

HISTORIES OF THE SACRED AND SECULAR

NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH SECULARISM

MICHAEL RECTENWALD



Nineteenth-Century British Secularism

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Nineteenth-Century British Secularism

Science, Religion, and Literature

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NINETEETH-CENTURY BRITISH SECULARISM: SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND LITERATURE

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Introduction: Secularity or the Post-Secular Condition

This book addresses the recent criticism and breakdown of the secularization thesis, a development that amounts to a crisis in the concept of secularism and in the long-held assumptions about an inevitable modernization from traditional, religious worlds to secular ones. Until the last decades of the twentieth century, secularization was generally regarded as a nearly indisputable fact of modern life and a staple of sociological thinking. A broadly held belief in secularization, what I call ‘the standard secularization thesis’, pointed to religion’s continual and inevitable decline. In the conjectures of the earliest sociologists – including Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, and Max Weber – secularization was considered an inevitable result of modernization: urbanization, industrialization, the rise of science, individualization, and so forth. Secularization was understood as teleological and irreversible, ending in the ultimate extirpation of religion and ‘the death of God’.¹ As an example of this article of faith, in 1968, the American sociologist Peter Berger was quoted in the *New York Times* as predicting that ‘[b]y the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture’.²

Yet unanimity among scholars regarding the progress of secularization no longer subsists, to say the least. Erstwhile proponents of the secularization thesis, including Berger himself, have conceded the persistence and continued relevance of religion, which has proven to be much more durable than they had imagined.³ The universality, timing, and mechanisms of the standard secularization thesis have come under the severe scrutiny of scholars from a number of fields, and some have even suggested that we abandon the notion altogether.⁴ ‘A triumphalist history of secularization’, as Talal Asad poignantly dubs it, has yielded to heated debates over a number of models for how secularization

occurs and what it might actually mean.⁵ The contemporary moment has even taken on a new moniker: post-secular.⁶ Indeed, while important thinkers have reasserted the secularization thesis, and others have attempted to retain it with significant revisions, there is little doubt that it has been significantly weakened.⁷ Secularism and secularization, that is, are no longer regarded unquestionably as the vaunted pillars of modernity.⁸

Such challenges to secularism and the secularization thesis have not left historical work untouched, and this is especially the case in terms of nineteenth-century studies. Traditionally, the nineteenth century in Britain has represented a pride of place within the secularization narrative; 'the age of Darwin, the age of steam, the age of the first self-identified secularists' represented a watermark of secularization.⁹ Romanticism was seen as a kind of aesthetic secularization or aestheticism as secularization, while a 'crisis of faith' narrative predominated in understandings of the Victorian period. The Romanticism as secularization paradigm pointed to the translation of traditional Christian religiosity into secular spirituality among Romantic-age writers and artists. The 'crisis of faith' narrative featured (mostly middle-class) Victorian intellectual heroes whose renunciations of religious creedal commitments signaled a progressive and teleological secularizing trend.¹⁰

Given the challenges to the standard secularization thesis, however, Romanticists have undertaken reassessments of the dominant motif.¹¹ And in Victorian studies, the new 'religious turn'¹² has even given rise to a countervailing narrative meant to replace the secularization thesis and the crisis of faith narrative, most emblematically dubbed the 'crisis of doubt' by Timothy Larsen.¹³ Larsen's coinage is meant to suggest that the 'crisis of faith' in the period has been grossly overestimated, while doubt itself was in crisis, as many erstwhile Secularists doubted their doubt and reconverted to some form of Christianity. Along similar lines, Callum G. Brown refers to two paradigms that have been adduced for understanding the religiosity of nineteenth century Britain: the 'traditional, "pessimist" view of religion', under which religion declines invariably from the early nineteenth-century on; and 'a revisionist school of "optimist" scholarship ... which argued more directly that the theory of secularization was wrong in whole or in part because it failed to account for the observable success of religion in nineteenth-century British industrial society'.¹⁴ According to Brown, both of these schools are mistaken – the prior because it posted secularization far too early, and the latter because it left the standard secularization thesis intact, while merely recalibrating it for religion's survival in the nineteenth

century. Most problematically, '[s]cholars ... have been trying for years to qualify or disparage secularization theory on its own terms – using the same methods and the same conceptualisation of the issue'.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the thesis itself, Brown argues, should be overthrown. According to Brown, secularization did not happen according to this model, but rather took place later, much more suddenly, and for different reasons than those given by the standard secularization thesis. Thus, Brown suggests that the secularization thesis has been a major impediment to understanding secularization.

