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The Invention of a ‘Secular Society’? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961–4

Abstract
This essay examines the sudden re-imagination of Britain as a ‘secular society’ in the highbrow British media between 1961 and 1964. It is often assumed that contemporary discourses of secularization were relatively unproblematic, simply reflecting reality, but closer investigation reveals that they invented a general crisis of supernaturalism, and exaggerated the extent of religious decline. Between 1961 and 1963 such discourses were promulgated in the British media chiefly by Christians, who still enjoyed a privileged position in the reporting of religious affairs. In many cases such discourses drew on a radical theological critique of the churches which had been developing since the 1940s. From 1963, especially in the wake of Honest to God, the idea of the ‘secular society’ was accepted by a wide range of Christian leaders, and consequently it passed into the received wisdom, allowing secular sociologists to dominate the debate from 1965. This problematic re-imagination of British religiosity had important secularizing consequences, especially in the fields of the media, the law, and within the churches themselves. For these reasons, Christians played the central role in the initial stages of the religious crisis of the 1960s, and in the imaginative deconstruction of ‘Christian Britain’.

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Introduction

At some point between 1961 and 1964, the received wisdom about British religiosity abruptly changed. ‘Almost overnight’, writes Simon Green of 1963 in his recent *The Passing of Protestant England*, ‘it became educated common sense to describe contemporary England as a secular society.’\(^1\) Since contemporaries frequently blurred the distinction between ‘England’ and ‘Britain’, this rhetoric normally applied to both.\(^2\) By 1965, in Hugh McLeod’s words, ‘there had been a revolution in people’s perceptions of their society and the place of religion within it’.\(^3\) This essay interrogates that revolution—problematising it, describing how it happened, and sketching a preliminary explanation of it. It is suggested that this shift in the perception of religiosity, as distinct from actual changes in religiosity, may be a significant but neglected factor in the making of the British religious crisis of the 1960s.

This is a relatively unexplored argument. Historians of the early 1960s have often assumed that contemporary diagnoses of Britain as a ‘secular society’ were broadly accurate, and therefore constitute evidence that ‘secularization’ had reached an advanced stage. In a recent example, Green provides a substantial survey of such discourses to support his view that England was largely secular after 1960; consequently, he concludes, the weakening bond between faith and people must have snapped at some point in the 1950s.\(^4\) Callum Brown takes a different view, seeing 1963 as the crucial turning point.\(^5\) Even so, he too cites the very strong ‘sense of crisis’ amongst ‘churchmen’ as evidence that Christianity entered a new and severe phase of decline in that year.\(^6\) Pessimistic clergymen were also used to illustrate the reality of ‘secularization’ by Alan Gilbert.\(^7\)

The *prima facie* objection to this approach is that people might adopt a rhetoric of religious crisis for a number of reasons, of which correct perception of a real crisis in popular religion is only one. The specific objection is that closer examination reveals such discourses of secularisation to be deeply problematic. In the first place, they anticipated reality rather than following it. Statements of the ‘secular


\(^4\) Green, *Passing of Protestant England*, 305; 311.


society’ became commonplace in the British press between 1961 and 1964, but the serious exodus from the churches only began in the second half of the decade.\(^8\) Even in 1965, ‘the drop in church-going since the mid-1950s was still quite modest’.\(^9\) Second, there is a problem of access to factual information. It was widely acknowledged that various ecclesiastical statistics had been gently declining since the late 1950s,\(^10\) but this was hardly evidence of a secular revolution. Statistics of baptism and church-going then showed a steeper decline from 1963,\(^11\) but this was not (and could not have been) obvious to contemporaries until 1965 at the very earliest. The Church of England’s own statistical unit, to take the major example, published volumes in three-year intervals: in 1959, 1962, and 1965.\(^12\) Consequently, the first public discussions of the post-1963 Anglican statistics date from mid-1965.\(^13\) Third, and most importantly, close reading of contemporary statements of secularization shows that the British media broadly understood the term ‘secular society’ to mean a society in which atheists would soon outnumber supernaturalists. Even the stoutest defenders of academic secularization theory, then as now, regard this understanding as simply wrong.\(^14\) Yet for many commentators in the early 1960s, such an outcome seemed to be one of the clear implications of scientific modernity. ‘Men can no longer credit the existence of “gods”, or of a God as a supernatural Person, as religion has always postied’, declared John Robinson, bishop of Woolwich, in his highly-publicized ‘Our image of God must go’ piece for the Observer in March 1963.\(^15\) Such statements abounded in The Times. ‘Without God there is nothing to believe in, there is only a non-moral cosmic process by which we are all being eaten up,’ argued a May 1963 article; ‘the trouble with twentieth-century civilization is that it feels like that all the time’. The twentieth century, it thought, seemed ‘imprisoned’ within ‘a closed system of natural forces’; even the word ‘supernatural’ was ‘suspect’.\(^16\) A December 1963 account described the present as a ‘sceptical age’,\(^17\) and a February 1964 discussion of ethics talked of

