Plural Secular Settlements[[1]](#footnote-1)

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The century-long phenomenon of secularisation theory has been buried from multiple angles. It has been described as the product of Euro-centric preoccupations (Hadden 1987, Martin 2005, Pérez-Agote 2014); as a consequence of a tendency to count rather than classify (Jenkins 1999); as a failure to consider such phenomena as immigration (Davie 2015), colonial mission (Howard 2011), Pentecostalism (Casanova 2007), and the complex interrelation of religion and politics in states with a powerful religious majority (Cesari 2017); as a misunderstanding of (European) urban working-class forms of life (Davie 1990; Brown 2009), even as a heterodox form of Christian theology (Milbank 1990). Secularisation as an account of decline betrays a European, urban, white middle class set of preoccupations. It is not that Durkheim was wrong when he wrote in 1893, in *The Division of Labour in Society*, ‘If there is one truth that history teaches beyond a doubt, it is that religion tends to embrace a smaller and smaller portion of social Life’ (Durkheim (1893/1964, 169). It is that he gave voice to a particular set of self-understandings of a particular ‘society’ that should not be confused with a factual description of the world *tout court*.

While secularization theory, as an account of decline, has itself declined much more rapidly than the religion whose decline it announced, the meaning of the ‘secular’ has proven durable, not just in the echo-chambers of sociology, but among theologians and scholars of religious life. In this more limited range of conversations, a distinction is drawn between the secular as an irreligious space and the secular as a legal space within which multiple religious traditions can and do go about the business of everyday religious life. Something similar is true of the concept of religious pluralism. Rowan Williams, in a discussion whose focus is the ‘secular’ state of India (as he understood it fifteen years ago in 2005), locates in it an ambiguity in which one finds two distinct intellectual projects. The first (broadly associated with the United Reformed Church theologian (later Quaker) John Hick is the idea that one can produce a universal account of religious belief, of which each religious tradition displays a particular species. The second (Williams’ own) is the idea that there are traditions with different origins, trajectories, and commitments who engage in ‘careful and attentive interaction between communities of religious practice’ (Williams 2012, 131). This is accompanied by a parallel but different ambiguity in concepts of political plurality. The first (associated with Harold Laski and John Neville Figgis) imagines the state not as the source of values but as a structure within which different values might be organised and mediated. The second (associated with Isaiah Berlin) imagines that political goods are not only various but often incompatible. Sacrifices need to be made, and because there is no ideal conception that harmonises them, the state should not seek to legislate a particular ideal vision (Williams 2012, 126). At the time Williams was writing he held the post of Archbishop of Canterbury, and across several books and lectures in that period (from 2003-2012) his focus was a vision of the public sphere as a realm of religious difference whose overlapping and competing goods might be negotiated through dialogue and held together through law. It is interesting some years later to see that this account also rehearses a robust alternative to the various nativisms whose expression in his home country is a set of ill-defined ‘British’ values whose purpose is to limit the range of acceptable cultural forms.

Ambitious alternative taxonomies of the secular can be found in the work of Charles Taylor, José Casanova, and Talal Asad. Such taxonomies are intellectually pleasing and enable one to diagnose with a certain degree of precision what kind of conception a particular author has. The concern here is less with authors and their conceptions and more with the political imaginations of students of religion in Pakistan, and what – if anything – the European project has to offer by way of intellectual resources. The views of Taylor and Casanova are discussed in the companion essay in this volume by Kevin W Gray. To talk of ‘secular settlements’, as understood here, is to confront different concepts of the secular, of the state, and of plurality (or pluralism). There are several moving parts before one confronts the compounding questions of geography and history.

This essay considers the consequences of embracing a concept of a secular settlement that privileges plurality (as a fact of difference) rather than pluralism (as a single conception that grasps multiple perspectives) and that envisages law as a set of rules, to which all parties can assent, rather than the expression of a single set of overarching values that are *de facto* those of the majority. To do so it considers two contrasting sources, one programmatic and one historical. The programmatic account is the ‘Academic Profile’ of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, drawn up in 2007 by Ben Quash and Timothy Jenkins. The historical account is the study of European seventeenth-century plurality by Benjamin Kaplan *Divided by Faith*, which explores the variety of secular settlements in the period either side of the Thirty Years War. To proceed in this way is to embrace a European story, using European categories, with a view to making sense of European political challenges. This is proposed not as an exercise in Euro-centrism, as if is microcosm of the world, but as a reflection on a particular set of circumstances which may articulate forms of thinking that are capable of translation in other circumstances.