While such antithetical paradigms describe what each holds to be the dominant trend in the period, both models miss a sense of just what secularization might mean and just how secularity might be characterized as such. Against both tendencies – and against Brown, who post-dates secularization after the mid-twentieth century, as well as against recent thinkers who claim that it never happened¹⁶ – I answer the intriguing and important challenge effectively issued by David Nash by proposing a new paradigm that not only comprehends both secularization (or the crisis of faith) and the persistence of religiosity (or the crisis of doubt) but also that moves beyond the language of crisis altogether – or, as I see it, one that accounts for both while favoring neither, while also embracing a broad range of other options and predicaments.¹⁷ Engaging critically with the notion of secularity put forth by Charles Taylor,¹⁸ I heed David Nash's recent recommendation that historians of religion (and by implication, historians of secularism) 'look beyond the teleological straightjackets [of the secularization thesis] that previously restricted and encumbered them'.¹⁹ *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism* offers a paradigm that obviates the adjudication between crisis of faith and crisis of doubt narratives (or between secularization and its lack). Instead, this volume figures both the crisis of faith and the crisis of doubt in terms of a new understanding of an emergent secularity, as emblemized in particular by mid-century Secularism proper. I will address the crisis in the secularization thesis by foregrounding a nineteenth-century development called 'Secularism' – the particular movement and creed founded by George Jacob Holyoake from 1851 to 1852 – in connection with several other secular interventions in the nineteenth century and as an instantiation of the rise of modern secularity. While Secularism proper has been treated by historians and other scholars – having been examined in terms of social history,²⁰ literary studies,²¹ feminism,²² and even the history of science²³ – it has yet to be situated in terms of so-called secular modernity, or especially in connection with the much-disputed processes of secularization. *Nineteenth-Century British*

Secularism rethinks and reevaluates the significance of Secularism, regarding it as a distinct historic moment of modernity and granting it centrality as both a herald and an exemplar for a new understanding of modern secularity, and as an inaugural event of the post-secular condition.

I have made mention of a number of distinct yet similar terms, so I shall briefly define them here, contrasting when necessary their meanings during the period with their employment today, while explaining how they are defined and mobilized in this book. This segue will also amplify my arguments regarding the secular, Secularism, secularization, post-secularism, and secularity.

Secular: In the nineteenth century, the word ‘secular’ referred, as it does today, to the non-religious. But it also signified the worldly aspects of ‘this life’; that is, it gestured toward the concerns of existence on earth as opposed to eternity or another world, and to the activities for maintaining and living an earthly life as opposed to the aspirations of religious life or spiritual improvement. Thus in *The Missionary Magazine* for 17 March 1800, in a life of John Bunyan, the beginning of Bunyan’s religious conversion is described as follows:

Such an entire change took place in his sentiments, dispositions, and affections, and his mind was so deeply engaged in contemplating the great concerns of eternity, and the things pertaining to the kingdom of God, that he found it very difficult to employ his thoughts on any secular affairs.²⁴

‘Secular affairs’ signified those duties or activities involving other than spiritual, otherworldly concerns of existence, specifically in this case those pertaining to earning a living, or ‘keeping body and soul together’.

As the above passage suggests, the word ‘secular’ was originally contrasted not to religion, but to eternity. Derived from the Latin, *saeculum*, the secular is related to time, and the French word for century, *siècle*. The secular thus stood for occurrences in worldly time as opposed to otherworldly eternity, to temporal as opposed to spiritual existence.

From the late thirteenth century, the secular came to refer to members of the (Roman Catholic) clergy who lived outside of monastic seclusion and served the laity. The secular clergy were contrasted with the cloistered monks and were generally considered less religiously rigorous than the latter. This in fact was the first meaning of ‘secular’ in connection with religion, and although this sense can occasionally be found in use, the term had generally lost this signification by

the middle of the nineteenth century. It is important to note that the 'secular' in this sense was a term within religious discourse. Then, the secular, which had once denoted a lesser state of religiosity within Christianity, later came to mean anything that was outside of religious observance or practice altogether. In the Secular movement beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the secular represented that which pertained to 'this life' as opposed to another, and the means for the improvement of 'this life'. Such means were generally termed 'Science', deemed the sole 'Providence' of humanity.

In addition to the uses made of it in the period, I employ the term 'secular' as part of the secular-religious binary, a binary that is troubled in various contexts and to varying degrees, but where the secular generally indicates the non-religious. But the secular should not be understood as the mere absence of religion as such. One of the arguments of *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism* is that the secular, far from being merely a space devoid of religion, is never neutral or content-free; rather, the secular always contains substantive elements, including social, political, economic and other content and meaning.²⁵ Further, the content of the secular is always context-dependent, and the secular's emergence, rather than being an inevitable result of 'progress', the ineluctable march of history, or the outcome of a progressive, irreversible, teleological secularization itself, is always contingent and subject to local conditions. The secular arises in response to and as a vehicle for authority and contest within particular circumstances. Following Asad's assertion that the secular 'is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity',²⁶ this book provides accounts of the nineteenth-century emergence of the 'secular' – in various public spaces, discourses, and practices, including science, religion, literature, and social and political movements. Additionally, in *Nineteenth-Century British Secularism*, the secular and the religious are regarded as mutually co-constitutive; they derive their substance and meaning only in distinction from one another.²⁷ And, as David Nash suggests, the secular and the religious are often found operating to similar effect, as the same narratives may be deployed by secular and religious culture.²⁸ Thus, the secular is not necessarily the negation of the religious and the secular and the religious are not necessarily antinomies.