\(^8\) This was true across the western world. Hugh McLeod, The Religious Crisis of the 1960s (Oxford, 2007), 188ff.  
\(^9\) McLeod, Religious Crisis of the 1960s, 240.  
\(^10\) Brown, Death of Christian Britain, 188.  
\(^11\) Brown, Death of Christian Britain, 188.  
\(^12\) Church of England Central Board of Finance, Facts and Figures about the Church of England (3 vols, London, 1959–65). These were the statistics relied upon by Wilson’s discussion of Anglicanism. [Bryan Wilson, Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment (London, 1966), 7].  
\(^13\) See, for example, John Robinson, ‘And What Next?’, Prism, 101 (September 1965), 9–17, 12.  
\(^14\) Steve Bruce, God is Dead: Secularization in the West (Oxford, 2002), 41.  
\(^16\) ‘Deliverance into Faith’, The Times, 4 May 1963, 12.  
\(^17\) ‘John the Baptist’s Doubts’, The Times, 14 December 1963, 10.
‘large numbers of people today who no longer believe in God’.18 Eight months later, a Times correspondent commented that ‘modern men believe themselves to be homeless in the vast impersonality of space’.19 A May 1965 discussion spoke of ‘multitudes of people’ who ‘sincerely find the notions of the supernatural and the transcendent difficult to assimilate’.20 A December 1965 column described ‘the defence of a supernatural religion in a naturalistically-minded age’ as ‘the question which is most urgent before the Church today’.21 Whilst these statements seemed credible in their cultural context, their sociology was wildly inaccurate. The churches had been gently declining for decades, but this was hardly caused by a mass conversion to philosophical naturalism; survey evidence suggests that during the 1960s theists outnumbered atheists by something in the region of eight to one.22 However valid we might think the language of secularization in general,23 or its application to the 1960s in particular,24 these considerations suggest that these secularization discourses were problematic, and that Britain’s ‘secular society’ was not so much discovered as invented. As Matthew Grimley’s article on the Wolfenden committee suggestively argued, the ‘wider secularization’ perceived in the early 1960s ‘was perhaps more imagined than real’.25

Once this possibility is taken seriously, the sudden re-imagination of British religiosity in the early 1960s comes to be seen in its proper light, as a question not of social structures, but a problem in the history of public ideas. The account of the rise of secularization discourses offered here answers part of a wider call by J.C.D. Clark for a history of the idea of secularization.26 Using Clark’s perspective, a new set of questions emerges. Who popularized the idea of the ‘secular society’? Where did they get the idea from? Why did it seem so compelling? What were its practical consequences?

19 ‘The Answer to Anxiety: “consider the lilies”’, The Times, 5 September 1964, 10.
23 For recent installments in this debate, see Jonathan Clark, ‘Secularization and Modernization: the Failure of a “Grand Narrative”’, The Historical Journal, 55 (March 2012), 161–94; Dominic Erdozain, ‘“Cause is Not Quite What it Used to be”: The Return of Secularisation’, English Historical Review CXXVII, 525 (2012), 377–400.
24 For opposing sides of this argument, see Brown, Death of Christian Britain, 15; Jane Garnett et al., Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives (London, 2007), 290.
This essay is a first attempt to answer such questions. It focuses on national rather than local opinion-formers: the people who wrote the books, contributed the newspaper articles, and gave the television interviews that comprised educated national discourse about the state of religion in early 1960s Britain. It proceeds by examining key sections of the highbrow British media such as The Times, the Observer, the BBC, and the Guardian, as well as major popular books on the subject. This admittedly tilts the focus away from more demotic media such as the Daily Express and the Daily Mail, but these had a track record of trenchantly defending Christian Britain, as the Margaret Knight (1955) and Eustace Chesser (1959) affairs demonstrated. In a similar pattern, conservative Christian activists found the comparatively demotic ITV much less objectionable than the metropolitan BBC. This focus also suggests that region may be an interesting problematic; whilst secularization discourses often claimed to describe the whole of society, many were actually manufactured in London. Conversely, given that the religious crisis of the 1960s was multinational in scope, international comparison is one of the most significant ways in which the approach taken here might be driven forward.

Three main arguments are offered. First, the secularization discourses of the early 1960s chiefly originated not from secular sociology, but from within British Christianity. To be understood properly, therefore, they must be contextualized within their various accompanying theological frameworks. Second, such discourses achieved dominance in the British media mainly because they appeared in articles and books written by Christians, and were then endorsed by senior Christian leaders, including the archbishop of Canterbury. Consequently, Christians played a crucial role in the construction of the British religious crisis of the 1960s. Third, this Christian re-imagination of British religiosity had a number of very significant secularizing consequences, especially in the fields of the media, the law, and the churches themselves. It also put secular sociologists, for the first time, squarely at the forefront of the debate about the state of British religion.

Christianity, Sociology, and the British Media, 1945–61

Scholars of religion have long been aware that narratives of Christian decline are a perennial feature of Christianity itself. To take a recent

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28 See, for example, ‘The Great Debate’, Daily Express, 10 September 1968, 12.
29 Brown, Death of Christian Britain, 24ff.
example, ‘prophesies of godlessness’ have been a recurring feature of American religious life since the rise of Puritanism, despite the fact that American Christianity has remained influential ever since that time.\(^{30}\) During the nineteenth century, secular thinkers such as Comte, Marx, and Weber added a sociological alternative to this long-standing Christian tradition.

Nonetheless, such narratives were not the dominant feature of commentary on religion produced by the British mainstream media in the 1950s. Rather, it was assumed that Britain was unequivocally a Christian country, and that commentary on religious affairs should directly reflect this. The sociological component of this assumption had some justification: the association between Christianity and English ‘national character’ had been a theme of English discourse throughout the inter-war period, and had received a new lease of life in the Second World War.\(^{31}\) In Scotland, the connection between Protestantism and national identity was perhaps even more pronounced.\(^{32}\) In 1952, the BBC estimated that about one in every three adults listened to its Sunday religious broadcasts.\(^{33}\) Reflecting this assumption of the intimate connection between ‘Britishness’ and ‘Christianity’, broadsheet treatment of religious matters before 1964 often took the form of protected regular columns written by Christians. Between 1958 and 1963, for example, the *Guardian* published over a hundred articles whose main heading was simply ‘The churches’, which were written by Christians from a variety of backgrounds, including Monica Furlong (Anglican), Christopher Driver (nonconformist), David Gourlay (Church of Scotland), Brian Wicker (Roman Catholic), and Roger Lloyd (Anglican). In the 1950s *The Times* ran hundreds of Christian devotional articles under the sub-heading ‘From a correspondent’, and this practice continued into the mid-sixties. These articles were often couched in unashamedly traditional language; a 1965 example discussed the lives of saints Benedict and Cuthbert in glowing terms, reminding *Times* readers that ‘God will want to hear our articulate praises, our spoken prayers. Even buildings can display his Glory’.\(^{34}\)

Similarly, the BBC’s output in the 1950s almost universally reflected its director-general’s 1948 statement that Britain was a Christian


\(^{33}\) Brown, ‘Mrs Knight and the BBC’, 355.