One might suppose that religious people seek a more religious society and that secular people seek a more secular society. This essay intends to confound such a supposition with the following claim: religious people should seek a secular society. Much turns on what is meant by a ‘secular society’ and even on what is meant by ‘religious people’. It is a familiar fantasy, entertained by some optimistic theorists, that one can clarify ambiguous terms through ascetic definitional practices. This is true for technical terms, where one wishes to discharge a particular intellectual task and where it is an established practice to craft the necessary tools for the job. But terms like ‘religious people’ and ‘secular society’ are not technical terms. They derive their force by having as their reference everyday realities that one can describe in everyday language. They are not natural kinds, like birds or gardens, but terms with common usage, and to depart from such usage is to depart from the social problems in which such usage is developed. By religious persons I mean what is commonly meant by the term: persons who do the sorts of things that would readily be described as religious. There is broad scope in such usage and – to use terms fashioned by Grace Davie – one can point to various kinds of believing and belonging (Davie 1990). Resisting the temptation to treat it as a definition, I mean by ‘religious persons’ those who answer deep questions of human existence, and who adapt to changing circumstances, by drawing on a recognisable tradition of practice and thought that has developed in a particular time and place. I mean persons who are located in a tradition (usually one that can be named), whose practices and forms of thought would be recognisable to another person similarly located. This can be outlined negatively. By ‘religious persons’ I do not mean those who have strange superstitious beliefs and practices which they pursue in private.

To outline what is meant by ‘secular society’ is to summarise this essay. This will, it is hoped, emerge from the details of the discussion. Roughly, and in advance, it means a society (at a scale somewhere between a city and a state) where there are commonly binding rules, established in law, which enable members of different traditions to negotiate with each other, hold each other to account, and resolve practical disagreements over questions of land, education, health, and other public goods. This can also be outlined negatively. By ‘secular society’ I do not mean a society with an all-encompassing anti-religious set of values to which everyone is expected to conform. This is for two reasons. First, the idea of anti-religious values is a European post-Enlightenment fantasy that ignores the everyday life of the majority of the world’s population. Second, the idea of any single all-encompassing set of values (whether religious or anti-religious) is a European colonial fantasy that supposes there is one right way to act and think (namely, the European’s). Stated programmatically: to be religious in a plural state (as most religious persons are) invites some account of what is needed if religious lives are to flourish in public amidst diversity, difference, and disagreement.

Disagreement is made prominent at the outset for two reasons. First, because our traditions are concerned, in the most intense way, with truth. Second, because at the heart of the secular conception developed here is a certain account of law. The question of truth will be briefly outlined here; the question of law will be deferred to the next section.

To acknowledge religious plurality is to acknowledge different claims about truth. The first thing to say about religious persons is that for the most part we think, and say, that truth matters. The occasion of this essay is a conference on secularisation held on the campus of the Lahore University of Management Sciences, and by ‘we’ I mean the participants in that conference, that is, principally Christians and Muslims, Europeans, Canadians, Russians, and Pakistanis. If we are to do justice to our own traditions, it is probably wise to place our concern with questions of truth centre-stage. This is opposed by certain more liberal voices in my own country, Britain, who would rather that we mute our concerns with the truth for the sake of peaceful life together. (‘Liberal’ here is taken as a self-designation: it is how those who speak in this way describe themselves.) To place questions of truth centre-stage 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 or at least pragmatic silence. But that is not true to our traditions, and in the long term, for that reason, such an approach will very likely fail. Beside that question of integrity we also 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 all religious traditions are the same. Britain produced a supreme specimen of such thinking in the work of John Hick, whose influence extends to nearly every British high school religion curriculum. 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. Only God knows if they are right. Such views typically are not supported by evidence; indeed they function in advance of particular cases on the ground and often know in advance what any investigation will reveal. Those who spend a significant portion of their time studying with Jews, Muslims, and Christians (perhaps through practices like Scriptural Reasoning or Comparative Theology) may find they form deep and long-term friendships with their colleagues, but they are probably unlikely to discover deep agreements.