Secularism: The word was coined by George Holyoake and first used by him in his periodical the *Reasoner* on 25 June 1851.²⁹ As distinct from its contemporary connotations, the neologism as first mobilized referred not to any general prevalence of the secular in the state or the public sphere, or to the absence of religion as such. Rather, 'Secularism' was

invented *as a substitute for atheism* – to refer to ‘the work we have always had in hand’ in the freethought movement, which Holyoake and company were in the process of reconstituting and which reconstitution was to be marked by the new term. Secularism referred specifically to a developing ‘positive’ freethought movement and creed, and stood for new ecumenism embracing both secular and religious elements and participants. I treat Secularism proper throughout, but most directly in chapters 3, 4, 5 and the epilogue.³⁰

Secularization: As I have suggested above, this is perhaps the most complicated and controversial of the terms. First referring to the transfer of church property to the state or private landholders during the Protestant Reformation, for example the expropriation and enclosure of monastic property under Henry VIII in England, later usage was extended to designate any transference of authority from religious persons or institutions to persons or institutions with non-religious functions. In contemporary parlance, secularization has often signified the (supposedly progressive and unidirectional) decline in importance and influence of religion in public life and private conviction, and has become nearly synonymous with the process of modernization itself. As I have suggested, the shape, extent, and even the very reality of secularization has been called into question over the past thirty-plus years, while many revisions of the secularization thesis have been proffered. My uses of the term secularization follow these contemporary understandings, but this book intervenes in the contemporary debates regarding secularization in ways that I have alluded to above, and discuss further below.

Post-secularism: An ambiguous and contested term, post-secularism may signify a skepticism or antagonism toward secularism in recognition of the persistence or ‘resurgence’ of religion. Connected with post-colonialism, post-secularism may regard secularism as a legacy of colonialist enterprises and a disguise for the domination of a particular (Christian) religious order. Regarded in connection with postmodernism, in which Jean-François Lyotard and others call into question the self-arrogating proclamations of a progressive and teleological modernity, post-secularism poses a challenge to secularization as a master narrative.³¹ By post-secularism, I refer to ‘an attempt to overcome the antinomy of secularism/religion’,³² such that both are granted recognition under a common umbrella. Post-secularism recognizes the persistence of religion and marks an acknowledgement of a religious and secular *pluralism*. Post-secularism accords to religion an enduring value – a place at the table in politics, a voice in the public sphere, and an abiding role in private life. It recognizes the ethical resources and

community-building efficacy that religious bodies and their ministers can offer and countenances the function of religion in constructing and defending cultural identities. Further, by acknowledging and respecting the persistence of religion, post-secularism amounts to a refutation of the standard secularization thesis. According to post-secularism, the secularization thesis has been empirically disproven. Rather than a descriptive characterization of modernity, the secularization thesis, post-secularism suggests, is a normative imperative and a (failed) self-fulfilling prophecy of secular advocates. As Aleksandr Morozov puts it:

‘Secularisation’ as an all-embracing process no longer exists, but the reason it no longer exists is not because it has come to an end as a process with the onset of the postsecular age. The reason is rather that there never was such a process. There was only self-description on the part of the rationalising consciousness, which singled out this process as real and significant.³³

Secularization, if it has indeed happened, has not followed the patterns set out by the standard secularization thesis but rather has resulted in something like the post-secular condition, or what I refer to throughout this book as modern secularity: the continued co-existence and mutual reproduction of the religious and the secular by its Other.

Secularity generally refers to the condition of being in a (more or less) secular society as such. However, as I mobilize it in this book, secularity borrows something from Charles Taylor’s definition in *A Secular Age*. After noting the usual meanings of secularity as 1) the expulsion of religion from sphere after sphere of public life, and 2) the decline of religious belief and practice, Taylor defines ‘secularity 3’ as follows:

Secularity in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place. By ‘context of understanding’ here, I mean both matters that will probably have been explicitly formulated by almost everyone, such as the plurality of options, and some which form the implicit, largely unfocused background of this experience and search, its ‘pre-ontology’, to use a Heideggerian term.³⁴

Leaving Taylor’s controversial philosophical historiography aside, with this sense of secularity, as I understand it, Taylor seems to suggest a new understanding of what it means to live in a secular age, and a different understanding of the relationship between the secular and the religious

in that age. Rather than positing the antinomy of the secular and religious, the term secularity is deployed to describe an abiding tensile condition comprising the coexistence of the religious and the secular within a common frame.

Secularity as it concerns belief amounts to what I call in this volume an overarching *optative condition* – which comprehends the various possibilities of belief and unbelief as well as the irresolution, tensions, and continuing challenges that they pose to one another. Under this notion of secularity, the persistence of religion is acknowledged, but, as Taylor notes, religion has become a choice among other options. But, it is also a condition under which the very structure of belief may have been changed. Under modern secularity, religiosity has been altered by the secular and relativized as one possibility among others, a relativism that profoundly impacts and disrupts it. Religious belief, where it survives, is inevitably contingent and unstable. Thus, this conception of secularity theoretically accounts for the fragility and vacillations of religious belief and unbelief, perhaps even making sense of the putative post-secular ‘religious resurgence’ observed by Peter Berger.³⁵