\(^{34}\) ‘Cuthbert and Benedict: Two Men of God’, *The Times*, 20 March 1965, 12.
country, and consequently that the Corporation was unequivocally pro-Christian.

There are many demands of impartiality laid upon the Corporation, but this is not one of them. We are citizens of a Christian country, and the BBC - an institution set up by the State - bases its policy upon a positive attitude towards the Christian values. [...] The whole preponderant weight of its programmes is directed to this end.\textsuperscript{35}

Such editorial policies meant that it was very difficult for outsiders to attack ‘Christian Britain’. In 1955, the psychologist Margaret Knight had to fight Christian BBC controllers to get her atheist views onto the radio, and her broadcast attracted a storm of criticism in the British press.\textsuperscript{36}

This Christian stranglehold on the discussion of religion in the 1950s and early 1960s appears especially impressive when compared to the minimal prominence accorded to sociologists of religion. In 1950, sociology in Britain was a tiny discipline, largely confined to the LSE, and there was no appreciable British school of Max Weber,\textsuperscript{37} who is often regarded as the father of academic secularization theory. Whilst numbers of sociology undergraduates expanded exponentially during the immediate post-war period, from around 200 in 1945 to about 3,000 by 1966,\textsuperscript{38} sociology remained something of an ‘outsider’ subject in the 1950s. It was restricted to newer universities such as Sheffield, Birmingham, and Leicester, which maintained flourishing departments.\textsuperscript{39} Oxford and Cambridge remained suspicious of the discipline, only introducing undergraduate sociology options in 1961 and 1962.\textsuperscript{40} This ‘outsider’ status ensured that sociologists had little impact on the British media’s discussion of religion before 1964. Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree’s \textit{English Life and Leisure} (1951) sold 10,000 copies, but met an ‘almost universally negative’ response even from other sociologists.\textsuperscript{41} The social anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer’s ‘paganisation thesis’ of 1955 was resisted by most contemporary observers.\textsuperscript{42} In 1962, Bryan Wilson was appointed reader in sociology at Oxford, and he rapidly established


\textsuperscript{36} Brown, ‘Mrs Knight and the BBC’, 345.


\textsuperscript{38} Halsey, \textit{A History of Sociology in Britain}, 89.

\textsuperscript{39} Halsey, \textit{A History of Sociology in Britain}, 93–4.

\textsuperscript{40} Halsey, \textit{A History of Sociology in Britain}, 99–101.

\textsuperscript{41} Green, \textit{Passing of Protestant England}, 180, 183.

\textsuperscript{42} Green, \textit{Passing of Protestant England}, 265.
himself as Britain’s foremost sociologist of religion. Although he had published newspaper articles on youth culture and the universities from 1959, and although the public profile of sociology had received a boost from the foundation of *New Society* in 1962, even Wilson had few opportunities to discuss mainstream British Christianity in broadsheet newsprint in the early 1960s. His first *Observer* article devoted to the subject was not published until 1965, and was commissioned as a response to a discussion of secularization by a clergyman. Another 1965 outing was provided by the journal *Theology*, so that Wilson might respond to an Anglican sociologist. It was not until 1966 that Wilson published the seminal work of British secularization theory, *Religion in Secular Society*.

This close relationship between Christianity and the ‘commanding heights’ of the British media was cemented during the 1950s by a clear sense of Anglican confidence. The dominant mood of the Church of England was one of ‘a general feeling of religious revival’. Whilst there is still debate about whether this optimism was well-founded, influential statements of church health persisted in Anglican discourse until very late in the decade. ‘A new Church of England is being born’ declared the *Church of England Newspaper* in 1960. ‘A Church efficient, sophisticated and progressive, a Church with money to spare.’ When a more iconoclastic editor of the *Church of England Newspaper* attacked the Anglican hierarchy in 1958, he criticized precisely this sense of ecclesiastical confidence. ‘To encourage themselves and hearten their followers’, argued Clifford Rhodes, ‘leading churchmen are extravagant with optimism’.

Given the close links between Christianity and the mainstream British media, and the hopefulness entertained by Anglicans in the 1950s, it is unsurprising that no fully-fledged discourse of secularization achieved anything like dominance in the mainstream British media in the years leading up to 1961. In January 1961, Geoffrey Fisher announced his resignation as archbishop of Canterbury, declaring that

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49 For an ‘optimistic’ view of British Christianity in the 1950s see Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 170. For the ‘pessimistic’ view, see Green, *Passing of Protestant England*, 244ff.
he left the Church of England ‘in good heart’. Subsequent historians have tended to distance themselves from this claim, suggesting that Fisher had failed to recognize a ‘change of consciousness’ which had happened ‘under the surface’ in the 1950s, thus leaving his Church radically unprepared for the storms of the 1960s. Yet this assessment would have surprised most commentators in 1961. The Guardian’s account of Fisher’s archiepiscopacy mentioned no crisis, concluding instead that ‘it may even be said that during his primacy the Church of England has come a little closer to becoming a Church of the people in all walks of life’. The Times did not mention a crisis either, dedicating pages of hagiographic reporting to Fisher’s resignation speech. Its own editorial was strongly positive, declaring that it had been a ‘notable tenure’. The Church Times greeted Fisher’s successor with unabashed optimism, declaring that ‘in the new Archbishop’, ‘great gifts match great opportunities’.