It is common to suppose that when it comes to religion there is agreement and there is disagreement. It is also common to suppose that agreement is good, and productive (we can get things done) and that disagreement is bad, and counter-productive (it obstructs action). This is very likely the wrong contrast, despite its considerable extent and influence. Different traditions really, genuinely and deeply disagree. The contrast developed here is 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 often leads to deeper understanding. If there is a fruitful purpose to inter-religious encounter (in some cases it is not fruitful and even damaging, as when such practices are acts of policing minorities by the state), surely one of those tasks is 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. This is likely to be costly and at constant risk of failure.

It is a startling but little remarked 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 regarding the difference between prophethood and divine sonship. But the doctrine of the Trinity, so central to ancient, medieval and modern Christian theology, often mysteriously recedes in the face of attempts to agree that Muslims and Christians believe in one God. This may be partly because those Christians who engage in inter-faith dialogue might 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 – a foundation of some kind – prior to venturing into the territory of disagreement. By contrast it is likely 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, in Britain and in Pakistan, for a state where religious life can flourish publicly amidst diversity, difference and disagreement is bound up with a responsibility to take disagreement seriously. To flourish is to acknowledge our concern with truth, to acknowledge our disagreements, but to render them generative rather than stagnant.

The question investigated here is: what kind of state do British and Pakistani religious persons need, in Britain and Pakistan, if we desire a public sphere in which religious lives can flourish in public, in pursuit of truth and in honest 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. I take a different view: we need a genuinely plural state so that religious life, and its concern with truth, can flourish more, and flourish in particular in public life.

**Twenty-First Century Cambridge**

In the early years of this century, the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge began a consultation as to the feasibility of a new research centre whose focus would be interreligious engagement. The period of consultation ended with a report which included an ‘academic profile’ whose purpose was to outline the intellectual framework that might inform this new centre. It is a document of enduring interest because it offers what might be called a map of possibilities: a succinct account of a certain intellectual terrain with suggestions for how to traverse it using available institutional and conceptual resources. It is divided into four brief sections: an historical and contextual background, the role of the university, the outline of where the academic focus should lie, and an outline of possible areas of research. (For reasons of space the last will not be considered here.)

The historical and contextual background names several factors considered relevant to an interfaith programme. These are grouped under three interrelated topics: demographics, economics, and politics. It is thus interesting that ‘religion’ is not itself a topic, but has some relation to these others. The demographic factors include global population growth, increased migration and the increased diversity of populations. The economic factors are in part a consequence of the demographic, principally increased competition for resources. The political factors are in part consequences of the preceding two, combined with the end of the Cold War: conflicts together with struggles over identity (including religious self-definition). The significance of religion, and of contested relations between religions, is viewed in the light of these wider forces (and not, for example, of the inner dynamics of those traditions).

These wider forces set the scene for two bold historical comparisons. The first is the case of post-Reformation Europe. It too was a period where political struggles took religious form, where religious identities were used to draw political boundaries, often with disastrous consequences. The wars of the seventeenth century produced a ‘secular settlement’ in which there was ‘an attempt to create a set of minimal rules or dispositions that allow the working together of the various religious intensities in some sort of political unit for some sort of collective good’ (Quash and Jenkins 2007). This claim is compressed and the sources of its terms is left unstated. ‘Dispositions’ is a term received in social anthropology through the work of Pierre Bourdieu . It roughly means the sense by social actors of what they might or should do in a situation (Bourdieu 1977). ‘Intensities’ is a term received in theology through the work of Daniel Hardy. It has a double function: it roughly means the internal dynamics of a phenomenon (in contrast to its external relations to other phenomena) but also a particular instance of action (in contrast to a regular pattern of action). The paradigmatic contrast is between worship, which displays intensity, and everyday life, which displays extensity (Hardy 2001). The crucial point, for Quash and Jenkins, is that official and unofficial guides to practice (‘rules’ and ‘dispositions’) are *minimal*.

The second historical case is the contrast in ancient Rome between the ‘law of nations’ and civil law. Civil law governed relations between Roman citizens, whereas the law of nations was a set of rules for settling disputes between non-citizens, and for regulating trade relations throughout the Roman empire. Originally a ‘lowest common denominator’ it had a subsequent life in the idea of a ‘universal’ law which embodies a transcendent set of values to which all people must be committed.

The two cases provide a contrast, for Quash and Jenkins, between two meanings of ‘secular’. The first is a set of minimal rules and dispositions, which permit members of different traditions to resolve disputes. The second is an alternative to traditions, ‘the horizon of civilization’, a ‘final truth about humanity’. The first, we might say, is a condition for negotiation; the second is a conception of humanity. The first enables different meanings to interact; the second is itself a new and dominant meaning.