So, why is it important to recuperate and feature the version of Secularism that George Holyoake founded in mid-nineteenth century Britain? First, because it arises from what might be thought of as an unexpected social provenance – not a world of elite intellectuals with their highbrow periodicals like the *Westminster Review*, but rather from the periodical and publishing houses of artisanal and working-class political activists, leaders, and journalists struggling for political representation, the rights of ‘free’ expression, and economic and political autonomy. Working- and artisanal-class freethinkers had promoted irreligious positions decades in advance of middle-class skeptics and unbelievers in nineteenth-century Britain. It is no surprise then that they arrived at the notion of Secularism before middle-class thinkers (although, as we shall see, not without the latter’s help). Secondly, the movement shows how Secularism was a contingent, historically shaped mode of action that could have turned out otherwise. Its contingent character challenges any extant notion of secularism as a universal doctrine delivered wholesale by Enlightenment rationality on the doorstep of the nineteenth century. (This fact also enlarges our understanding about the contingent and plural character of *contemporary*, context-dependent and local secularisms; they are not anomalies but rather have a precedent in western historical Secularism itself; there never was a (logically necessary) secularism; there were always only possible secularisms.) Third, Secularism as founded by Holyoake illustrates the

way Secularism as a real-world movement already responded to the failures of Enlightenment rationality to replace religion by admitting to the abiding presence of religion and welcoming the religious believer to its fold. Significantly, Secularism as first developed was never strictly an atheism or antitheism. To the contrary, developed explicitly as an alternative to atheistic freethought, Holyoake's Secularism anticipated Thomas Huxley's agnosticism by nearly two decades. Thus Norman Vance is mistaken in conflating Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh as two militantly 'anti-religious Victorian freethinkers'.³⁶ Finally, given its inclusion of religious discourse and practice, Secularism anticipated the post-secular moment announced in the early twenty-first century and debated amongst scholars of secularity today. The development of mid-nineteenth-century Secularism proper demonstrates that, as Rajeev Bhargava puts it in a related context, 'we have always been post-secular'.³⁷

In addition to Secularism proper, the book treats several important secular interventions in the nineteenth century, including Thomas Carlyle's 'natural supernaturalism', Richard Carlile's anti-theist science advocacy, Charles Lyell's uniformity principle in geology, the mid-century emergence of scientific naturalism, Francis Newman's naturalized religion or 'primitive Christianity', and George Eliot's secularism and post-secularism. Some of these figures, such as Newman, Holyoake, and even Eliot, were more or less directly involved in the development of Secularism proper. Others, such as Carlile, Carlyle, and Lyell, contributed to the underlying episteme from which Secularism proper evolved. Taken together, they contribute to an important cultural, philosophical, political, religious and scientific current whose repercussions would be felt throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.

These illustrations of secularity by no means constitute a comprehensive account of what has been called the 'secularization' of British society – mostly because this is not the picture I am drawing or the model under which I am operating. Following the commencement of the 'reshaping of religious history' announced by David Nash, this history of secularism/Secularism does not begin with the assumption of a secular teleology.³⁸ And, while more than mere tokens of the secular, these instances of secular emergence are meant as epitomes rather than the pieces of a complete puzzle. Thus, for example, while I touch on Darwinism throughout, other than treating it in terms of its connection to the emergence of scientific naturalism (Chapter 4), and the Anglo-Jewish response (Chapter 6), the Darwinian revolution is largely left unexplored in these pages. The reasons for this apparently glaring

omission are several. First, the secular had already emerged decades ahead of the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Even considering only the so-called middle-class Victorian 'crisis of faith' phenomenon, we note that evidence for such a crisis exists as early as 1840, if we take Charles Hennell's *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) as a somewhat arbitrary marker. But by the 1840s, the effects of the biblical Higher Criticism were already being felt by those who, like Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot), were exposed to it (and, in her case, exposing others to it).

Further, as I show in Chapter 2, even within the milieu of gentlemanly geology, the secular made inroads in science by 1830 with the publication of Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833). And in other milieus, plebeian propagandists for a materialist science not only produced and disseminated evolutionary ideas well before 1859 but also they fleshed out the implications of such theories in terms of the secular well in advance of the watershed publication event of 1859. Rather than fearing a loss of religious faith or experiencing it as catastrophic, these artisan radicals gladly embraced materialist cosmologies and advocated doctrines that supported their anti-clerical, republican, and radically egalitarian worldviews. Therefore, while it may be true, as Robert M. Young suggested decades ago, that Darwinism did not precipitate a major gestalt shift in the period,³⁹ it is also the case that materialist cosmologies, historicist biblical criticism, and geological science had already begun to irrupt decades before the *Origin*, whether or not these intellectual episodes registered any significant sociological effect. In any case, a presupposition of the Darwinian 'origin story' of secularization is that science is necessarily a secular and secularizing force, and thus with the publication of such texts as the *Origin*, a secularization process is inevitably put into play. This study interrupts this assumption by showing that science is far from necessarily secular or secularizing and that rather than necessarily precipitating the secular, science itself must be *made* secular before it is to have any such secularizing effect. I treat the emergence of the secular in science in chapters 2 and 4, showing its contingent and context-dependent character as opposed to its supposed 'natural' secularism as such. Further, to presume that such revolutionary science naturally unsettles religious belief is to accord it an efficacy that it does not necessarily have, especially when considering that earlier scientific revolutions in conflict with Biblical narratives did not precipitate faith-shattering consequences but rather were accommodated rather well by traditional Christianity. The Copernican revolution is a striking case in point. Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), for example, easily

accommodated the Copernican cosmology without evincing a loss of Christian belief. As Charles LaPorte puts it, 'to take modern science as categorically inimical to religious belief is to misread most of modern history'.⁴⁰ This is not to say that the Darwinian revolution or Lyell's geological science did not result in repercussions, but it is to acknowledge that the impact of paradigm-shifting science on belief is contingent upon social contexts, contexts that are explored in chapters 2 and 4.

