

A Post-Secular Victorian Study: Religion, Reading, and Imagining Britain

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I welcome William McKelvy's reflections, for he addresses more explicitly an argument he pursued in *The English Cult of Literature* (2007): secularization narratives that rely on the demise of religion, coordinated with the rise of something to usurp its authority (e.g., secular literature), need to be disabled as automatic guides to the history of nineteenth-century Britain. Not only do these narratives need to be shelved, but they should also be replaced with a "Post-Secular Victorian Studies." While I affirm McKelvy's call for post-secular scholarship, I have reservations about his description of what he calls "Victorian secularization theory" (27 above). So I will state them briefly before proposing a subject for a "post-secular Victorian study": the relationship between reading and religious visions of the nation in nineteenth-century Britain.

McKelvy, in my view, risks pushing his argument too far when he characterizes Cardinal Newman, W.E.H. Lecky, and Herbert Spencer as participants in a "particular species of theological discourse," a Victorian form of secularization theory motivated "by religious convictions" (27 above). Can all these writers' "convictions," as opposed to one of their common objects of study, be called "religious"? Newman, Lecky, and Spencer agree that the onset of religious pluralism and liberalism is a modern phenomenon with roots in the Protestant Reformation. Yet while Newman and Lecky proceed from their religious (Christian) commitments and affirm theological assumptions (e.g., belief in providence), Spencer does not. As McKelvy acknowledges, Spencer denies the super-

natural claims of all religions (24 above), and makes an early sociological attempt to "explain the laws that structure human societies" without depending on theological dogmas about the origin, nature, or direction of human history (27 above) – his idea of the First Cause being that it was strictly unknowable. For these reasons, I cannot agree that the discourse of these writers is on the whole "theological" or "motivated by religious convictions." Perhaps it is better to emphasize their shared belief that the history and future of theology and religious devotion is vital to any description of modern change. As McKelvy reminds us, theology and religious practice were generally excluded as determining and enduringly relevant forces in accounts of secularization by twentieth-century sociologists, especially after the 1950s and '60s (27-29). Therefore, one can distinguish Victorian from twentieth-century secularization debates by the continuing importance, and sometimes interpretive authority, each gives to theology and religion. This seems to be McKelvy's real point, and I believe it is a valuable one.

More convincingly, McKelvy suggests that secularization narratives dominant in twentieth-century sociology, literary studies, and many other fields could be a species of what Eric Hobsbawm has called "invented traditions": "practices," in this case interpretive methods and grand narratives, "governed ... by accepted rules and of a ritual ... nature," that inculcate normative assumptions about our own world "by repetition," and by projecting them onto "a suitable historical past" (1). In other words, secularization theory, understood as the decline of religion and relegation of belief to a private sphere, might tell us more about the direction twentieth-century academics and intellectuals wished to give modernity, rather than providing an empirical account of the last two hundred years of Western – let alone global – history. By recommending a "post-secular Victorian studies," McKelvy implies that we would better engage with our own historical and scholarly moment by admitting the central role of theology and religion in debates about secularization in the 1860s: for then, as now, "a wide range of arguments about modern change are being made in a world charged by a variety of religious faiths and their detrac-

tors” (29 above). Accepting this argument could sponsor misplaced hope that uncovering the Victorians’ various approaches to religion in modernity will provide us with “guides” for our own. Aside from increasing our comfort with the decline of twentieth-century secularization theory and the rise of theology and religion as serious subjects, I doubt this will happen. That said, I accept the tacit invitation: we ought to recover religiously inspired Victorian debates about modern change for the insight they yield into the past and, potentially, the present.

Recent debate about modernity has often focused on the boundaries – real, desired, and resisted – between religious beliefs and national public spheres. In France, arguments about how these boundaries should be policed recently erupted when its parlement decided to ban the Islamic burqa and niqab from public spaces (effective 11 April 2011). A few months later, public debate was sparked in the United States by the gathering of 32,000 at Houston’s Reliant stadium for a day of prayer hosted by Texas Governor Rick Perry. Protestors ringed the stadium; Houston attorney David Furlow criticized Perry for violating the separation between church and state; the ACLU investigated the governor’s use of public funds; and supporters defended his action with examples from U.S. history: the Houston assembly revealed that the intersection of religion with public life remains vital and controversial in a modern nation noted for its religious intensity (*Houston Chronicle*, 27 July 2011). Anxiety, especially Western, over the public force of religion seems to derive at least in part from the belief that the nonsectarian nation has (and should) become the center of imaginative and political allegiance for modern societies, while religious forms of belonging and community have (and should) become safely privatized.