This ambiguity at the heart of ‘the secular’ has severe consequences for how one understands religion. In the case of minimal rules and dispositions, religious traditions engage one another through a commitment (perhaps somewhat provisional or pragmatic, even grudging) to ways to resolve disputes, a kind of ‘court of last resort’ to use the language of Quash and Jenkins. In the case of the horizon of civilization, religious traditions are intrinsically a problem in so far as they pose rival conceptions of what a ‘civilization’ should be.

The ambiguity of the secular also produces different conceptions of conflict. In the first case, there is conflict between religious traditions which must be resolved through appeal to a minimal set of rules and dispositions. In the second case, there is a conflict between religion and the secular vision of civilization. This has deep and abiding implications for how one understands the relation between the state and civil society, especially where questions of loyalty are concerned, and even more especially where religious actors in one place may have been trained in an entirely different place.

All these considerations lead Quash and Jenkins to suppose that there are opportunities for research in the modern university, which is itself a product of these same intellectual forces. (The university does not peer in from the outside, but is a player in the drama.) Such research serves not merely to report on states of affairs but to be itself a force ‘to revive the secular project’ in the first, minimal, sense. The modern university is a kind of secular institution in its model of collegiality, in which different intellectual pursuits are pursued independently and in relation to each other, and governed by rules and dispositions to enable practical conflicts to be resolved. This is obviously an ideal type: actual universities may display contrary tendencies in this respect and some of its members might have a strong sense of the ‘final ‘truth’ of what research should be. This will be discernible in the relationship (and the conception of that relationship) between the central administration and the various faculties or departments. For Quash and Jenkins, a faculty devoted to the study of theology and religious traditions is an ideal location for research into secular settlements, especially if it exhibits in its own constitution a commitment to enabling different religious traditions to engage each other.

The outline of the academic focus of the proposed research centre is an application of these conceptual considerations to a practical programme of research. These are presented as four foci, three of which are matters of approach. The first is simply a limitation of the field of study to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each of the others identifies a consequence of thinking in terms of minimal rules and dispositions. The second (of the four) is a focus on particular religious traditions and their indigenous categories rather than on concepts that embrace all traditions in advance or try at the outset to identify common or universal features. This has the effect, it is envisaged, of focusing on the particularities of traditions rather than some supposed genus of which the traditions are species. A focus on particularities, in turn, requires a certain historical and ethnographic interest. The third focus is a variation on the second: as well as a concern with particularities within traditions there is to be a focus on interactions between traditions. Again, traditions are not related as species of a single genus but as historical trajectories that interact with and shape each other. Traditions are constituted by their mutual encounters, and thus the investigation of a tradition is simultaneously an investigation of its encounters with other traditions. This is not only of historical interest, however. A study of past and present encounters may also reveal new possibilities for those in the future. The fourth focus is also a variation on the second: attention to categories indigenous to the traditions (rather than too quickly importing categories from elsewhere) requires attention to their ‘strong theological claims and devotional intensities’. This seems primarily articulated as a corrective to what is called in the Academic Profile ‘the pluralist Theology of Religions’ school. By this is meant a tendency to treat particular theological claims as species of a genus of ‘purer’ religious instinct, that is, as accidental predicates of a more substantial essence.

Taken together, the research foci outline an approach to the study of religions that pays attention to the historical particulars of each tradition, including their theological claims, and to their interactions with one another, against a backdrop of demographic, economic, and political shifts that manifest as ‘religious’ phenomena.

It can be seen from this summary that the document for the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme shares concerns and makes proposals with significant overlap with those of Rowan Williams cited earlier. There is good reason to wonder if this approach betrays a certain Anglican pattern of thinking, given the authors’ religious affiliation (and mine). If so, this is unlikely to be a magical connection of minds, and more a product of a certain religious history. The history of the Anglican church in Britain is to a significant extent a history of conflicts and negotiations between rival factions within it (broadly catholic and broadly protestant) and with rival religious communities within the country. Its religious conflicts did not get resolved through war but through a failed campaign of pressure against minority (Christian) traditions, prosecuted through aggressive legislation and restrictions on employment, which then became gradually attenuated. It is possible for a Catholic to hold a chair in Divinity in Britain, and although it has been possible since 2013 for the monarch to marry a Catholic, they cannot themselves be one. The commitment to ‘careful and attentive interaction between communities of religious practice’ (Williams) or the attraction of ‘religious intensities policed by a secular settlement’ (Quash and Jenkins) may owe a good deal to the formation of their authors in Anglican particularities.