The Emergence of Christian Secularization Narratives, c.1940–61

Yet whilst this triumphalism was going on, a minority of educated Christians was beginning to offer an alternative narrative: that the churches were facing a profound, existential crisis. This rhetoric went back to the 1930s, when horrified Christian thinkers had interpreted the rise of totalitarianism as obvious evidence of the collapse of Christendom. In 1940, for example, the influential Anglican historian Alec Vidler had argued that

In Germany the post-Christian secularization and paganization of society is already blatantly occurring and even patently accomplished fact, whereas here we are drifting into a similar condition without being aware of it.

Vidler was part of a minority of Christian intellectuals who were independently reinventing the concept of ‘secularization’ in the 1940s. He never mentioned Marx, Weber, or Comte, and his elision of ‘secularization’ and ‘paganization’ suggests that he was not consciously following them. His focus on the worsening international situation was

58 Alec Vidler, God’s Judgment on Europe (London, 1940), 77.
such that his suggestions for further reading consisted entirely of ‘recent books’, none of which were published before 1938. Statements of Christendom in crisis, beset by the recent emergence of mass atheisms, were also made during the 1940s by J.H. Oldham’s influential *Christian News-Letter*, which had a wartime circulation of about 10,000. A new and modern Christian culture, it was hoped by a minority of British thinkers in the 1940s, would flower out of the ashes of the old one.

Unbeknownst to these thinkers, the idea of Christendom in crisis had already received seminal treatment from a Nazi prison cell, by the German theologian and political prisoner Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Whilst the debate about what precisely Bonhoeffer meant is still going on, his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, published in English in 1953, appeared to maintain that twentieth century man had suddenly ‘come of age’. This transition had cut humanity off from the last nineteen hundred years of religious history; mankind was now ‘proceeding towards a time of no religion at all’. Accordingly, traditional Christianity might look healthy, but it was actually in a state of radical crisis. This development, Bonhoeffer argued, was the culmination of a process whereby all avenues of intellectual enquiry had become autonomous, a process that had begun in the middle ages.

Bonhoeffer’s martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis ensured that his final theological fragments were taken seriously by a generation of British theologians. The most famous of these did not hesitate to label Bonhoeffer’s account of spiritual change as ‘secularization’. The same connection was later made by Alan Gilbert, who credited Bonhoeffer as an influence on his own history of secularization. Notably, Bonhoeffer appeared to welcome mankind ‘coming of age’, because it pointed the

64 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 146 (8 June 1944).
way to a recovery of the immersion of the Church in life of the world, which Bonhoeffer regarded as essential to true Christianity. He even hinted that humanity’s ‘coming of age’ was ultimately due to divine agency.

This radical Christian thinking, with its almost millenarian vision of exciting new forms of Christianity, influenced various sections of intramural Christian discussion during the late 1950s. It promoted a totalizing discourse of secularization, which rested on a number of questionable assumptions. One was the sense of an old epoch being replaced by a new one, causing a total transformation of religiosity. This made it difficult for such discourses to make distinctions about age, nationality, or gender. A second was the idea that ‘modern secular man’ was not only uninterested in traditional Christianity, but in all kinds of supernaturalism. Accordingly, these discourses tended to identify a ‘religious’ crisis, rather than a specifically Christian one. A third was the theological critique of isolationist churches who gathered in holy huddles and ignored the outside world.

The most important Anglican work in this vein from the 1950s was Ted Wickham’s pioneering study of secularization in Sheffield, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (1957). Wickham had been ordained in 1938, had led the Sheffield Industrial Mission since its inception in 1944, and was made bishop of Middleton in 1959. *Church and People* had a ‘wide influence’, and was ‘widely accepted in the 1960s and 1970s as a decisive intervention’; yet reading it in the context of Bonhoefferian theology, rather than as a purely secular investigation, reveals a rather different interpretation than that which is usually offered.

Wickham’s central argument was that the church was in a state of profound spiritual crisis. Whilst this crisis had long roots, going back to the scientific revolution of the eighteenth century, and the rise of the working classes in the nineteenth, it was only now coming into view. ‘From a date as recent as the thirties’, he wrote, ‘the collapse has been nothing less than catastrophic’. A new epoch was at hand: recent times had seen ‘the rapid evolution of a wholly new society’ containing ‘a new type of man’. Like Bonhoeffer, Wickham hinted that this development was the work of God. In ‘the secular culture of the

74 Edward Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London, 1957), 222.
75 Wickham, *Church and People*, 204.
76 Wickham, *Church and People*, 236.
77 Wickham, *Church and People*, 205.
78 Wickham, *Church and People*, 233.
present’, this new type of man was too secular to accept supernatualist
Christianity.\textsuperscript{79}

Whilst \textit{Church and People} was a pioneering work of historical
sociology, it was also a moral critique of the contemporary church.
Addressing the religious boom of the nineteenth century, Wickham
admitted that the churches seemed healthy—they ‘luxuriated’ in zeal,
manpower, money, and religious revival—but in reality, he thought, ‘the
disease was spreading’.\textsuperscript{80} Failing to understand ‘the phase of history
into which the age had come’,\textsuperscript{81} the nineteenth century churches had
shown a ‘lack of sensitivity to the secular world’, and had thus
‘obscured the very nature of the gospel itself’, falling into ‘heresy’.
Their social work was of the wrong kind, focusing on individuals rather
than the structures of society.\textsuperscript{82} Consequently, whilst they might have
appeared strong, they were actually weak.\textsuperscript{83} Wickham used the same
logic to dismiss the apparent church-going boom of the 1950s. Whilst
there was a ‘significant shift of the middle classes towards the
churches’, this was probably a manifestation of inauthentic Christianity,
a shying away from the real world.\textsuperscript{84} Unless the Church followed the
moral priority of serving the secular world, it was simply ‘a survival
from the past’.\textsuperscript{85} Wickham was judging the fundamental health of the
churches on theological as well as sociological grounds.

