

New Plural Settlements: The Secular and Secularization

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This essay will develop a frame for considering the kind of plural society that is hospitable to both religious and non-religious members, from the perspective of an Anglican theologian.¹ Currently in Britain there is a struggle in the public sphere, especially in the press, between those who claim that our nation is too religious and that it needs to become more secular, and those who claim that our nation is too secular and that it needs to become more religious. This is accompanied by a search for an elusive group of ‘moderate’ religious actors. This context is particular to Britain and is different from Bangladesh or Pakistan, for example.²

This is partly an exercise in the provincialisation of knowledge. The proposals developed here are rooted in a British context of British history and British law. While they invite responses from other contexts (especially in South Asia) it is clear that the contexts of research, and the freedoms to explore issues of public life, are not symmetrical. The freedoms afforded British scholars (even when traveling in Bangladesh and Pakistan) are not available in the same way to colleagues working in those countries: there are official and unofficial penalties in both Bangladesh and Pakistan for promoting secular ideas, for example.

Nonetheless I propose to develop a train of reasoning that may have resonance in South Asia as well as in Northern Europe. I shall argue that if religious people, in multiple religious traditions, are to flourish, our society needs to be plural in a way that it currently is not and that this plurality will include certain ‘secular’ dimensions – although these will need to be carefully circumscribed.

Such a claim sounds counter-intuitive. One might suppose that religious people want a *religious* society and that secular people a *secular* society. If religious and secular are simply opposites, as they are in some sociology, this becomes a commonsense view. I shall suggest, with specific historical illustrations, that the flourishing of religious people – whether in Birmingham, Dhaka or Lahore – is contingent on there being a state, and especially laws, that sustains diversity, difference, and disagreement. That means a plural state, with a certain secular character, for the sake of a religious society.

To privilege diversity is a commonplace in European life. Our legal frameworks are well developed along this axis: the aim of laws such as the Equality Act 2010 in the UK is to prohibit discrimination on a variety of grounds, including religion or belief.³ These are developments often perceived by religious people to be toxic to religious flourishing. There was notable Roman Catholic opposition to the bill. The populist *Daily Mail* carried a

¹ I use “plural” rather than “pluralist” throughout. I take “plural” to be a category descriptive of a state of social affairs and “pluralism” to be a doctrine about plurality, a doctrine which I reject. See Oliver O’Donovan “Reflections on Pluralism,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* (2008), 54-66.

² This essay was originally a lecture delivered at the University of Dhaka and Lahore University of Management Sciences in February 2012.

³ The Equality Act 2010 identifies a number of “protected characteristics”; Part 2, Chapter 1, section 10 lays out the provisions in relation to “religion or belief” and specifically includes “lack of belief” under the heading of belief. The full text is available at http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/pdfs/ukpga_20100015_en.pdf (last accessed 24 May 2016).

typically provocative piece “Christmas could be killed off by Harman's Equality Bill, bishops warn.”⁴ Shortly after this Pope Benedict XVI, concerned with the restrictions the bill would place on religious communities’ freedom to act, suggested that in “some respects [such proposed legislation] actually violates the natural law upon which the equality of all human beings is grounded.”⁵ Objections were not limited to Catholics. One Anglican Bishop, speaking in the House of Lords, wished to celebrate plurality in society but warned of “an authoritarian imposition of an individualistic understanding of difference” implicit in the bill’s framing of the issues.⁶ Three other Anglican bishops issued a press release indicating their concern that “churches and other faiths will find themselves more vulnerable to legal challenge than under the current law.”⁷ The Muslim Council of Britain had explicitly supported the Equality Act 2006 and implicitly endorsed government guidance accompanying the Equality Act 2010, with its provisions in relation to religion or belief.⁸ The MCB did, however, object to amendments to the act which might have required some religious organisations (including Muslim ones) to conduct same-sex marriages. This gives some sense of the variety of responses at the time (2009-10).

It should be relatively easy to see from these brief examples that religious commentary on diversity has as its primary concern the protection of religious communities’ rights. The Catholic bishops’ response to the Equality Act 2010, including that of the Bishop of Rome, suggests a readily intelligible pragmatism: it welcomes diversity legislation to the extent that it protects minorities like the Roman Catholic Church in Britain, and it opposes it to the extent that it infringes upon its practices.