The principal yield for our discussion is the idea of minimal rules and dispositions combined with an attentiveness to encounters in the past and in the present from which one might learn. This will now be subject to a test, considering a particular historical account of religious settlements in Europe.

**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 official recognition for the first time, and 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 had failed. The reasons for this failure must be guessed at, and are generally agreed to do with 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 between the two treaties is that the Peace of Westphalia – while problematic in many ways – seems with hindsight to have intended to hold different communities (and enabled them to live) together in a way which the Peace of Augsburg did not. In many ways the Peace of Westphalia repeated some of the principles of the Peace of Augsburg. For example, *cuius regio, eius religio* was preserved, albeit with some restrictions (Gross 1948, 22; Beller 1970, 355). 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 legal provision for minority traditions to have freedom of worship in their towns, even if they were minority traditions. Augsburg expected minorities to migrate; Westphalia expected minorities to be part of a varied community.

A romantic cast of mind might see in this a significant advance in human compassion and understanding, and that may be so, but it also reflected stark economic realities: the emigration of entire communities had devastating economic repercussions for towns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, 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 instructively different. 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 collective life in religiously diverse towns: ‘subjects who in 1627 had been debarred from the free exercise of their religion, other than that of their ruler, were by the Peace granted the right of conducting private worship, and of educating their children, at home or abroad, in conformity with their own faith’ (Ward 1934, 412). The laws were designed to clarify rights of minority communities and establish them in law. There was also a determined attempt to mitigate the problem of majorities overwhelming minorities when votes were counted:

…a majority of votes should no longer be held decisive at the Diet; but that such questions should be settled by an amicable ‘composition’ between its two parts of corpora … In the same spirit of parity it was agreed that when possible there should be equality of consulting and voting power between the two religions on all commissions of the Diet, including those *Deputationstage* which had come to exercise an authority nearly equalling that of the Diets themselves (Ward 1934, 414)

If the history between the two settlements is not considered, it might look as if though Augsburg should be the more successful model: it separates the warring parties and allocates them different tranches of land, whereas Westphalia looks like a recipe for disaster: it places the disputatious communities side-by-side and hopes for the best.

The history is decisive. 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 led to repeated clashes. But the big difference was the effect of the Thirty Years War. Eight million 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 battle (Beller 1970, 357): 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 might call (following Quash and Jenkins) ‘minimal rules and dispositions’. These rules and dispositions governed relations between different communities, and were such that each community could affirm them. They were not grand philosophical ideologies. They were not the product of deep (or even superficial) theological agreement. They were small things, with limited scope, enabling minorities to live alongside majority religious traditions, permitting minorities to worship, and naming what was, and what was not, acceptable practice in public.

One should not be romantic about it. Westphalia deprived the Emperor and the imperial diet of power and influence and increased the independence of the princes: this, more than forging religious peace, was the interest of many of the parties, and its international impact was to strengthen France and Sweden at the expense of the Habsburg bloc (Beller 1970, 357). In the view of one historian, the achievement of a lasting peace between Protestants and Catholics was in fact perceived by both parties as a bitter disappointment: each had hoped for decisive victory (Whiteman 1961, 122) but neither got it.

This is a particular kind of ‘secular’ settlement. It was obviously religious – it had religion at its heart because nearly all of the parties were religious. But its approach to religious difference was the creation 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 is important not to romanticise these practical arrangements: they did in many ways enshrine the hegemony of the majority tradition, and were designed to do so, but importantly it did not exclude minorities. Quite the reverse: 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. But it did happen gradually all over Europe. By the end of the 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, known today by Europeans simply as modern philosophy.

Attention can be drawn 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 one concerns 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.

Catholic priests would pass through 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 done for centuries, Catholics would kneel in adoration in the streets as the priest passed by. 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 everyday practice 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. The Protestant Huguenots who lived in the same cities as the Catholics did not view the sacrament in the same way, however, and their tradition not only did not require them to kneel, but their religious leaders often explicitly forbade them from doing so. This was a more recent development, rooted simultaneously in new theological understandings and in the political imperative to distinguish one identity 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. In one particular and notable 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.

