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I

Shifting boundaries

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CHAPTER I

The religious and the secular in Victorian Britain

During the 1880s R. W. Dale, the leading British Congregationalist clergyman of his day, published an essay entitled, ‘Every-day business a divine calling’. Portraying the world as the creation of God in which the divine will was to be realized through all vocations, Dale observed, ‘It is convenient, no doubt, to distinguish what is commonly described as “secular” from what is commonly described as “religious”. We all know what the distinction means. But the distinction must not be understood to imply that in religious work we are doing God’s will, and that in secular work we are not doing it.’¹ Dale thus rejected boundaries in the conceptualization of social life that might have permitted his contemporaries to shy away from particular moral duties. As a Christian minister, Dale was unwilling to allow the members of his prosperous middle-class Birmingham congregation or his readers to divide their lives into conveniently distinct religious and secular arenas in which the values of the former did not inform the activities of the latter. Religious convictions were to result in civic action as well as in personal morality and piety.

For much of this century historians of Victorian intellectual and social life have had difficulty accommodating themselves to figures such as Dale and have resisted such rejection of boundaries between religious and secular activity. There long existed a general agreement among historians and literary scholars of Victorian Britain that secularization or the movement from a culture in which theological thinking, religious activity, and clergy were important or dominant to one in which they were much less important explained many of the most significant religious and intellectual developments of the era. This interpretation left little room for the likes of R. W. Dale or

¹ R. W. Dale, *Laws of Christ for common life*, 7th edn (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1903), pp. 3–4.

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his assertion that the religious and the secular might blend into and overlap each other.² Nor could that secular interpretation easily accommodate itself to the Victorian Nonconformist and Roman Catholic revivals, the political and spiritual resurgence of the Church of England, the liveliness of religion in both Ireland and Scotland, the strong religious alignments in nineteenth-century British politics, or the ongoing religious forces of the first decade of the twentieth century which manifested themselves in the struggle over the Education Act of 1902, the Welsh tax strikes, and Welsh disestablishment. Furthermore, that interpretation could not account for the enormous drive toward churchbuilding throughout the nineteenth century and the erection of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Westminster or the Anglican Cathedral in Truro.

Yet despite these explanatory shortcomings, the chief interpretive framework for both Victorian and general modern European intellectual history has remained the emergence of a secular world view replacing a religious world view. As Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge have asserted, 'At least since the Enlightenment, most Western intellectuals have anticipated the death of religion as eagerly as ancient Israel awaited the messiah.'³ Following this general interpretation, intellectual and cultural historians of Victorian Britain for most of this century have portrayed religious thought and activity in a critically negative light while favourably presenting secular intellectual activity as progressive and desirable. The demise of religion according to numerous intellectual historians and other commentators opened the way for a better, truer life of the mind embodied in the work of secular intellectuals and quite often university-based scholars.⁴ For most historians the undermining of the influence of both the Church of England and the Nonconformist denominations as well as the erosion of religious faith and conviction among the educated classes by modern intellectual forces seemed

² Only Asa Briggs in *Victorian cities* (London: Oldhams Press, 1963) seriously attempted to draw the Nonconformist clergy deeply into Victorian social history.

³ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The future of religion: secularization, revival and cult formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 1. See also, Franklin L. Baumer, *Religion and the rise of scepticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1960); Owen Chadwick, *The secularization of the European mind in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 1–18.

⁴ See A. J. Engel, *From clergyman to don: the rise of the academic profession in nineteenth-century Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), for a treatment of the subject that despite its title employs less than the usual self-congratulation.

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almost inevitable and unproblematic. Those developments were certainly rarely if ever the occasion for regret or criticism.

This complacently approving attitude toward the demise of religious influences stood in sharp contrast to the outlooks exhibited by social and economic historians toward other nineteenth-century developments that contributed to the emergence of modern British society. Many of the latter historians directed critically and even harshly probing questions toward the contemporaneous emergence of British industrial society. Indeed, providing a critique of industrial society became as much a part of the vocation of mid-twentieth-century scholars as did the championing of the emergence of secular intellectual life.