I propose here a contrasting set of religious interests. I argue that it is worth considering the possibility that a secular framework (where the meaning of “secular” requires some interpretation) is to be embraced not primarily because it protects religious interests, but because such a framework is better suited than any other to the flourishing of religious practices in a plural world. Put more sharply: instead of wishing for a religious state (a state whose religion is one’s own) and being willing to make do with a secular one, I shall explore the desirability of having a secular state and being willing to make do with a religious one if that is not yet possible. Such an account may be as much of interest in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan as it is in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The core category here is that of disagreement. I mention disagreement at the outset because our traditions are concerned, in the most intense way, with truth. We make different

⁴ Available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1228643/Christmas-killed-Harmans-Equality-Bill-bishops-warn.html>. (Last accessed 24 May 2016). The author, Kirsty Walker, covered Westminster for the *Daily Mail*, and had no special interest in religious affairs. The article referred to a letter by the General Secretary of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference [of England and Wales].

⁵ Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100201_bishops-england-wales.html. (Last accessed 24 May 2016).

⁶ Available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200910/ldhansrd/text/91126-0004.htm#09112630000123>. (Accessed 24 May 2016).

⁷ Available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2010/01/preqbill230110.aspx>. (Accessed 24 May 2016).

⁸ On the issue of discrimination and homosexuality in the 2006 act, see <http://www.mcb.org.uk/mcb-statement-on-sors/> (accessed 24 May 2016). On the 2010 act, see the MCB’s response to the so-called “Trojan Horse” report: <http://www.mcb.org.uk/the-muslim-council-of-britain-responds-to-peter-clarkes-trojan-horse-letter-report/>. (Accessed 24 May 2016).

claims about truth. We think, and say, that truth matters. If we are to be true to our own traditions, we need to place our concern with questions of truth centre-stage. This is not popular among certain more liberal voices in Britain, who would rather that we mute our concerns with the truth for the sake of peaceful life together. And it is inflammatory to the more secularist voices in Britain who laugh with scorn at the religious traditions: “Look at these foolish traditions with their rival claims to truth. They cannot all be right. It is likely that none of them is!” It might be tempting to cover our concern with truth with a blanket of modest silence. Clearly that is not true to our traditions, and in the long term, for that reason, such an approach will surely fail. But there is also a need to face the facts: in our pursuit of truth, of lives lived in truth, we disagree. The scornful secularists are not wrong about that. There may be those in Islamic, Hindu, and Christian traditions who think that at some deep level religious traditions are the same. There may be those who, following in the footsteps of ambitious nineteenth-century intellectuals, believe that there is some “essence” or “spirit” of Christianity or Islam that can be captured in a way that brings them into peaceful harmony with one another. There is little evidence to support such a belief. Those who spend much time studying with Jews and Muslims, and who may have formed deep and long-term friendships with colleagues in practices like Scriptural Reasoning, typically do not discover deep agreements. They tend to discover understanding more often than agreement, and collegiality more often than consensus.⁹

It is reasonable to suppose that when it comes to religion there is agreement and there is disagreement. It is common to judge that agreement is good and productive (we can get stuff done) and that disagreement is bad and counter-productive (it obstructs action). This may be the wrong contrast. Different traditions really, genuinely, and deeply disagree. The contrast is thus not between agreement and disagreement but between two kinds of disagreement. I propose to distinguish between *stagnant disagreement*, which goes nowhere and leads to endless stalemates, and *generative disagreement*, which provokes intellectual inquiry and may lead to deeper understanding. One of the tasks of inter-faith encounter is arguably to discover generative disagreements, and to identify – and place to one side – stagnant disagreements. If we are going to disagree – *and we are* – we should disagree with a purpose, with imagination, and with generosity.

It is a startling feature of much inter-faith dialogue that many Christians become somewhat Socinian when engaging with Muslims. There is much talk of Jesus Christ and lively discussion of the difference between prophethood and divine sonship. But the doctrine of the Trinity, so central to ancient, medieval, and modern theology, often mysteriously recedes before attempts to agree that Muslims and Christians alike believe in one God. This may be partly because those Christians who engage in inter-faith dialogue do not find the details of trinitarian theology intellectually compelling, although they know that the doctrine is core to their tradition; but more significant perhaps is the desire to find a platform of agreement prior to venturing into territory of disagreement. I suggest that finding a suitable *platform of disagreement* is by far the more important task. One of those disagreements surely concerns the different meanings, for Muslims and Christians, of the word “one” when we affirm “one God.”