Academic versions of this story about the retreat of religious belief from the public spheres of nation states have been influentially challenged by the sociologist of religion José Casanova in his *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994). Once controversial, Casanova’s argument for the public vitality of religion around the world, especially in the United States and countries outside the West, has been confirmed by

recent history, and respect for his basic claims has grown among sociologists. As McKelvy notices, the sociologist Steve Bruce now feels the need to defend, against many detractors, the inevitable decline of religion's "social presence" in modern industrial liberal democracies, insisting that when "the state" ceases to "promote a particular religion" and makes "religious affiliation a matter of personal preference," this "separates religious rectitude from other vital forms of social being (such as ... citizenship, and national loyalty)" (76-77).

Bruce shares with many current scholars of nationalism a tenacious willingness to characterize national consciousness, especially in its Western forms, as the secularizing successor of religion. In the introduction to *Nations and Nationalism: A Global Historical Overview* (2008), a massive anthology aimed at students and junior scholars, the authors proclaim that in the nineteenth century "the nation filled the gap" left by "traditional religions" (Herb and Badescu, xix). The conviction that national consciousness is secular at heart drives Liah Greenfeld's argument for the rise of nationalism in sixteenth-century England, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (1992). After the English Civil War, Greenfeld argues, the "nation as the primary object of loyalty was established," and it was only "natural" that "religion" thereafter "ceased to be the source of social values" – inevitably, it would "be pushed aside" as a foundation of national identity (77). Greenfeld's historical argument has been powerfully refuted by Krishan Kumar (96-103), but the influence her book has enjoyed among scholars of nationalism indicates the appeal of her belief that the rise of national consciousness is an agent of secularization, heralding the demise of religion's social authority. In the 2008 anthology I mention above, for instance, Greenfeld, joined by Jonathan Eastwood, repeats her basic claim that "the national image of the world is a secular one" (5).

If one accepts that narratives of religious decline should no longer govern the history of nineteenth-century Britain, it becomes possible to pursue a "post-secular Victorian study" largely unremarked upon by scholars of literature, history, political science, and religion. Between the 1820s and 1870s the Anglican Church was forced to surrender many of

its exclusive ties to the state, and so (at least formally) much of its political and social authority. Yet this process was accompanied by the competing attempts of creative authors, journalists, educators, and clergy to treat print as a medium for imagining and participating in a virtual Protestant community spanning the British nation.

These authors so often concentrated on Britain's consumption of print when imagining its spiritual collective because they could not connect British identity to an existing religious institution. As Linda Colley has argued in *Britons: Forging the Nation* (1992), a popular sense of British identity was created over the eighteenth century by allegiance to a general Protestantism defended through constant warfare with continental enemies (3-7). Foremost among these was France, early imagined as a nation of idolatrous Catholics, and, after 1793, as "a nation of scoffing infidels" (McLeod 46). After the French dragon fell in 1815, nineteenth-century Protestants in all four British kingdoms persistently imagined their commonality by defining themselves against the aliens at home, Irish Catholics (Kumar 163). Yet, Keith Robbins observes, there was never a "British" – as opposed to an English or Anglican – "Church" (190). If the dominant Protestant population could find a common enemy in Catholics and atheists, internal divisions between church and chapel, and between parties within the Established Church, frequently erupted into vicious public antagonism, as made clear by decades of warfare between Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics, who in turn agreed in denouncing liberal churchmen. The political decline of the Anglican Church by mid-century made unavoidable for English Anglicans what the creation of British consciousness in fact required: Britain's (Protestant) Church must be an imagined sanctuary. Attempts to invoke and describe the British nation's consciousness of its religious community therefore turned to reading. At least notionally, reading was voluntary, constantly expanding, and mind shaping, and it was passing out of the control of any single institution of the state, church, or chapel. Reading would be the means and the measure of the nation's religious – if not theological – community.

A striking example of this phenomenon in nineteenth-century prose is the journalistic commentary on the *The Christian Year* (1827) follow-

ing the death of its author, the Anglican priest and Tractarian John Keble, in 1866. A series of devotional lyrics organized around the Book of Common Prayer, *The Christian Year* was the century's poetic blockbuster, going through 158 editions before its copyright expired in 1873, allegedly read by members of all classes (Blair 7-9), and setting what might be a world record for the number of editions produced in its author's lifetime.¹ By the century's end, at least half a million copies had been sold and nearly every literate Victorian household would have had one (Tennyson 226-27).