Another apparent omission is the Bradlaugh branch of Secularism centered on the National Secular Society (NSS) and the *National Reformer*, the periodical founded and co-edited by Charles Bradlaugh to advance a secular agenda. Although I treat Bradlaughian Secularism in chapters 3 and 4, Bradlaugh and company are dealt with specifically as they interact with and differ from the Holyoake branch of Secularism. The reasons for this emphasis will be made clear, but I will note here that mid-century Secularism as founded and developed by Holyoake is the central object of interest in these pages. This interest has to do with my argument that Holyoake's brand of Secularism represents an inaugural event in modern secularity and an anticipation of the post-secular.

Doubtless other important phenomena would appear to be necessary in order to register a complete map of the emergence of the secular in the period. Robert Owen and Owenism are not directly treated, although I pick up the legacy of Owenism with George Holyoake's Secularism, which is generally understood to be the successor to Owenism. The British biblical criticism, in particular the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860, is certainly another. While I do treat the effects on British thought of German Higher Criticism in Chapter 5, and also the Anglo-Jewish response to the Higher Criticism in Chapter 6, my method is not one of 'coverage' so much as illustration of the notion of secularity being proffered, which the following chapters describe.

Chapter 1 deals with two antithetical figures – Thomas Carlyle and Richard Carlile – whose greatest similarity may be their homonymic surnames. This chapter shows how Carlyle and Carlile represent and propose differing versions of secularization, thus exemplifying the notion of secularity that I am employing throughout. At first blush, these two figures could not be any further apart philosophically, and yet they are bookends of the secular as it emerges in the period. Richard Carlile's freethinking career uncannily epitomizes the rationalism and utilitarianism that Thomas Carlyle lambasted repeatedly – particularly in 'Signs of the Times' (1829), 'Characteristics' (1831), and *Sartor Resartus* (1831). Whereas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* represents a Romantic re-enchantment of the secular and 'immanentization' of the divine, Carlile's *Address to*

Men of Science (1821) embodies the mobilization of a hard secularism in an attempt to eradicate all semblances of religiosity. Ironically, Carlyle would express this anti-religious, anti-theist desire in millennial, evangelical tones. Together, Carlyle and Carlile stand for two tendencies of the secular in the period. They adumbrate the coming of Secularism as it would emerge by mid-century but also they are figures fully immersed in a new secularity: a condition embracing belief, unbelief, and a suspension between the two.

In Chapter 2, I treat the field of gentlemanly geology during a period of a great explosion in knowledge production in order to show the contingent and context-dependent character of the emergence of the secular in science. Charles Lyell – in connection with the Murray publishing house and the Tory *Quarterly Review*, a bastion of political and religious conservatism – called for a reform of science and educational institutions based on the dramatic upsurge in scientific activity underway from the early nineteenth century. Lyell's scientific knowledge project can be seen largely as a response to such plebeian educational plans and projects as promoted by Carlile in his *Address to Men of Science* and the Zetetic societies modeled after it, the numerous Mechanic's Institutes founded thereafter, and the projects inaugurated by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (founded in 1826). Furthermore, like Carlile's proposals and projects, Lyell's knowledge project, which included his *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833), may be understood as secular. The project was aimed at the supersession or circumventing of theological and other cultural strictures within the domains of knowledge production and dissemination. It depended upon the *differentiation* of spheres – scientific, educational, and to some extent the broader public sphere – and the clearing of spaces within them to make room for new configurations and understandings of science and education. The chapter shows how a conservative publisher and a progressive author worked together to advance a secular, reformist agenda in a gentlemanly milieu of scientific knowledge production.

Chapter 3 turns to the movement of Secularism founded by Holyoake from 1851–1852, tracing the shift in freethought from the negation of theism to a 'positive' new movement and creed independent of, but not necessarily opposed to, religious belief. The chapter develops the history of Holyoake's Secularism in connection with several trends in the period; first, the break-up of the older infidelity represented by Richard Carlile in the 1820s and continued through the 1840s; second, as a development and differentiation from Robert Owen's social environmentalism and cooperation movement; third, a movement toward

a broadened inter-class, cross-belief affiliation, represented particularly in the association (a ‘Confidential Combination’) of Holyoake and company with such figures as Thornton Hunt, George Henry Lewes, George Eliot, Herbert Spencer, Francis Newman, and Thomas Huxley; and finally, the eventual divergence from Holyoake’s brand by the later Secularist strain headed by Charles Bradlaugh, especially in terms of the issues of atheism, sexuality, and birth control. With Secularism, Holyoake developed a big tent movement under which theists, unbelievers, and skeptics could combine for the material improvement of humanity, especially the working classes, using ‘science’, broadly conceived, as their method. Mid-century Secularism, I argue, should be understood as a salient moment of modernity, marking as it does an inaugural expression of modern secularity understood as defined above. That is, with Secularism, Holyoake was already engaging in a post-Enlightenment notion of secularity as a pluralistic, inclusive, and contingently constructed combination of believers and unbelievers. Within a state that had only recently criminally persecuted blasphemy, with himself as the state’s most recent victim, Holyoake nevertheless already grasped a sense of secularity as characterized by the recognition and cooperation between religion and its others, a vision of the public and political spheres not unlike that which Habermas describes as ‘post-secular’.