Our shared need for a state where religious life can flourish publicly amidst diversity, difference, and disagreement is bound up with a responsibility to take disagreement seriously.

⁹ Nicholas Adams, “Long-Term Disagreement,” *Modern Theology* 29, vol. 4 (2013):154-171.

To flourish is to acknowledge our concern with truth, to acknowledge our disagreements, but to render them generative rather than stagnant.

The thorny question is: what kind of state do we need, then, if we desire a state in which religious lives can flourish in public, in pursuit of truth and in unflinching recognition of disagreements? In Britain there are arguments that religion needs to flourish less (or at least be less public) so that we can have a more secular state; and there are counter-arguments that we need a less secular state so that religion can flourish more. A different view is arguably needed: we desire a genuinely plural state so that religious life, and its concern with truth, can flourish more, and flourish in particular in public life.

It is perhaps worth noting that this view has no bearing at all on the question of the establishment of the Church of England, to take an example from my own home context. On that question one needs to be attentive to the history of England (the Anglican church in Scotland, where I worshipped for many years, is not the established Church) and practical about what the effects of changes to establishment might be. I believe that common life in England has been, and continues to be, by and large served well by the established Church, and so long as this remains the case, the case for disestablishment is relatively weak. But it is the flourishing of common life that must be the criterion, and not what is good or bad for the Church or good or bad for any particular institution in the land. The same goes for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, for example, which might be considered secular and religious in the senses I develop here.

Grasping what “secular” means is a familiar challenge. Following some recent arguments by the English Social Anthropologist Timothy Jenkins, I suggest that there are at least two quite distinct uses of the word “secular.” One stems from the seventeenth century, when Europe was reeling in exhaustion after years of violent political wars, in which religious belief played a variety of roles. The other stems from the nineteenth century, when Britain in particular was coming to terms with a massive growth of cities, and where religious life began to take new urban forms. These two kinds of “secular” are very different. There is good reason to distinguish them, and discern between them, if we are to understand what kind of secular character a plural society might have, in which religious life can truly flourish in public.

To explore this, I propose to take two snapshots of religious life in Europe, one in France and one in Scotland.¹⁰

Seventeenth Century Bordeaux

In 1555, after around thirty years of conflict following the start of the Protestant Reformation in Germany, a truce was called between the Catholics and the Lutheran Protestants, and the Peace of Augsburg was signed. This accord gave Lutheran Protestants

¹⁰ See Benjamin Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (London: Belknap: 2007). Kaplan gestures toward the need to study the narratives of toleration that grew up between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries (4-5) but then reverts to the standard historical practice of evaluating evidence. Such practices are rightly core to the discipline of history, but they need, in my view, to be complemented by the historical study of the ways such phenomena as the narratives of toleration are produced as part of our contemporary intellectual furniture. The strength of Kaplan’s book lies in its focus not on thinkers and texts in which arguments for toleration can be found, but on everyday practices of toleration and the theological settlements that accompanied them.

official recognition for the first time, and it also established the principle, known by the Latin motto *cuius regio, eius religio*, that the religion of a region would be determined by the religion of its ruler.

In 1648, after thirty years of bloody conflict during the Thirty Years War in Germany, another truce was called, this time between a wider variety of Protestant communities (including Calvinists) and Catholics, and the Peace of Westphalia was signed.

There was a need for the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 because the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 failed. The reasons for this failure are complex, and to understand them is to consider questions of land, aristocratic dynasties, political and economic dependence and independence, and the responses of different communities – Protestant and Catholic – living side by side. Much happened in the hundred years between the two sets of treaties.

One of the striking differences is that the Peace of Westphalia – while problematic in many ways – actually held communities (and enabled them to live) together in a way that the Peace of Augsburg did not. One of the key differences was that under the terms of the Peace of Augsburg, members of minority communities were expected to leave their homes and find towns and cities that practised their religious traditions: the treaties envisaged that there would be Catholic towns and Protestant towns. Under the terms of the Peace of Westphalia, however, this was no longer the case. The treaties made provision for minority traditions to have freedom of worship in their towns, even if they were minority traditions. To oversimplify somewhat, Augsburg expected minorities to migrate; Westphalia expected minorities to be part of a varied community.