This situation reflected a general division of labour that emerged during the middle of this century between British and American scholars of Victorian Britain. The former tended to be concerned with economic and social developments whereas the latter addressed themselves to questions of intellectual and cultural history.⁵ This division of labour in turn reflected the political and cultural situations of the two scholarly communities after the end of World War II. Many British historians living through the first Labour government, the return of the Conservatives, and the various strains of the mid-century associated with the retreat from empire continued the over half-century-old tradition of associating a socialist or radical political agenda with a critique of the nineteenth-century industrial experience as well as of liberal politics. American historians and literary scholars, for their part, similarly pursued an earlier tradition of working out their own cultural vocation through reference to British intellectuals. The discrepancy in the two national research agendas occurred without planning and provoked little or no significant notice or comment.

The secular interpretation of Victorian and general nineteenth-century intellectual life very much reflected the concerns of mid-twentieth-century American university intellectuals. In the United States the study of intellectual history by historians, philosophers,

⁵ There are notable exceptions to this generalization as witnessed by the work of Noel Annan, Basil Willey, Raymond Williams, and John Burrow. On the general absence of a role for intellectual history or the history of ideas in Great Britain, see Noel Annan, *Our age: English intellectuals between the world wars, a group portrait* (New York: Random House, 1990), pp. 247–79.

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and literary scholars constituted in part an attempt at a self-definition of American intellectual life, vocation, and values. Intellectual history devoted in large measure to the study of the development of liberalism, secularism, rational science, psychoanalysis, socialism, and other progressive, non-religious outlooks, as well as to the emergence of critical and liberal theology, provided secular university scholars with a history of their own past and of the values that they and their institutions were to epitomize. Intellectual history set forth a spectrum of opinions within which scholarly, cultural and political debate might properly or wisely take place. Alternatively, certain intellectual outlooks received relatively little attention or friendly analysis. These included romantic and early Victorian science that did not fit the positivistic mould, popular pseudo-sciences, radical politics, Communism (as opposed to versions of Marxist humanism), European conservative politics, post-tridentine Roman Catholicism, and Judaism, each of which received only modest scholarly attention during the middle years of this century. Through these omissions intellectual history became in no small measure an approving account of the emergence of Protestantism, the subsequent secularization of the Protestant vision, and the social and intellectual displacement of Protestant clergy by lay academics in universities or by lay intellectuals in the society at large.

During most of the third quarter of this century accepting some version of the secular interpretation of modern life became almost a rite of passage, though often an unconscious one, for historians entering the academic profession. From the 1930s through the 1970s many American university scholars genuinely believed (the wish perhaps being father to the thought) that institutional religion would no longer constitute a major factor in modern society. Many students entering graduate school knew from their own childhoods that religion was an important and significant human activity and that it was alive and well in various parts of the world or at least in the worlds where they had come of age. Those were the worlds of small, largely Protestant towns or of urban Roman Catholic and Jewish communities where religion provided a significant part of the basis for the social structure and for social cohesion. Students generally entered graduate school just as they were finally separating from those communities to which they may have retained significant ties during the undergraduate years. Universities, especially those

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with the leading graduate schools, had and have little or no place for religion. Such was also true of the academic profession as it had established itself by the 1960s. To enter the academic profession was to take one's place alongside the secular clerisy who upheld what were regarded as the best values of the liberal democratic tradition and who attempted to draw those values from literature and philosophy. Such professional scholars generally embraced cultural relativism and a somewhat unarticulated new orthodox belief that in the future there must be no orthodoxies.⁶ Consequently, it seemed a natural course of personal maturation and professional development for young scholars to look to non-religious values, ideals, and institutions to shape their own era and scholarship and to interpret past ages.

It is worth noting that this secular outlook toward contemporary culture and historical change persisted among academic historians and other university scholars at the very time when the Roman Catholic Church experienced a major expansion in the non-Western world, Judaism displayed new vitality throughout the Western world, American evangelicalism grew in political and social influence unrivalled since the 1920s, the Black Church provided the leadership to the American civil rights movement, and the Islamic revival transformed the political and social face of Asia and Africa.⁷ These various developments have by the last two decades of this century directly, if perhaps imperceptibly, begun to change the attitude of historians to religion in the past as well as in the present. What sustained university academics in their adherence to a belief in the inevitable movement of secular forces was the actual decline of the major mainline liberal Protestant denominations in the United States which in the parochialism of their own religious experience many academics (still overwhelmingly Protestant at mid-century) equated with the totality of religious life.

All of these contemporary mid-twentieth-century scholarly outlooks came to influence the treatment of the religious and the secular in Victorian Britain. During the third quarter of this century young professional scholars and teachers of Victorian Britain generally

⁵ I am indebted to Professor Martha Garland for the insight of the general rejection of orthodoxy as such.