Chapter 4 examines the importance of Holyoake’s brand of Secularism to the creed of scientific naturalism – the epistemological creed that supported and promoted Darwinism, as developed and promoted by Thomas H. Huxley, John Tyndall, Herbert Spencer, and others. Drawing on a philosophical family resemblance and evidence of extensive social contact, I argue that Secularism was a significant source for the emerging new creed of scientific naturalism in the mid-nineteenth century. Not only did Holyoake’s Secularism help clear the way for scientific naturalism by fighting battles with the state and religious interlocutors but also it served as a source for what Huxley, almost twenty years later, termed ‘agnosticism’. As I show in Chapter 3, Holyoake modified free-thought in the early 1850s, as he forged connections with middle-class literary radicals and budding scientific naturalists, some of whom met in a ‘Confidential Combination’ of freethinkers. Secularism became the new creed for this coterie. As I show in this chapter, Secularism promoted and received reciprocal support from the most prominent group of scientific naturalists, as Holyoake used Bradlaugh’s atheism and neo-Malthusianism as a foil, forging and maintaining friendly relations with Huxley, Spencer, and Tyndall through to the end of the century.

In Holyoake's *Secularism*, I argue, we find the beginnings of the mutation of radical infidelity into the respectability necessary for the acceptance of scientific naturalism, and also the distancing of later forms of infidelity incompatible with it. Holyoake's *Secularism* represents an important early stage of scientific naturalism, and scientific naturalism marks an important moment in modern secularity. But perhaps more importantly, as I have suggested above, *Secularism's* role in the emergence of scientific naturalism underscores the contingent relationship between science and the secular. Science is not necessarily secular as such; as this chapter shows, it has to be made secular.

Chapter 5 examines the impact of secularism/*Secularism* on religious discourse, and vice versa. It registers a watermark in modern secularity – showing that the secular is not merely a space separate and distinct from religion, but rather that it infiltrates and conditions religion itself. The chapter treats the three Newman brothers – (Cardinal) John Henry, Charles Robert, and Francis William. Beginning from the same evangelical and familial base, these three Newmans diverged toward three different belief destinations: Catholicism, atheism, and theism. They thus illustrate secularity beautifully. I pay particular attention to Francis Newman, the liberal theologian and advocate of secular improvement. Francis Newman is a pivotal figure for *Secularism/secularity* in the period, especially given his impact on Holyoake and Darwin. I examine Newman's religious works, especially *The Soul: its Sorrows and Aspirations: The Natural History of the Soul, as the True Basis of Theology* (1849) and *Phases of Faith: or, Passages from the History of My Creed* (1850). These treatises stand as milestones for the secularist impulse in mid-century religious discourse – and as widely divergent from the Catholic revival undertaken by his brother in the Tractarian (or Oxford) Movement. I argue, however, that both moves – Francis Newman's naturalization of religion and 'immanentization' of God, and John Henry Newman's Catholic revival – are driven by the same condition of secularity, in particular the challenges posed by rationalism for evangelical Christianity from the end of the first quarter of the century. Of the three brothers, Francis Newman best represents the condition of secularity, taking as he did a middle course between the orthodox Christianity of John Henry and the unbelief of Charles Robert. This chapter shows how religious discourse was impacted by the secular but also how *Secularism* proper was constructed in conversation with this new religiosity as represented by Francis Newman.

Chapter 6 examines the literary representations of religion and secularism in the fiction of George Eliot, paying particular attention to her

final novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876). The mid-century 'crisis of faith', secularism, and 'secularization' have generally been treated almost exclusively in connection with Christianity; to redress this remission, this chapter turns to examine 'secularization' in the context of Judaism, first as represented in Eliot's fiction, and then briefly in Great Britain in the last quarter of the century. Eliot was a committed secularist. However, I argue that given the recognition that she lent religion and the importance that she placed upon it within a secular framework, she is best regarded as a 'post-secularist'. Although her earlier fiction generally repurposed religiosity for secular ends, in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot takes a surprising and ambiguous 'religious turn'. *Daniel Deronda* represents a secular-religious novel that accords greater importance and centrality to religion, in particular to Judaism. I consider Judaism in connection with the Eliot's use of the trope 'blood', to examine whether this figure stands for 'racial' determinism or cultural inheritance, which bears significance in terms of Judaism's apparent exceptionality. After a discussion of difference and transcendence in *Daniel Deronda*, I consider the question of 'secularization' in connection with nineteenth-century Anglo-Judaism, a line of inquiry that has been largely neglected, and one that I aim to inaugurate with this chapter.

Finally, in the epilogue, I explore a central tension within Secularism, a tension which continues to play out to this day, and which can be seen even in contemporary frameworks like post-secularism. But again, I suggest that this historical and contemporary tension may be explained in terms of the notion of secularity that I investigate throughout. Modern secularity or the post-secular condition simply mirrors the same tension that Holyoake's Secularism embodied over one hundred and sixty years ago.