This marked a significant advance in human compassion and understanding, no doubt, but it also reflected stark economic realities: the emigration of entire communities had devastating economic repercussions for towns in the sixteenth century, as workforces departed and their vital labour became suddenly unavailable. It made more economic sense to have communities living cheek by jowl, and not trying to segregate entire conurbations.

The kinds of law passed in 1555 and 1648 were different too. Augsburg legislated for migration and religiously monochrome towns. The laws were designed to clarify differences, and enshrine them. They established who was in, and who must be out, in any particular area. Westphalia, by contrast, legislated for life together in religiously diverse towns. The laws were designed to clarify rights of minority communities and establish them in law. If one does not know the history between the two settlements, one might suppose that Augsburg should be the more successful model in that it separated the warring parties and allocated them different tranches of land, whereas Westphalia looks like a recipe for disaster in that it placed the disputatious communities side-by-side and hoped for the best.

The history matters. In practice, communities often did not migrate very far after the 1555 settlement, and sometimes the expelled communities established themselves quite close to the cities they had just left. This was a genuine recipe for disaster, and it led to repeated clashes. But the big difference was the effect of the Thirty Years War. Millions of people died; the fields of Germany, the Netherlands, and France were drenched in blood, economies were ruined, pestilence picked off many of those who had survived steel. Nearly every community could see that an alternative to violence had to be found for handling disagreements.

The Peace of Westphalia was the establishment of what we shall (following Jenkins) call “minimal rules.”¹¹ These rules governed relations between different communities and were such that each community could affirm them. These were not grand philosophical ideologies. They were not the product of deep theological agreement. They operated by and large on a local scale with limited scope, enabling minorities to live alongside majority religious traditions, enabling minorities to worship, and naming what was and what was not acceptable practice in public.

This is a particular kind of “secular” settlement. It was undoubtedly religious: it had religion at its heart. But its approach to religious difference was the drafting and enforcement of minimal rules. It was secular in the sense that it was non-exclusive. It was minimal in the sense that it did not adjudicate questions of truth. It did in many ways enshrine the hegemony of the majority tradition, but it did not exclude minorities. Indeed it named and enforced the rights of the minorities. These minimal rules played out differently in different communities – the European landscape was immensely complex and varied – and it played out at different speeds: it did not happen all at once, by any means, but it did happen gradually all over Europe. By the end of the seventeenth century, most communities were governed in this way, by minimal rules whose purpose was to ensure common life, and it even began to give birth to new forms of philosophy in which questions of tradition were placed more and more to the margins. That is another story.¹²

We can draw attention to one other feature of this religious context that is relevant to our concerns: the approach to truth embodied in the different communities. There are many possible examples to choose from. One particularly significant event concerned confrontations between Catholics and Protestant Huguenots in the south-western French city of Bordeaux. The historian Benjamin Kaplan retells a case in 1646 that was typical of the period.¹³

Catholic priests would process in the streets carrying the consecrated host, often on the way to a dying parishioner, to administer last rites or to visit the sick. As they had for centuries, Catholics would kneel in adoration in the streets as they passed. This was an important and well-established public religious practice which expressed a complex history of devotion and sacramental theology: it was a deeply rooted in everyday practices of religious life. It was also a rich theatrical blending of sight and sound: the religious vestments of those in the procession would be accompanied by the ringing of a bell to draw the focus of the surrounding townspeople and mark the passage of the host. But the Protestant Huguenots, who lived in the same cities as the Catholics, did not view the sacrament in the same way. Their tradition not only did not require them to kneel, but often explicitly forbade them to do so. This was a more recent development, rooted simultaneously in new theological understandings and in the political imperative to distinguish one identity

¹¹ Much of Jenkins’ thought in this area remains unpublished; a version of this idea can be found in the “Academic Profile” for the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme that he co-wrote with Ben Quash in 2007. This document makes the case that the study of inter-faith engagement might itself be a contribution to imagining new kinds of secular settlement. See <http://www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/resources/journalarticlesandbookchapters/cipacademicprofile> (last accessed 24 May 2016).

¹² See Nicholas Adams, “In Pursuit of a ‘New Secular’: Human Rights and ‘A Common Word,’” in *Muslim and Christian Understanding*, ed. El-Ansary and Linnan (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2010), 175-188.