Wickham made the theological origins of his account explicit in his
conclusion, when, citing Bonhoeffer, he argued that the ‘rapid evolution
of a wholly new society’ demanded ‘a secular understanding of the
Gospel’.\textsuperscript{86} This entailed the translation of Christianity into purely
secular concepts, and the reorientation of the churches towards the
‘permeation of the world’.\textsuperscript{87} Yet Wickham denied that this ‘ secular’
thology was merely a reaction to rapid social change. Rather, it was a
positive theological vision, reflecting ‘theological and Biblical truth’.\textsuperscript{88}
Wickham ended his book with a challenge to the Church authorities,
declaring that ‘humanly speaking it is not conceivable that the situation
can be retrieved’ if his programme for ‘over-all reform’ was ignored.\textsuperscript{89}

As the 1950s drew to a close, such highly pessimistic assessments of
the prospects for traditional Christianity proliferated in the theologically
liberal and the theologically radical sections of the Church of

\textsuperscript{79} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 235–6.
\textsuperscript{80} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 13, 191.
\textsuperscript{81} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 191.
\textsuperscript{82} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 194.
\textsuperscript{83} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 196–8.
\textsuperscript{84} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 219.
\textsuperscript{85} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 272.
\textsuperscript{86} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 232, 236.
\textsuperscript{87} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 224–5.
\textsuperscript{88} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 230, 236.
\textsuperscript{89} Wickham, \textit{Church and People}, 272–3.
England. In July 1957, the theologically liberal Church of England Newspaper prominently reported bishop of Birmingham Leonard Wilson’s presidential address to the annual conference of the Modern Churchman’s Union, which painted a ‘sombre picture of the present secular age’. ‘It was a commonplace observation’, he was reported as saying, ‘to speak of the disintegrating forces which had in the last forty years created a new world’. ‘Life was secular: man was dehumanized and largely at the mercy of the scientific machine which he had skilfully created but which he failed so pathetically to control’. Another conference speaker described ‘the increasing secularization’ of ‘our own land’. ‘That there is almost nothing left in all the manifestations of human life which is not secularized would be universally acknowledged’ declared another. An August 1957 editorial of the Church of England Newspaper described the former ‘Christian heartlands’ of Europe as almost completely un-Christian. ‘The Church everywhere’, it declared, ‘is now a minority in a largely alien environment’. Such statements also surfaced in the radical Anglican monthly Prism, which, once it had been bought by the radical millionaire and Anglican cleric Timothy Beaumont in 1960, regularly discussed the ideas of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Even by 1958, then, in the words of Alec Vidler, reviewing Church and People in an Industrial City for the Spectator, there was ‘a cleavage, unacknowledged and indeed obscure’ between church traditionalists and ‘those who are convinced that [the churches’] future depends on a reformation more far-reaching in its nature and effects than that of the sixteenth century.

Perhaps surprisingly, an increasing number of these reforming Christians either acquiesced in or positively welcomed the onset of secularization. An example of the former was the Anglo-Catholic monk and literary critic Martin Jarrett-Kerr, whose 1964 examination of secular themes in contemporary literature was entitled The Secular Promise. The Christian economist Denys Munby went further, arguing in The Idea of a Secular Society (1963) that ‘in effect for the most important purposes we are a secular society, where it makes little or no

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90 ‘Bishop’s Sombre Picture of a Secular Age’, Church of England Newspaper, 26 July 1957, 1.
95 See for example ‘Focus’, Prism, 65 (September 1962), 1–4.
difference in what our religion or morality consists, and in which Christians are a small minority’.99 He went on to suggest that the union of the sacred and the secular as manifest in contemporary secularization was in fact the work of Jesus upon the cross.100 Accordingly, Christians should learn to welcome the secular society.101 Like Wickham, Munby also demanded that the churches should reconceptualize themselves to focus on serving the world.102 In 1963, Bishop Robinson noted that the ‘common factor’ in the theological ferment of the previous few years was ‘glad acceptance of secularization as a God-given fact’.103 Many who felt like this went on to participate in ‘Christian radicalism’, a major movement in the British churches in the 1960s.104

Christian Secularization Narratives Enter the Mainstream British Media, c.1961–4

Given the close links between the churches and the British media, it is unsurprising that these theological narratives of total spiritual crisis began to find their way from ecclesiastical circles into the national press. In 1959, the Church of Scotland minister and Guardian columnist David Gourlay introduced his readers to a radical theological vision of the collapse of organized religion, and the consequent release of the sacred into the secular world, which was inspired by the German-American existentialist theologian Paul Tillich. Christians are often so pre-occupied by religious activities, wrote Gourlay, that they fail to see that ‘the axe is laid to the root of the tree’ of organized religion. Gourlay found the coming collapse of organized religion an enthralling prospect.