1

Carlyle and Carlile: Late Romantic Skepticism and Early Radical Freethought

As I have suggested, mid-century Secularism as founded by George Jacob Holyoake in 1851–1852 was a post-Enlightenment development, both an extension of Enlightenment rationality, and a response to its failed promises for extending reason across the public and private spheres to the exclusion of religious belief and practice. In order to comprehend this development, I begin by examining some salient post-Enlightenment discourse and activity in early nineteenth-century Britain. This chapter counter-poses two exemplary, late Romantic-age and seemingly antithetical successors to the Enlightenment legacy. One epitomizes the late Romantic response to what Romantics deemed an overweening faith in Enlightenment rationality, as expressed in terms of scientific materialism, Political Economy, and a Utilitarian ethical ‘calculus’. The other represents the extension of Enlightenment promises to the ‘popular Enlightenment’ and the expression given it in the artisanal freethought movement, a movement that would eventually lead, circuitously, to Secularism proper. Respectively, the two figures – the ‘Victorian sage’ and cultural critic Thomas Carlyle and the Romantic-age, plebeian, Paineite radical, Richard Carlile – will serve to represent these currents. While apparently diametrically opposed, the standpoints of Carlyle and Carlile demonstrate a range of secular possibilities in the period.

The choice of Carlyle and Carlile may seem to be based arbitrarily on their homonymic surnames, but together, these two contemporaneous figures work well to frame the outer edges of the secular as I define it. I regard the secular not as the outcome of progressive religious decline – per the standard secularization thesis – although this sense of the secular is discussed throughout this book. Rather, I understand the secular as an element within secularity, an overarching or background *condition*,

a new 'naïve framework' of modernity that embraces belief and unbelief, the secular and the religious, as well as the irresolution and challenges posed by the conjunction of these elements.¹ According to Charles Taylor, secularity is a 'modern imaginary' that, by the nineteenth century, involved all subjects in a new set of dilemmas and choices, which constitute what I am calling an *optative condition*. The development of secularity precedes the period under consideration, but by the nineteenth century, secularity develops into what Taylor refers to as a 'nova', as its contours become spectacular by virtue of the diversity that it permits. As Taylor notes:

the salient feature of the modern cosmic imaginary is not that it fostered materialism, or enabled people to return as it were to religion, though it has done both these things. But the most important fact about it which is relevant to our enquiry here is that it has opened a space in which people can wander between and around all these options without having to land clearly and definitively in any one.²

Between them, Carlile and Carlyle represent a range of this *wandering* in the early nineteenth century – from religious faith, to skepticism, to materialism, to 'natural supernaturalism', to 'rational Christianity'. The metaphysical belief commitments that they present are also connected to 'worldly' convictions. Furthermore, both of these figures construe their choices as conditioned and constrained by the contexts that make them possible. Despite or perhaps because of their significant differences, Carlyle and Carlile illustrate the outlines of secularity that I am engaging here and throughout. Their views also illustrate theories of secularization itself – both the standard secularization thesis, as well as revised versions of secularization.

Thomas Carlyle's 'natural supernaturalism', from *Sartor Resartus* (1833–1834), has been taken by critics to represent a characteristic expression of Romantic secularization, placing 'belief' on a new naturalistic basis (albeit at the same time spiritualizing belief). On the other hand, Richard Carlile's early freethinking career may be seen as uncannily epitomizing the rationalism and Utilitarianism that Thomas Carlyle lambasted repeatedly, especially in 'Signs of the Times' (1829) and 'Characteristics' (1831). In his radical periodical and pamphleteering career, Carlile advocated the immediate secularization of the social order in its various domains. With a faith in science as an unmediated means of access to the phenomenal world available for social and political change, Carlile's scientism was a proto-positivism, embodying

a progressive and teleological model of a declining religiosity. Whereas Carlyle represented the expression of the secular in religious terms (or vice versa), in his efforts to extirpate belief, Carlile advanced an emergent 'hard naturalism'.³ On the other hand, Carlyle attempted to retain the higher purpose and meaning making potentiated by Christianity, while eliminating its doctrinal and miraculous basis (what he called its 'Mythus'). Carlyle and Carlile thus adumbrate Secularism proper, as it would emerge by mid-century. They represent antipodal figures, who are nevertheless immersed in a new common secularity.

Generally, in the nineteenth century in Britain, the religious and secular choices and dilemmas availed have been thought to include, broadly considered, established and dissenting Christianity; an evangelicalism that spanned the two; Unitarianism and other forms of theism and deism; Romantic reconfigurations of Christianity; pantheism; atheism; and later, secularism, agnosticism, rationalism, spiritualism, theosophy, and others. However, until relatively recently, the historiography of the period has been dominated by the familiar 'crisis of faith' narrative, a narrative that runs parallel to and reinforces the standard secularization thesis. Emboldened by challenges to the standard secularization thesis in broader histories and sociological studies, historians studying the nineteenth century have begun to challenge this dominant motif. One salient work, Timothy Larsen's *Crisis of Doubt* (2006), is especially relevant to this discussion.⁴ In a critical intervention into the histories of freethought, secularism, and religion, Larsen coins the phrase 'crisis of doubt' to cleverly destabilize this dominant narrative. Larsen argues that contrary to the assumption of religious decline that has been vastly overplayed in historiography of the nineteenth-century, thriving religious belief was actually the rule, not the exception. To counter a long-standing preponderance of 'crisis of faith' historicism, Larsen conveys a series of reconversion, 'crisis of doubt' case studies, suppressed or lesser-known accounts of erstwhile Secularists, who later reconverted to some form of Christianity. Based on an opening critique of a broad body of scholarship, in conjunction with his collection of short religious re-conversion biographies, Larsen aims to overthrow the dominant versions of faith, doubt, and secularization that he sees as having distorted our perspective.