What are we to make of this? This example is not selected as a partisan story against Catholics: there were persistent and retaliatory acts of violence on by both Protestants and Catholic: we could just as well consider the Protestant-led execution of Michael Servetus in in Geneva 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. 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 aspect of truth-seeking is especially 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, of placing one’s opponent in the wrong. These practices of wish-fulfilment are designed to provoke confrontation, and create 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 if I claim to be right, and you disagree with me, I think you are wrong. We need not deny or evade this. If Christians and Muslims are to engage each other seriously, this must be acknowledged and made the basis for conversation and discussion. There are some significant variations on rightness and wrongness in relation to religious claims, however. The most significant claims made in religious traditions are not typically testable according to criteria that are shared by all traditions. Very often they involve appeals to authorities that are not shared, the most obvious being a canon of scripture. To redeem a claim to be right in such a case is to submit that claim to highly tradition-specific criteria such that only a member of that tradition could judge it. To occupy a different tradition is not merely to disagree with the claim but possibly not to recognise the criteria by which it could be judged as a claim. But there is a difference between thinking that another is wrong (and the other knowing that he is thought to be wrong), and me saying it, and especially performing that utterance, with the express (and perhaps violent) purpose of placing the other 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. And the ‘truth’ is the same in each case too. There is no great difference in 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, and it becomes a matter for the courts or night-time violence.

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.

I wish to sow the idea that displaying the truth and pursuing the error are distinct and do not 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 the relation of 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 perhaps unusual distinction is especially useful when one confronts claims by more moderate voices for religious folk to mute their concern with truth for the sake of peaceful life together. I view this as a mistaken plea. It is not the concern with displaying truth that poses the threat of violence, in my account. 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. 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, or life.

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 and dispositions 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 be learnt 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 this presents an opportunity to learn from these practices of theological integrity.

**Nineteenth Century Edinburgh**

We turn now to the birth not of ‘the secular’ but of ‘secularization’, that is, the powerful (but illusory) idea that 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. I am here heavily indebted to Callum Brown’s *The Death of Christian Britain* (and to Jenkins’ reading of this study: Jenkins 2013).

In the early nineteenth century, a Church of Scotland minister, Thomas Chalmers, moved from a rural ministry to the city Glasgow, and then later to 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 (Brown 2009, 22).

The question we might ask is: what was this difference? It is a well-recognised philosophical phenomenon that one cannot directly describe differences. One can only describe phenomena and then through comparison notice the ways in which these descriptions differ. 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. In any case, 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. The move to Glasgow came as a shock, and provoked strongly contrasting descriptions. Chalmers described the large numbers of working class men, many of whom did not attend church (or at least his church), and the 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 coexisted alongside 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’.

Chalmers was not one 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 chivvy his fellow evangelicals into action. The unholy city needed, he urged, to be retaken by the churches. Chalmers produced an arrestingly dark portrait of that unholy city to concentrate everyone’s minds (Brown 2009, 24).

The important thing to notice here is 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 whose purpose was to motivate social change. Chalmers is now 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 figure who changed British history.

Brown draws attention to certain features of Chalmers’ narrative that were – in his 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 to generate energy (and raise funds) in support of evangelical activity (Brown 2009, 25).

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 fund-raising) 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 second world war 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 for us to notice. First, there is an important distinction between taking religious decline as a fact, and taking narratives of decline as objects of study. This distinction is crucial. 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. This 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 charged with rhetoric 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 suggests – people were the wrong kind of Christian, or exhibited the wrong kind of relation to the religion practised in their locality. 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 come as unwelcome news for civil servants advising governments. There are many disappointments when government and scholarship meet. 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 does one 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’. Their employment would be at considerable risk were they to do so. So much the worse for civil servants, for governments, and for those of us on the receiving end of legislation and executive orders produced by those governments (Adams 2020). It is clear that the role of the university in this is urgent: the task is to investigate narratives, to interpret them, and to 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 sceptical of the stories we are told about our religious lives.

This is not to say that myths are nonsense. 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. 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 in drawing universal conclusions from specific cases (Jenkins 2013). We might say, in summary, there needs to be profligate attentiveness, and restrained generalization.

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1. This essay is a revised and expanded version of a previously published piece: <http://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/back-issues/volume-15-number-2-november-2016/new-plural-settlements-the-secular-and-secularization/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)