¹³ For an earlier compelling account of the significance of this period, and this region, for how many of us think today, see also Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).

from another. Differences in sacramental theology set the stage for public forms of religious confrontation. In some cases, as the priest walked down the street ringing his bell, the Huguenots would withdraw into side streets or into shops in order not to cause offence to their Catholic neighbours by not kneeling, yet also observe their own distinctive and more restrained everyday religious practices. But in one particular case, in which a young Protestant woman was on trial for breaking Catholic religious rules, Huguenots complained to the magistrate that the priest bringing the complaint would chase Huguenots down side streets and make it impossible for them to escape, often beating them with sticks and shouting religious formulae at them. It was even alleged that the priest would stop ringing the bell as he made his way in the town, so as to surprise an unsuspecting Huguenot victim, and then suddenly start ringing the bell violently when there was no time for the Protestant to withdraw.¹⁴

What are we to make of this? I do not choose this example as a story against Catholics. There were persistent and retaliatory acts of violence on both sides: we could just as well consider the Protestants' execution in Geneva of Michael Servetus in 1553, or (in a way that highlights the tragedy as well as the wickedness of such violence) the murder by Protestants and Catholics of their own flocks in the suppression of internal dissent.¹⁵ Rather, I want to draw attention to the way in which an important religious practice – in this case the veneration of the host – became an opportunity to place the other person in the wrong. This is an aspect of truth-seeking that we might find particularly worthy of investigation. There seem to be forms of truth-seeking where it is not enough to affirm the truth and to argue for it. There is an impulse, and an established practice, for placing one's opponent in the wrong. These practices are designed to provoke confrontation and create the conditions where there has to be a winner and a loser. This is a familiar situation for us. Our religious traditions are different. We make different claims to truth. We disagree. But there is a significant (and practically important) difference between claiming to be right and drawing attention to another's error.

Now clearly if I claim to be right, and you disagree with me, I judge you to be wrong. We need not deny or evade this. There are, however, two subtle points to be made about this judgement. The first concerns what I hope to establish: is it my rightness or your wrongness? The other concerns what it is reasonable to expect one's opponent to assent to: I may have good reasons to affirm *x* and you may have good (different) reasons to deny it.¹⁶ If Christians and Muslims are to engage each other seriously, this must be acknowledged and made the basis for conversation and discussion. But there is a difference between thinking you are wrong (and you knowing that I think you are wrong), and me saying it, and especially performing that utterance with the express (and perhaps violent) purpose of placing you in the wrong. These are starkly different ways of bearing witness to the truth.

There is a difference between allowing a Huguenot to withdraw into a side street and chasing him down it until there is nowhere to hide. In both cases – withdrawal and pursuit – there is disagreement. The truth is the same in each case too. There is no great difference in

¹⁴ Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, 81-2, summarising Élie Benoist, *Histoire de l'Edit de Nantes, Volume 3* (Delft, 1693), 74-77.

¹⁵ See William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 123ff, esp. 141ff.

¹⁶ Adams, "Long-Term Disagreement."

theological stance vis à vis the sacrament in each case. The difference lies in what is done about the other's error, seen from one's own point of view. In the one case it is acknowledged – from both sides – but not pursued. In the other case it is vigorously pursued – indeed his whole person is pursued until there is nowhere left to run.

We need to make a distinction, then, between different modes of articulating the truth. This need not be a complex affair: we can simply call it (with the Bordeaux image in mind) the difference between *displaying the truth* and *pursuing the error*, or just between witnessing and condemning.

I propose that displaying the truth and pursuing the error are not the same thing and do not necessarily entail each other. I am not suggesting that one should never pursue the error, nor even that one should always display the truth. Rather, I am exploring the possibility that circumstances may require various forms of relation to truth and error, and that the lesson of Bordeaux in 1646 is that pursuing error can make a travesty of displaying the truth and may even call into question one's genuine concern for it. This distinction is especially useful when one confronts claims by more self-described “moderate” voices for religious folk to mute their concern with truth for the sake of peaceful life together. I think that under certain conditions this is a mistaken plea. It is not the concern with displaying truth that poses the greater threat of violence, in my view. It is the determination to pursue the error and to run it to ground.

There are places where pursuing the error is quite appropriate, such as a university. Conferences and seminars are in some ways institutions expressly designed to pursue the error, in the sense that scholars present their findings to peers in the expectation that errors will be identified and remedied. To speak in a university is to acknowledge the incompleteness of every utterance, but such institutions are, at their best, places of safety in which to err is normal and indeed expected. It is quite otherwise with religious institutions, especially where error may be taken as a reason to exclude persons from the community and even to punish them and their families by depriving them of livelihood, property, and even their lives.