Like other relatively recent studies, such as Alister E. McGrath's *Twilight of Atheism* (2004), which disrupt the supposed inevitability of secular modernity, Larsen does well to point to the persistence and viability of religion in the period. He is also careful to acknowledge that the 'crisis of faith' really did happen for a number of subjects. However,

in place of one stale and reductionist model, Larsen posits a competing hegemony, which leaves too little room for doubt, and makes faith rather too secure. Such a dichotomization, as either of these dueling and rather static, near all-or-nothing, faith or doubt paradigms suggest, belies the actual religious and secular diversity evident in the period. Likewise, rather than having to declare faith or doubt the ultimate victor, we might instead pay attention to the wide range of belief and unbelief commitments availed by nineteenth century circumstances.⁵ We should understand secularity not only as embracing the 'crisis of faith' and the 'crisis of doubt' paradigms, but also as accounting for an increasing plurality of belief modalities available along a spectrum between the antipodes of faith and doubt, which were rarely static or fixed positions in any case. Further, such metaphysical commitments necessarily intersected with other convictions, including economic, moral, political, scientific, social and spiritual positions. This chapter begins an exploration of the kinds of belief commitments that modern secularity availed.

Natural supernaturalism: the 'desecularization' of the secular

A liminal text residing on the border between Romantic and Victorian literature and sensibility, *Sartor Resartus* has been treated as an instance of Romantic secularization as well as a prototype of the Victorian 'crisis of faith' narrative. In his *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), M. H. Abrams considered the peculiar literary production in terms of the former, arguing that Romanticism itself was 'the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking', and that the natural supernaturalism of *Sartor Resartus*, from which Abrams derived his title, represented the general tendency in the period 'to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine'.⁶ That is, for Abrams, the natural supernaturalism of *Sartor Resartus* was precisely the secularization of belief, the transformation of religious sentiment into a secular mode, a transformation triggered by the incursion of Enlightenment rationality, notably in the form of Utilitarianism and Political Economy.

Within the past two or three decades, as the standard secularization thesis has been challenged, studies in Romanticism have also undertaken a decoupling of Romanticism and secularization. As Colin Jager has noted, the Romanticism as secularization thesis has been challenged by studies that show religious belief to have been more important for canonical writers than suggested by critics such as Abrams.⁷ This is

clear in the cases of Wordsworth and Coleridge, as in Blake. The secularization thesis of Romanticism has also been contested by studies that point to a range of expression having little or no relation to secularization or religion. 'As a result, one might look to non- or extra-canonical writers and materials, and thereby contest secularization by, as it were, changing the subject'. Or, one might examine secularism in terms of its 'institutional dimensions', the conditions that make secularism possible or necessary.⁸

Along similar lines, Frank M. Turner has suggested that the 'crisis of faith' narrative – largely based on intellectual encounters, while prominent in the Victorian period and certainly applicable to the lives and works of several literary and philosophical figures – is otherwise an inadequate explanation for the emergence of the secular in the nineteenth century. Turner argues that religious discourse and particularly a new religious *pluralism* was equally or perhaps more important than secular literature. With the diversification of belief in the early nineteenth century, more opportunities for falling out with one's beliefs became possible, Turner suggests.⁹ This position corresponds with sociologist Peter Berger's earlier claim that religious pluralism '*ipso facto* plunges religion into a crisis of credibility'.¹⁰ This claim seems to be borne out by the number of defections from evangelicalism, for example. Historians and literary scholars have generally ignored this role for religion. Further, Turner argues that 'the widespread and widely accepted image of an existing religious faith ... that falls victim to emerging new intellectual forces' was born in the early nineteenth century and was largely owing to *Sartor's* impact on subsequent writers and intellectuals.¹¹ *Sartor* forecasted a 'crisis of faith' made legendary by several prominent Victorian intellectuals. Indeed, famous Victorian 'crisis of faith' encounters – such as those of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, George Eliot, Leslie Stephen, Matthew Arnold, Francis W. Newman and others – may be read as variations on the *Sartor* theme, which itself mirrors an evangelical conversion.¹² While Turner may be correct in pointing to increasing religious diversity as a stimulus for secular conversions, his reading of *Sartor* is susceptible to the same tendency for which he criticizes historians. That is, much like Abrams, he reads *Sartor* as a straightforward secularization narrative wherein the secular merely displaces the religious. The religious has no real place in Turner's reading of *Sartor*; it is merely overthrown.

Certainly *Sartor* is a secularization allegory of sorts. As Barry V. Qualls has shown, the allegory reflects Carlyle's reworking of both the tradition of Christian pilgrimage, as popularized in Bunyan, and the Romantic secular rearticulations and re-locations of this tradition.¹³ Within this