Originally resolved on posthumous publication, Keble was encouraged to print *The Christian Year* in 1827 because of threats he discerned from print culture to the authority of the Anglican Church over the minds and hearts of Britons. As Keble argued in an 1823 sermon, the rapid increase of reading among the middle and upper classes was creating a "nation, characterized perhaps beyond all others by a feverish thirst after knowledge for its own sake" (*Sermons* 54). Blind faith in the reader's private judgment and "the general diffusion of knowledge" (54), Keble came to believe, would soon spread to the working classes as a result of efforts by groups such as the British and Foreign Bible Society to expand study of the Bible freed from Anglican doctrine, and by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge to distribute cheap literature on the arts and sciences among the poor. Zealous believers in the saving power of reading were spreading worship of knowledge as a value in itself, and confidence in one's private judgment at the expense of ecclesiastical guidance.

Something needed to be done to unite private reading with "thoughts and feelings ... recommended and exemplified in the Prayer Book" (Keble, "Advertisement" to *The Christian Year*). Keble indicates what those "thoughts and feelings" are in tract 13 for the 1833 *Tracts for the Times*, when he argues that typological interpretation of daily life, national history, and the surrounding world is the fundamental discipline trained by the Prayer Book's coordination of readings from the Old and New Testaments (2, 10-11). *The Christian Year* can

be understood as an attempt to translate into the private reading of poetry the typological disciplines of the Prayer Book. George Landow summarizes the typological view of time and history recommended in works such as *The Christian Year*: “Before Christ, all recorded Old Testament events served as a lens converging upon His appearance; after His death and resurrection, all things simultaneously point backwards towards His earthly life and forwards to His second coming” (40). Invoking one well-known type communicates a whole view of history and the world as “completely ordered” by “God’s plan” (40). In Keble’s ideal scenario, Britons of every class would learn to see themselves in a community of faith that stretched backward and forward through a history in which each event and fact was providentially interwoven, however impossible it might be to apprehend all the connections. For all Keble’s faith in the Anglican Church, with *The Christian Year* he concedes that the sense of community formed in churches must now also be trained in the mental spaces imagined through the printed page.

In a poem widely praised by contemporaries, “St. Matthew the Apostle,” Keble presents the former tax collector as a type of all modern urbanites, threading their way through a “crowded loneliness” of “ever-moving myriads” (22-23), and barred from the sky by smog. Like Matthew, who dwelt in the city and thrived on what the religious of his day called a dirty business, nineteenth-century urban readers and businessmen can still follow a divine calling:

There are in this loud and stunning tide
Of human care and crime,
...
Who carry music in their heart
Through dusky lane and wrangling mart,
Plying their daily task with busier feet,
Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat. (25-32)

Keble assures readers that routinely passing nameless faces amidst a deafening bustle can become a spiritual discipline, an opportunity to

practice reserved and inward daily devotion. Throughout *The Christian Year*, in fact, Keble gives the impression of what might be called a community of the isolated, one that involves the anonymous reader and Keble as distant poet, each of them engaged in private prayer and reflection by way of the poetry. At the end of "St. Matthew," the speaker adopts a voice that *The Christian Year*'s popularity helped readers recognize as Keble's, despite the country parson's refusal to put his name on the title page: "oh! if even on Babel [the city] shine / Such gleams of Paradise," shame on us who "live in Paradise [the countryside], as if God was not there!" (72-73, 79). After describing the spiritual struggle of anonymous "myriads" in the city, the Keblean speaker, alone in his countryside retirement, pauses to be admonished by their example. Fictitiously overheard by any reader of *The Christian Year*, the solitary author represents anonymous individuals, simultaneously leading overlooked lives across the nation, as members of a Christian community. As *The Christian Year* began "to be met with in every form, at every place – between one shilling and two guineas" (Hood 428), the sense of being one among its countless readers could confirm belief in a Protestant nation of the daily faithful.

While Keble intended *The Christian Year* to bring British readers under Anglican discipline, his collection became a means for those in and outside the English Church to imagine their nation. This is clear in journalists' reflections on *The Christian Year* after Keble's death in 1866. Writing that year for *The Contemporary Review*, William Lake, an Anglican clergyman, cites the interdenominational circulation of *The Christian Year* to imagine a Protestant nation formed by reading:

[Keble's poetry in *The Christian Year* is], far above any other that can be named, the constant companion of every class of thoughtful Englishmen and Englishwomen, – a true 'Eirenicon' [an attempt to make peace], in which, spite of all the differences of thought and feeling, –

"Reconcilèd Christians meet,
And face to face and heart to heart,

High thoughts of holy love impart,
In silence meek or converse sweet.” (337)

Quoting from “St. Mark’s Day” in *The Christian Year*, Lake describes private reading of poetry (“constant companion of every class of thoughtful Englishmen and Englishwomen”) as participation in a national congregation (“Christians meet/ ... face to face and heart to heart”). Piercing denominational divisions through private reading, *The Christian Year* provides a virtual Christian meeting place that no single church or party could offer. Similar assertions were made in 1866 by dissenting journalists. Even the militant *Nonconformist* viewed the enjoyment of *The Christian Year* “among all cultured men and women” (261) as a sign of a Protestant nation with room for different religious camps – a vision that Keble had himself apparently only imperfectly understood: “In almost everything that relates to Church life and outward Christian worship on earth he was opposed to us ... [But] Keble is to the Christian Church what Tennyson is to all of our own age ... – the poet of lofty spirituality” (262).