We thus have two broad lessons from the seventeenth century. The first is that the secular settlement of this period was the establishing of minimal rules that enabled communities to live together, as an alternative to settling disagreements through violence. The second is that communities did not give up on the truth, but they did gradually change – and in time almost abandon – their practices of pursuing the error. These seem to me worthwhile lessons to learn from this slice of European history. The Peace of Westphalia marked a renewed commitment to living with others' errors: it was by no means perfect, and it was probably political stability rather than theological compromise that finally calmed the violent confrontations. But however we describe it, truth was never given up, and we should learn from these practices of theological integrity too.

Nineteenth Century Edinburgh

We might now reintroduce the uncertainties that surround the word “secular,” and it is useful to investigate briefly the birth not of “the secular” but of “secularization,” that is, the influential idea that society (which typically means European society) is becoming more and

more secular. In this case, “secular” does not refer to minimal rules that govern common life, but signals that religion is in decline.¹⁷

In the early nineteenth century, a Church of Scotland minister, Thomas Chalmers, moved from a rural ministry to the city, in Glasgow, and then later in Edinburgh. He found that the normal practices of rural ministry – especially the practice of visiting all one’s parishioners – were not possible in an urban setting. There were simply too many people. But he also found that large numbers of people in his parish were not attending church. Chalmers inferred that this must be something to do with the difference between rural and urban life.

The question we might ask is: what was this difference? It is a well recognised philosophical phenomenon that one cannot describe differences directly. One can only describe phenomena and then through comparison notice the ways in which these descriptions are different. It is always descriptions that are different, and differences in phenomena and differences in descriptions of phenomena can never be sharply distinguished. This may seem somewhat abstract, when stated in this way, but we shall see that it is important. Chalmers described the city and the rural parish differently, and he drew strong conclusions – practical conclusions – from these differences in description.

It would appear that Chalmers’ experience of rural parish life had been one in which the whole community participated in church life. A minister could expect to visit his flock and get to know that local community. His move to Glasgow seems to have come as a shock and provoked strongly contrasting descriptions. Chalmers described large numbers of working class men, many of whom did not attend church (or at least *his* church), and smaller numbers of middle class families who did. There are many ways Chalmers might have gone about making sense of what he saw. He might have looked at the relations between churches and places of work; or between the majority Presbyterian church and the minority denominations that competed with it; between obvious participation in services of worship and more peripheral forms of participation in social arrangements facilitated by churches, and so forth. Instead, Chalmers seems to have drawn two strong conclusions. First, working class people were less religious than middle class people; second, cities were less religious than rural parishes. Callum Brown refers to the narrative which emerged from this as “the myth of the unholy city.”¹⁸

Chalmers was not a man to slump in his chair and moan about decline. He was a man of action. He quickly gathered together other ministers and those active in the urban churches in Glasgow (and later Edinburgh) and formed groups whose purpose was to re-evangelise the city. Chalmers made use of statistics of church attendance – which may or may not have been doctored to make things look worse than they were (we can only with difficulty judge this today) – to goad his fellow evangelicals into action. The unholy city needed to be retaken by the churches. Chalmers arguably produced an arrestingly dark portrait of that unholy city to concentrate everyone’s minds.

¹⁷ In what follows I draw on Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009) and more indirectly on Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Oxford: Wiley, 2015). I am indebted to Timothy Jenkins’ readings of these two texts, especially Timothy Jenkins, “A Secular and Religious World,” in *The Vocation of Theology Today*, eds. Tom Greggs, Rachel Muers and Simeon Zahl (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 163-177.

¹⁸ *The Death of Christian Britain*, 18ff.

We might focus here on the narrative of the unholy city, and the production of descriptions to live by. Indeed, these were not only descriptions to live by, but descriptions to motivate social change. Chalmers is justifiably regarded as a giant of nineteenth century Edinburgh, and an imposing portrait of him hangs in the senate room in the School of Divinity where the academic body holds its most important departmental meetings. We are not dealing with a peripheral figure with strange ideas. This is a man who changed our history.