Perhaps the ‘secret’ of true Christian witness lies in grasping something of the vision behind the book of Revelation, where there is no longer any ‘organised religion’, for God is all in all.105

Gourlay’s columns returned regularly to these themes over the next few years.106 In 1962, he caused a minor controversy by declaring that

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104 This term was coined in David Edwards, ‘Radicalism for Christians’, *New Society*, 35 (30 May 1963), 6–8, 7.
‘the Church is finished’. In January 1963, the religious affairs correspondent Monica Furlong told *Guardian* readers that ‘the best thing about being a Christian at the moment is that organised religion has collapsed’. Even though ‘in churches and chapels up and down the land people still meet to worship God’, the reality was that ‘the foundations have shivered, that there are cracks a mile wide in the walls, and that hot ashes are falling like rain upon our piety’. Christian discourses of crisis also began to appear in *The Times*, though these tended to be fearful rather than optimistic. A 1961 devotional article, allegedly concerned with the scripture reading for the fifth Sunday after Trinity, argued that the culture of ‘Christendom’ was ‘now in dissolution’, and that ‘there are some who fear that religion can hardly survive’. The article attributed the religious crisis to the rise of scientific materialism, arguing that ‘the vast accumulation of new knowledge and the dominance of the “scientific” attitude have radically changed the mental climate’. A discussion of ‘the fruit of the Spirit’, printed two months later, borrowed Bonhoeffer’s description of the present as a ‘religionless age’, stating that ‘the very word God has ceased to be significant’. A January 1962 devotional article argued that ‘“Christendom” has gone out irrevocably’, having been replaced by ‘a secular kind of society’. This situation, it suggested, raised the question of Christianity’s very survival.

In March 1963 these narratives were given an enormous and unexpected fillip by John Robinson’s *Honest to God*, which was by far the most widely read work of the 1960s to deal with secularization. Robinson was the Anglican bishop of Woolwich, and his book caused a scandal by appearing to deny the validity of theism. Like Wickham, Robinson purveyed a narrative of a paradigm shift in western spirituality, which had recently rendered ‘religion’ obsolete, necessitating the translation of Christianity into secular, non-supernatural terms. The narrative of the collapse of traditional religion was one that Robinson had borrowed from Bonhoeffer, and he called it ‘the process of secularization’. Like a significant number of theologically radical Christians, Robinson welcomed this apparent process, seeing it as divinely ordained.

*Honest to God*’s spectacular success was largely fortuitous, and it was not anticipated by Robinson’s publishers, who only printed 6,000 copies
of the book prior to publication. Its sales are partly explicable by Robinson’s prior reputation as the ‘Lady Chatterley’ bishop; most crucially, his book was given maximum publicity by a feature article in the Observer, which was hastily arranged when an editor demanded a feature at short notice. The ensuing controversy ensured that Robinson’s best-seller raised the profile of Christian secularization narratives to the point where they could not be ignored. Honest to God sold 350,000 copies by December 1963, and sales ultimately reached over a million. The archbishop of Canterbury rushed out a response; Harold Macmillan read it twice; it was satirized by both Private Eye and Flanders and Swann. It was the most prominent work to emerge from the movement of ‘Christian radicalism’ within the British churches.

Importantly, Robinson’s theologically-inspired rhetoric of the new secular age was then adopted by a wide range of his Christian critics. From the sympathetic end of the spectrum, Roger Lloyd, the sub-dean of Winchester, wrote a book-length survey of the debate in which he agreed that ‘the new man of the new age does exist’, and that modern secular man ‘simply cannot respond’ to the traditional Christian message. From a more hostile perspective, the Thomist theologian Eric Mascall, whose point-by-point refutation of Honest to God is still the most detailed in existence, also conceded that a thorough-going secularization had occurred. ‘There is one point about which I fully agree with the spokesmen of what has come to be known as “the new theology”’, he wrote. ‘It is this: we live in a thoroughly secularized age.’ The language of the secular society was also adopted by leading figures in the various Christian denominations. In 1964, the Methodist leader Donald Soper declared that ‘we are living in the first secular age’. In the same year, the much-discussed Paul report on the

117 Green, Passing of Protestant England, 291.
121 This argument follows that made in Green, Passing of Protestant England, 294.
deployment and payment of Anglican clergy took it as axiomatic that
the Church of England was being thrust ‘towards a critical point’.126
In May 1963, responding to Honest to God, Archbishop Ramsey similarly
showed himself ready to talk of the present as ‘a secular age’.127 In
1965, he said it was ‘very important for Christianity to make itself more
intelligible to the secular world and to get to grips with the issues
which concern the secular world around’.128 In 1969, he wrote in more
detail about the apparent shift from the supernatural. The changes of
the last few decades, he argued, ‘have produced the phenomena
known as “the secular world” and “the secular man”’. These
developments constituted ‘the new phase in our culture’. The new
“secularity” implied ‘belief in the omnicompetence of the technological
sciences’. ‘Of course religious beliefs, practices and institutions are
dismissed as devoid of relevance or meaning.’129 Whilst it was
important not to exaggerate the advance of secularism, Ramsey stated,
this did amount to a ‘new situation’.130 Once the narrative of the new
“secular age” had been conceded even by the archbishop of Canterbury,
it was very difficult to resist. Ramsey’s May 1963 intervention was
rapidly used as a debating point in subsequent argument.131 According
to one account, in the late 1960s Ramsey was asked at a press lunch
whether the Church would survive into the next century, and caused
consternation by replying, ‘that is not certain, not certain, not certain at
all. Not certain. It might easily… just fall away after twenty years or
so’.132

From 1963 it was frequently assumed by the mainstream press that
Britain was indeed a secular society.133 A Christian writing an article
about Passover for The Times in May 1963, for example, simply stated
that this was a ‘secularized society’ without argument.134 Ironically,
Christians now began to find evidence of persistence of interest in
Christianity puzzling and problematic. In 1965, the Church Times
commented that ‘perhaps the most surprising feature of an age which
has been termed “secular” and “materialistic” is the overwhelming
demand for books about religion’.135 In the Guardian, the Anglican
publisher and clergyman David Edwards described this phenomenon

128 ‘Dr. Ramsey Defends Plain Words: No Theological Jargon’, The Times, 18 November
1965, 14.
130 Ramsey, God, Christ and the World, 16.
131 See for example ‘Letters to the Editor: Lost Scientists’, The Observer, 19 May 1963, 11.
133 Green, Passing of Protestant England, 294.
as ‘astonishing’. In 1965, he stated that the number of students who went to church was ‘remarkable’, especially given that Britain’s universities ‘present a secular appearance’.