The *Nonconformist* journalist shows that imagining a non-sectarian but generally Protestant nation by means of *The Christian Year* was compatible with privileging one’s own ecclesiastical camp. In fact, cherishing *The Christian Year* could be a way of ridiculing the spiritual narrowness of other religious groups. The *Nonconformist* chastises Scotch Presbyterians for refusing “to read a line of Keble’s,” a sign of the Puritanical “idolatry of most Scotchmen” (262). When commemorating Keble’s *The Christian Year*, then, ideologically opposed journalists felt empowered by its reception to imagine conflicting versions of the national community that Keble anxiously prophesied in his 1833 “National Apostasy” sermon: a Protestant Britain in which the Anglican Church was “to stand, in the eye of the State, as one sect among many” (*Sermons* 127). *The Christian Year* became a centerpiece in reflections in the 1860s on a Protestant British identity that eluded institutional walls and was sustained by reading.

One way to apply McKelvy’s call for “post-secular Victorian studies” to nineteenth-century prose, then, would be to study the conflicting

ways British authors imagined a Protestant national identity formed by reading, even as the state severed its exclusive connections to the Church. Understanding this story about the Victorians might also cast light on our situation as scholars working in modern nations. At the risk of sensationalism, I suggest that Keble and a majority of Victorians have something in common with Governor Rick Perry, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and a number of academics in departments of literature, history, political science, and sociology. They agree that few if any national communities can be fully conceived or examined when religion is pushed into a private corner. The case of *The Christian Year* also indicates the wisdom of respecting the role media have played and continue to play in conflicted attempts to imagine religious and national community. What newspapers, societies for diffusing knowledge, and printed books were to Keble and the Victorians, the internet and social media are for many today when it comes to debating how we imagine ourselves in national and international space and time. They are not only the *means* by which we imagine community; they also partially *constitute* the kinds of communities we envision.

Victorian journalists of the 1860s further suggest that efforts to imagine the place of religion in national community can be surprisingly adaptable, and are inherently limited. Writers within and without the Established Church used the reception of *The Christian Year* to support their visions of a Protestant reading nation, and they did so without surrendering their own theological positions. Even Catholic commentators, still subject to harsh treatment by their fellow Britons, could argue, as did a journalist in the 1866 *Month*, that devoted reading of *The Christian Year* revealed unconscious longing in Britain for "the Spouse of Christ," the Catholic Church it had so long forsaken (451). As this writer's conversion of an exclusive national image to his advantage indicates, imagining the Protestant nation sustained by Keble's *Christian Year* required forgetting its Catholic members – as well as the Jews, Hindus, Muslims, spiritualists, agnostics, (few) atheists, and other non-Protestants within nineteenth-century Britain's national and imperial boundaries. Class was

also a factor: the praise of the *Nonconformist* for “cultured men and women” who appreciate *The Christian Year* separates these readers from an unmentioned and excluded population of the economically unfortunate and (supposedly) culturally deficient (261).

McKelvy’s meditations on secularization theory, and mine on Victorian imaginations of British religious identity, suggest another point worth stressing. The ways scholars imagine the collective consciousness of the people they write about (e.g., increasingly secular) are often bound up with the ways they imagine their own academic communities (e.g., sociology as a field protected from theology) and the situations within which they write (e.g., nations in which religion is a private matter). Perhaps taking religion and theology more seriously in nineteenth-century prose will change more than the way we imagine the past.

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Notes

¹ At least this seemed to be the case in 1927, when *The Times Literary Supplement* suggested that “with its ninety-five editions in thirty-nine years,” *The Christian Year* “is probably a world’s ‘record’” for the most editions of a work sold in an author’s lifetime (492).

² In addition to G.B. Tennyson’s discussion in *Victorian Devotional Poetry* (226-32), see Kirstie Blair’s survey of responses to *The Christian Year* in her “Introduction” to *Keble in Context* (7-9), “John Keble and the Rhythm of Faith” (129-30), and “Keble and *The Christian Year*” (607-8, 616-621).

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