary) concept for the modern world.

If we bear in mind Elvin's recasting of "the modern" as the ability to wield power and to change systems, we can recover a little of how Gore could consider himself as holding a faith entirely commensurate with the conditions of late nineteenth-century modernity. Gore and his fellow incarnationists held two beliefs about Christ in creative tension. Firstly that, as the *logos* or "Word" depicted in the Gospel of John, Christ was the timeless creator, the beginning, end, and integral part of all things and therefore constantly relevant to and immanent in human experience (John I). Secondly, that Christ's decision to put aside his divine omnipotence – to enter human time and experience human life in full in order to redeem it – had had the effect of completely recasting the character and nature of human history. If we recall once more Elvin's criteria for categorizing something or someone as "modern" – the ability to create, wield and access power (Elvin, 210) and the capacity to change systems (*Ibid.*, 211) – we can begin to see how incarnationists like Gore could believe that their faith was not only relevant to modern life but also possessed an imperative to engage with it actively.

Gore's particular contribution to incarnational theology – the idea that Christ had deliberately limited the knowledge of his human incarnation, Jesus of Nazareth, to that of a human being of his time (*kenosis*; see Philippians 2:6-8) – was scarcely more than an inference in *Lux Mundi* and yet was tremendously influential amongst twentieth-century Christian thinkers such as Tawney and William Temple who took forward Gore's mission of social justice based on the notion of sacrifice into the new century (Grimley, 37-42). However, by formulating and propounding a doctrine in which Christ was believed not only to be timeless and omnipotent but also discernable at and limited by a particular point and location in human history, Gore and his followers left themselves open to

the charge of trying to reconcile the irreconcilable. No wonder, perhaps, that some reviewers of *Lux Mundi* took the opportunity to stress their belief in the “superior clarity of evangelicalism” (Garnett, online edn.). By focusing on the incarnation as the most significant moment for modern Christians to dwell upon, explore, and venerate, thinkers such as Gore drew inexorable attention to the temporality of their faith. Whether they liked it or not, a religion of incarnation not only allowed for the possibility of an Immanuel – a God ever-present with humanity as both a beneficent, timeless being alert to suffering; it also allowed others to find a God that was enmeshed in human time, no longer a being independent of it and, indeed, providentially able to direct it. As Walter Benjamin pointed out, if we privilege what he calls “a messianic zero-hour [*Stillstellung*]” in any narrative – whether that be of incarnation, the birth of the modern, or the death of religion – we invite critiques framed in chronological terms because our narrative has “time as its core, its precious but flavourless seed” (Benjamin, 2005 [1974], online).

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