⁷ One of the notable exceptions to this generalization was Sidney Ahlstrom in *A religious history of the American people* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 1079–96.

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accepted several more or less given truths about nineteenth-century British intellectual history. There had been a sharp, necessary conflict between science and religion. The logic of scientific, rationalistic, and critical historical thought had driven men and women from their traditional Christian faith and from adherence to the authority of scripture. Darwinian natural selection and a thoroughly naturalistic science had displaced virtually all science that retained supernatural, animistic, or idealist elements. Darwin's burial in Westminster Abbey symbolized the acceptance of his theory. John Stuart Mill despite his posthumous essays on nature and religion had been a rationalist and secular thinker. Those same scholars learned and taught a good deal about substitute secular religions of the nineteenth century such as St Simonianism, positivism, the religion of humanity, nationalism, socialism and the like. They tended to concentrate on the emergence of philosophical theology and paid relatively little attention to advances in biblical study except to the extent that those changes were destructive to earlier interpretations of scripture. Versions of post-Kantian idealism, perhaps the most pervasive outlook of the century, stood virtually ignored except as certain strains related to the emergence of Marxism.

This reading of nineteenth-century intellectual life, which illustrated what W. L. Burn in another context termed 'selective Victorianism', served to support many of the vocational ideals of the mid-century academic community of the United States.⁸ American scholars simply accepted often at face value the reading and self-explanation of a relatively limited number of Victorian authors and then tended to use them as guides to their own cultural situation. This practice in large measure replicated the nineteenth-century situation when many educated Americans had looked to Britain for cultural guidance and had in turn provided a major publishing market for many of the Victorian sages, commencing with Thomas Carlyle. The major Victorian writers, who generally had seen themselves as separating from contemporary religious life, provided a pattern for mid-twentieth-century American academics who were seeking to forge a place for themselves in a liberal democratic society where previously many intellectuals including those in the academy had been clerics or laymen with strong religious values. As applied to the twentieth century, the nineteenth-century secular hypothesis

⁸ W. L. Burn, *The age of equipoise: a study of the mid-Victorian generation* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1964), p.36.

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served to confirm the vocation of mid-twentieth-century American academicians based on the various nineteenth-century concepts of intellectual elites.⁹

By taking upon themselves the role of a Coleridgean clerisy and an Arnoldian cultural elite, American academics at mid-century could also tackle two other immediately pressing threats in their culture. First, they could present a set of non-Christian humanistic moral values drawn from the Western tradition that were opposed to the secular values of mid-twentieth-century Communism. Second, by championing Darwin and the advanced groups in the Victorian scientific community, they could continue to fight a rearguard action against religious fundamentalism and other modes of anti-intellectualism in American life – the demise of which was more a wish than a reality in the America of the fifties and sixties.¹⁰

The division of nineteenth-century intellectual and social activity into generally distinct religious and secular spheres that mid-twentieth-century scholars imposed upon British, European, and American Victorians was not a wholly false view; and it was certainly not implausible. But to revert to an Arnoldian term, it was not really adequate to an historical understanding of the Victorian age. The most significant issues that mid-twentieth-century scholars did not really probe deeply were the actual, specific, concrete character of nineteenth-century religion and nineteenth-century secular developments. Rather they allowed a positivist concept of science derived from Comte and Mill to provide the undergirding for their definition of the secular. Similarly they adopted a generally romantic concept of religion, which meshed well with the mid-century desire of American intellectuals to withdraw from institutional and denominational religion, to evaluate nineteenth-century religious developments. Both conceptual approaches, rooted in a single tradition of Victorian scientific philosophy on the one hand and a single tradition of religious thought on the other, prevented scholars from confronting in a direct manner the full spectrum of the secular and the religious as the latter concretely manifested them-

⁹ It was probably no accident that Lionel Trilling's first book was *Matthew Arnold* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1939). See also, Ben Knights, *The idea of the clerisy in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

¹⁰ Richard Hofstadter's *Social Darwinism in American thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944) and *Anti-intellectualism in American life* (New York: Knopf, 1963) symbolized these attitudes. Many scholars of Victorian Britain drew their interpretive categories from such treatments of American intellectual history.

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selves in nineteenth-century life and crossed over the twentieth-century conceptual boundaries.