After 1964, the debate about British religion metamorphosed to fit its new guiding assumptions, allowing experts with secular credentials to dominate the debate for the first time. Bryan Wilson’s *Religion in Secular Society* (1966) rapidly became the leading discourse in the field. The Christian sociologist David Martin published studies of English religion in 1967 and 1969. Mainstream newspapers began to use sociological approaches to develop an allegedly objective critique of the mainstream churches. In 1966 *The Times*, formerly one of the most pro-Christian newspapers, began a series of articles entitled ‘Christians asleep’ by stating that assessments of the churches which ‘may seem harsh’ were in fact justified by recent statistical trends. It attributed religious decline to ‘the difficulty of communicating in intelligible terms with a secular society’, which, it argued, the Church ‘has never had to do... before’.

In the *Guardian*, under the heading ‘The churches’ last hope?’, Bryan Wilson explained that the ecumenical movement was a sign of the churches’ fundamental vulnerability.

A full explanation of why the idea of the ‘secular society’ was suddenly found to be so compelling deserves more space than can be given here, but a thorough analysis would take account of at least three categories of commentators. The first is those radical Christians, such as Robinson, Furlong, Gourlay, and Wickham, who found the idea of ‘secularization’ compelling for theological reasons, sometimes speculating that it was ultimately due to divine agency. The evidence presented here suggests that theological radicals dominated the early stages of the discussion, creating the initial impetus behind the wider re-imagination of British religiosity. The origins and development of such radical theological perspectives is therefore a subject that deserves further study. Our second category is those non-radical Christian commentators who accepted the idea of ‘secularization’ without welcoming it, such as Ramsey and Mascall. This idea might have seemed compelling to such thinkers partly because other groups were engaging with similar narratives of rapid social change in other contexts. In the late 1950s, Harold Macmillan’s government repeatedly discussed the idea that the

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new age of affluence had caused a fundamental shift in social values.\textsuperscript{142} The idea that Britain’s youth had recently become alienated prompted significant media interest in juvenile delinquency, despite the very low numbers of teenagers actually involved.\textsuperscript{143} For some, the Suez fiasco heralded a harsh new world of British decline.\textsuperscript{144} For others, the post-war era had witnessed fundamental changes in the British class system.\textsuperscript{145} For still others, the loss of empire triggered a crisis of racial identity.\textsuperscript{146} Yet it is striking how little contemporary secularization discourses engaged with many of these wider concerns: Britain might seem secular, but ‘secular man’ was rarely imagined to be distinctively British, distinctively white, or distinctively young, and discussion of his gender was conspicuously infrequent. Nonetheless, one of these other narratives was felt to have direct relevance to the question of religion: the idea of an imminent ‘scientific revolution’ which would shortly transform British society. This mythical expectation was embraced by Labour after its election defeat in 1959,\textsuperscript{147} culminating in Harold Wilson’s famous 1963 ‘white heat’ promise to create a ‘New Britain’, ‘harnessing the resources of technology’.\textsuperscript{148} Such rhetoric was also adopted by the ‘What’s wrong with Britain?’ school of commentators, which, exemplified by Anthony Sampson’s \textit{Anatomy of Britain} (1962) and based on ‘a kind of Mickey Mouse sociology’, criticized a wide variety of areas of public life as unfit for the coming scientific age.\textsuperscript{149} This mythology also gained traction within wider Christian networks. In 1948, the ecumenical leader J.H. Oldham explored it on behalf of the World Council of Churches.\textsuperscript{150} In the late 1950s, it was regularly discussed by the \textit{Church of England Newspaper}, which announced in January 1958 that ‘a radical change’ had come over human consciousness, ‘a change that removes the foundations of almost all our forms of authority in church and state alike’, which was prompted by ‘the rise of the scientific and technological age’.\textsuperscript{151} The

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{142} Mark Jarvis, \textit{Conservative Governments, Morality and Social Change in Affluent Britain, 1957-64} (Manchester, 2005), passim, esp. 24–5, 69.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Jarvis, \textit{Conservative Governments, Morality and Social Change}, 28–30.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Jim Tomlinson, \textit{The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain} (Harlow, 2000), 21ff.
\item \textsuperscript{146} Bill Schwarz, \textit{The White Man’s World} (Oxford, 2011), 4.
\item \textsuperscript{148} Edgerton, \textit{Warfare State: Britain}, 240.
\item \textsuperscript{151} ‘Authority to-day’, \textit{Church of England Newspaper}, 24 January 1958, 6.
\end{itemize}
idea that modern society was now dominated by ‘scientific’ ways of thinking became a regular feature of Christian comment, even outside the bounds of theological radicalism. In 1964, Donald Soper attributed the decline in Christianity to ‘a general and superficial sense that science with a capital “S” and in inverted commas had disposed of religion’.152 In 1969, Archbishop Ramsey cited ‘belief in the omnicompetence of the technological sciences’ in his discussion of ‘the new “secularity”’.153 In 1966, a Times correspondent rather startlingly argued that westerners failed to observe Holy Week because they were ‘so fully occupied with the scientific and technological revolution’.154 Such a mythology of the advance of ‘scientific’ and hence philosophically materialist assumptions might explain not only why the future was thought to be ‘secular’, but also why the ‘secular age’ was thought to imply widespread atheism. Radical Christians, at any rate, had long argued that the new scientific age implied precisely this.155 Our third group for further consideration is those secular sociological commentators, such as Bryan Wilson, who dominated the discussion from 1965. The account offered above suggests that they played a subsidiary role in the debate before then, only gaining discursive dominance once the idea of the ‘secular society’ had already been established by Christians. Such commentators were working within their own intellectual traditions, such as that developed by Max Weber; even so, ironically, it has recently been argued that even academic secularization theory ‘in part derives its authority from Christianity’s own pathology of decay and renewal’.156