Brown draws attention certain features of Chalmers' narrative that were – in Brown's view – to prove of lasting influence on how later generations were to think about religion. These include a focus on class differences and the role of religion in describing them; the prominence of statistics to support claims made about religious life; and the overarching narrative of decline, whose purpose was originally, it seems, to generate energy (and raise funds) in support of evangelical activity.

Brown draws conclusions which are not difficult to anticipate. The myth of the unholy city became established and reproduced in the Scottish, and later the British, psyche. The narrative of decline became taken as a fact, rather than as the evangelical (and fundraising) ruse it originally was. And the gathering of statistics to support claims produced an appearance of objectivity that even today remains stubbornly resistant to dispute. The sociology of religion of post World War II Britain reproduced a broadly Chalmersian picture, and the idea of secularization entered popular consciousness with renewed vigour as journalists and others digested and further reproduced its narrative of decline.

There are two things to notice. First, there is an important distinction between *taking religious decline as a fact* and *taking narratives of decline as objects of study*. If we take religious decline as a fact, or at least as an hypothesis, then the investigative task is to chart that decline and offer an explanation for it, or at least to test that hypothesis. That is what many researchers and journalists continue to do today. But if we take narratives of decline as objects of study, then the investigative task is to probe these narrative phenomena. We can ask: what was going on when Chalmers described the unholy city and when quite possibly he exaggerated religious decline as a strategy for bolstering evangelical action? The statistics he produced cease to be taken as objective mirrors of reality and start to look more like weapons in a sophisticated arsenal. This is all the more significant when one considers the possibility that where Chalmers describes "decline" we might today discern shifting alliances, where folk who had previously attended mainstream Presbyterian churches started to belong to other religious groupings. From Chalmers' perspective this would have counted as religious decline because – as Brown nicely puts it – "people were the wrong kind of Christian." Where we might be inclined to see changing religious affiliation, Chalmers saw ungodliness.

Second, narratives of secularization may turn out to be as mythical as the myth of the ungodly city. If that is so, then our task is to make sense of our contemporary context not as one in which we see "secularization" (or in South Asia "radicalization") but one in which we inhabit worlds of language in which there are *narratives of secularization* and *narratives of radicalization*. This may be unwelcome news for civil servants advising governments. Civil servants deal in phenomena rather than in narratives. Civil servants are more likely to say, "We see a decrease in religious attendance" or "We see an increase in fundamentalist activity." Almost never will we find them saying "We see people making sense of their lives in different ways" or "There are a variety of narratives in play which require interpreting." So much the worse for civil servants, for governments, and for those of us at the sharp end of

legislation and executive orders produced by those governments. It is clear that the role of the university in this is distinctive and urgent: our task is to investigate narratives, interpret them, and show how ordinary people in fact make sense of their lives – including their religious lives. When confronted with the myth of the unholy city, or of the extremist city, our job is to be corrosively skeptical of the stories we are told about our religious lives.

This is not to say that myths are nonsense or that extremism does not exist. At the same time as Chalmers was reclaiming the city for God, scholars in Munich and Berlin were producing sophisticated accounts of the ways in which myths relate to social knowledge and the historical transmission of the consciousness of previous generations.¹⁹ It is quite possible (indeed likely) that we are today witnessing complex configurations of religious decline and revival, liberalisation and radicalization, in Britain, in Bangladesh, in Pakistan and elsewhere. We can only engage these phenomena intelligently by paying close attention to local phenomena and being self-critical about the categories we use to describe them. As Timothy Jenkins in his commentary on Brown's work so eloquently argues, there needs to be proper ethnography on the one hand, and care about drawing universal conclusions from specific cases. We might say there needs to be profligate attentiveness and restrained generalization.

The Twenty-first Century (But Where?)

We have two terms in play. (1) There are the “secular” settlements of the seventeenth century, in which “secular” here means “minimal rules.” (2) There is the “secularization” talk of the nineteenth century, in which “secularization” is a ruse for promoting evangelical activity. In the twenty-first century we face some tough challenges. We need “secular” settlements like those of seventeenth century Europe, but we don't have them. We don't need talk of “secularization” like that of the nineteenth century, but we have it on a significant scale.

We need to distinguish between these two senses of secular – one involving “minimal rules” and one involving “the unholy city” – but that is only one dimension of my argument. I have also tried to show something through the examples chosen. I have tried to identify particular contexts: seventeenth century Bordeaux and nineteenth century Edinburgh. I want now to draw attention to this feature of the discussion: the issue of particularity.