My own doubts about the adequacy of the bipolar interpretation of Victorian intellectual life emerged rather slowly. My first book, written during the late sixties and early seventies as my doctoral dissertation, explored the lives and thought of six late nineteenth-century thinkers who had undergone a double loss of faith.¹¹ Each had first abandoned Christianity and embraced science with considerable confidence and then in turn abandoned that latter faith. In rejecting scientific naturalism, each had sought some kind of religious dimension in life through pursuit of spiritualism, psychical research, metaphysical speculation, or idealism. By their adulthood they could be regarded neither as traditional religious thinkers nor as fully secular writers. While preparing that volume, I had assumed my protagonists were personally rather confused and even atypical. I later came to recognize, as did numerous other scholars working in other areas of Victorian life, that the situation of my protagonists was not untypical of many British, European, and American intellectuals during the last forty years of the century.¹² The book, I believe, proved useful to later scholars because it had opened the door, however hesitantly, to consideration of figures who did not fit neatly into what had previously seemed to be regarded as exclusively scientific or religious outlooks. Without fully understanding at the time, I had begun to reject the conceptual categories then widely accepted in the historical literature because those categories simply could not encompass nineteenth-century intellectual life as I found it.

More serious doubts emerged in my thinking as I began to teach and undertake further research. I soon reached the conviction that intellectual historians had for many years approached the field with far too much emphasis on the *intellectual* and with an inadequate appreciation for the *historical*. Intellectual historians had too often regarded their vocation as a subset of philosophy or of the history of

¹¹ Frank Miller Turner, *Between science and religion: the reaction to scientific naturalism in late Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

¹² See particularly Janet Oppenheim, *The other world: spiritualism and psychical research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain victory: social democracy and progressivism in European and American thought, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Charles D. Cashdollar, *The transformation of theology, 1830–1890: Positivism and Protestant thought in Britain and America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), as well as the more recent works on Darwin and evolution in n. 26 below.

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philosophy. Ideas were assumed to have a life of their own (which in a very real sense they do) and their fate to be largely oblivious to the world about them.¹³ Important documents of intellectual history were treated not only outside any social or political context but also outside the immediate intellectual context. Not only secondary thinkers had been ignored but also important figures and schools of thought whose fame or influence had declined. Foremost among such ignored intellectuals were those whose ideas had opposed or been unrelated to the emergence of a progressive, secular, critical, scientific, naturalistic, or rational world view.¹⁴ The most significant subgroup among these were Roman Catholic intellectuals and theologians. There was also little or no appreciation for the manner in which popular interest in magic, superstition, religious ritual, mesmerism, and spiritualism could shade into science or respectable religion.¹⁵

The roots of this largely Whiggish approach to the historical account of intellectual activity lay in the origins of intellectual history. Many intellectual historians in the past consciously or unconsciously took as their model histories of religious doctrine or sectarian religious struggle. Almost invariably those works had cast their narratives into struggles between truth and error or orthodox and unorthodox doctrines. The history of doctrine and sectarian conflict tended to be seen as the triumph of truth through combat with error. The later secular historical philosophies embodied in the works of the Enlightenment, Hegelian philosophy, Comtean

¹³ Quentin Skinner during the 1970s was constructing a widely discussed theoretical approach to this problem which, I must confess, never seemed particularly useful to my own concerns. The most important of his statements was Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', *History and Theory*, 8 (1969), 3–53. For a recent criticism of Skinner's views which includes references to the general dispute, see David Spadafora, *The idea of progress in eighteenth-century Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 417–24.

¹⁴ Both the political and scientific philosophy of Karl Popper were instrumental in leading to these views. *The open society and its enemies* (London: G. Routledge and Sons, Ltd, 1943) associated totalitarian thought with modes of idealist political philosophy. In turn this analysis meshed with that of nineteenth-century philosophers of science, such as John Stuart Mill, who had attacked philosophic idealism in the latter parts of his autobiography. The major exception to this ignoring of non-rational thought was Isaiah Berlin's various essays; see in particular Isaiah Berlin, *Against the current: essays in the history of ideas* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), and *The crooked timber of humanity: chapters in the history of ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

¹⁵ Some of the earliest works to remedy this omission were Robert Young, *Mind, brain, and adaptation in the nineteenth century: cerebral localization and its biological context from Gall to Ferrier* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); James Obelkevich, *Religion and rural society: South Lindsey, 1825–1875* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the end of the Enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).