Our situation is not like that of the seventeenth century. Indeed there is no “our situation.” Life in Birmingham now is different from life then in Bordeaux, and from life then or now in Dhaka, or in Edinburgh. Christianity in the Congo is different from Christianity in Los Angeles. Islamic life in Jakarta is different from Islamic life in Riyadh. We need political settlements that pay attention to local history, local customs, local laws, local communities. If we are to think about what kinds of secular society promote the flourishing of religious people, we will utter absurdities and banalities if we over-generalise from specific historical and geographical cases. It is hard to imagine how legal trends in Bordeaux can be translated without change into legal proposals for Lahore. In the same way, it seems eccentric to permit talk about the unholy city in nineteenth century Edinburgh to be *the* determining narrative for our religious context in twenty-first century Dhaka.

¹⁹ Arguably the most interesting and sophisticated is F.W.J. Schelling, *Historical-critical Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, trans. M Richey, M Zisselsberger (New York: SUNY, 2007).

Yet the lessons of seventeenth century Europe are not entirely irrelevant in Bangladesh or in Pakistan or elsewhere. We do surely need “minimal rules” for communities to pursue common life together, whether that common life is between Christians and Muslims as it is in Alexandria, or between Jews and Muslims as it is in Jerusalem, or between Christians and Jews as it is in Vienna. In Dhaka it is a different picture, with a Muslim majority and a Hindu minority. In Lahore it is different again, with a Muslim majority and a Christian minority; it is a different picture yet again in Beijing or Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur. Those differences matter and require our attention. We need laws and customs that promote common life so that we can be religious – be ourselves – in public, with each other, in pursuit of the common good (if we can agree at least on what that might be). We do not need to be secular in the corrosive nineteenth century sense in which religious life is narratively rendered precarious and then edged out of public life and into some gloomy private sphere where only the secret services listen in. Laws and customs will surely be locally particular. And that means that the groundwork needed will not primarily be investigations into terms like “secular” or “secularisation,” but investigations into the histories and customs of the local communities that contribute to our shared (or at least overlapping) life. We need to pay attention to where we are, who we have been, and not least what kind of future we anticipate together.

This concern with the kind of investigations needed is articulated with clarity and force in two explicitly ethnographic studies by Timothy Jenkins, which are here commended to all those interested in the secular, as part of our deliberation on what kind of plural settlements religious people need.²⁰ Generalisations are, for Jenkins, precious outcomes of small-scale studies. As an alternative to the over-generalisations which dog so many attempts to talk about “religion” or the “religious,” which lay the ground for further over-generalisations about the “secular” and “secularisation,” Jenkins points to what he calls the “middle distance” in which human lives are led.²¹ This concept is spelled out in a later discussion as “the general and the specific (which may well themselves be less large and less small respectively than the universal and the particular) [that] are held together in certain amalgams and relations.”²² If we are to generalise about the “secular,” we need to do so with an eye on the “middle distance,” and that will mean gathering together many small-scale studies of the ordinary lives of religious communities. Surprisingly few of these exist. We surely need more.

The “new plural settlements” in view have continuities with the minimal secular settlements of seventeenth-century Europe, but in our time those settlements will govern not only relations between different Christian denominations (including a wide variety of minority denominations) but between different religious traditions, including Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Jewish and Muslim communities. These settlements will not be based on

²⁰ Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach* (Oxford: Berghan, 1999); Timothy Jenkins, *The Life of Property: House, Family and Inheritance in Béarn, South-West France* (Oxford: Berghan, 2010).

²¹ Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life*, 35. See also Nicholas Adams, “Superstition and Enlightenment: Engagements between Theology and Anthropology,” forthcoming.

²² Timothy Jenkins, “Closer to Dan Brown than to Gregor Mendel: on Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62, no. 3 (2009), 274.

theological agreement any more than they were in 1648: they will be the outcomes of negotiations.

Our vocation is to understand rather than agree with each other, and to foster collegiality as the context for what are surely our long-term disagreements. In so doing I propose that we distinguish generative and stagnant disagreements, and displaying the truth and pursuing the error. Instead of arguing about secularisation, we might usefully distinguish studying religious phenomena and studying narratives about religious life. These three axes offer a basis for a variety of intellectual investigations that can be pursued by Muslims and Christians (and others) in the university, in our communities, and in public life. Taken together, they offer resources for rethinking the secular, and for imagining something new.