Consequences 1964–70

A full examination of the consequences of this abrupt and problematic re-imagination of British religiosity would be very long indeed; the following analysis serves merely to underline the importance of the imaginative revolution being described.157 As we shall see, the most relevant point in the debates which followed was not how rapidly British Christianity was declining, but how rapidly it was thought to be declining. As Alister Chapman suggests, the idea of secularization ‘became a part of the story it was trying to tell’.158

153 Robinson, Honest to God, 16; Ramsey, God, Christ and the World, 15.
In the first place, elite perception of secularization had a dramatic effect on the cultural authority that Christianity had previously enjoyed in British media. This was especially the case at the BBC, which by 1965 had shifted position ‘from a declaredly Christian to a neutral stance’, much to the anger of Christian traditionalists such as Mary Whitehouse.\(^{159}\) Whilst Christianity had attracted the notice of satirical shows such as ‘That was the week that was’ from 1960, before 1963 BBC sketches on the subject of religion had been relatively mild, especially compared to the treatment meted out to politicians.\(^{160}\) Yet by May 1965, the perceived secularization of contemporary Britain was being used to justify changes in staple religious programming.\(^{161}\) The popular devotional programme ‘Lift up your hearts’ was controversially replaced by ‘Ten to eight’, which was aimed at ‘a wider and more secular audience’.\(^ {162}\) From 1965, shows such as ‘Not so much a programme, more a way of life’ and ‘Till death do us part’ lampooned Christianity much more than had previously been possible.\(^ {163}\) As McLeod points out, in doing this ‘the BBC was trying to reflect a change in public mood which it believed to be already under way’. Yet the BBC’s shift itself had a powerful influence on British culture.\(^ {164}\) In the broadsheet newspapers, the protected space once given to Christian devotional articles now declined.

A second major set of consequences concern legislation. As the *Guardian* put it in December 1964, it was now felt that if Christians were a minority of the population, they ‘could no longer dictate social habits to the rest of the community’.\(^ {165}\) This, of course, was to enforce a changed definition of what a Christian is: 47 per cent of live births were baptized as Anglicans in 1970,\(^ {166}\) a proportion which, once the other denominations are included, could be taken to well over half. Even so, the secularization analysis was fundamentally accepted by the hierarchy of the Church of England. As Matthew Grimley has shown, their influential support for the legalization of homosexuality stemmed not from a change in Anglican moral attitudes, but from the feeling that Christians no longer had the right to speak for the whole of society, and that consequently it would be easier to protect Christian teachings on moral questions if they were uncoupled from the law.\(^ {167}\) In a further

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\(^{165}\) ‘The Shape of Sundays to Come’, *The Guardian*, 10 December 1964, 10.

\(^{166}\) Robin Gill, *The ‘Empty’ Church Revisited* (Aldershot, 2003), 162.

example, Britain’s status as a ‘secular society’ was used in the press as an argument for the liberalization of the divorce laws. The Church of England’s own contribution to the divorce-law debate took it as axiomatic that Britain was ‘a society not as a whole characterized by Christian belief’. The state should make more liberal provision for divorce and remarriage, argued the archbishop’s commission, precisely because ‘incredulity… is widespread’ amongst ‘the people of a modern secular society’, who would find the legal imposition of a traditional marriage code ‘tyrannical’.

A third set of consequences lie within the politics of the British churches. The narrative of the secular age facilitated the rise of ‘Christian radicalism’, a loosely affiliated movement of Christians that sought to adapt the British churches to be ‘the carrier of the new life for the new age’. Admittedly, such theological radicalism also had important international dimensions, most obviously in the case of Roman Catholicism. Even so, such radicalism left important legacies, increasing the sense of religious crisis, and driving questions of social justice further up the churches’ agenda.

A fourth consequence must remain rather more speculative: the effect of the concept of ‘secularization’ on local church communities. This is another matter for further enquiry, which would most usefully be pursued in local studies such as that modelled by Alister Chapman. Nonetheless, it is very likely that the idea that precipitous church decline was inevitable contributed to the slump in the morale of the British clergy during the 1960s, for which there is already some evidence. The idea may also have been a factor in the declining numbers of young men offering themselves for ordination, which for Anglicans began in 1964. Between 1963 and 1964, the number of new enquiries about Anglican ordination fell by 21 per cent. Further, it is possible that the now well-entrenched narratives of secularization contributed to the shrinkage of congregations across the country. For centuries most British people (always, of course, with influential exceptions) had thought that being Christian was the default position for a British person, a normal state of being. Now they were frequently being told that being a Christian was peculiar. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the years between 1961 and 1964, which saw the

170 Mortimer et al., Putting Asunder, 10.
171 This phrase is taken from Robinson, New Reformation?, back cover.
172 Chapman, Secularization and the Ministry of John Stott’, 513.
173 McLeod, Religious Crisis of the 1960s, 194.
174 A decline documented as early as 1965 in Robinson, ‘And what next?’, 12.
proliferation and entrenchment of secularization narratives in the British media, also saw the beginning of the catastrophic falls in the ecclesiastical statistics from which the British churches have never recovered.175

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the sudden emergence of secularization narratives in the British media between 1961 and 1964 was not a straightforward reflection of the ‘fact’ of sudden ‘secularization’, but instead represented an elite re-imagination of British religiosity based on speculative assumptions about mass atheism, a ‘new age’, and the ‘scientific and technological revolution’. Secularization narratives were not initially popularized by secular sociologists, but rather rose to prominence within intramural Christian discussion from 1957, as a real but limited religious decline was interpreted as the dawn of the first secular age. Between 1961 and 1964 such narratives were aired in the British media largely by Christians, gaining credibility because they were accepted by senior Christian leaders. Indeed, given the privileged position afforded to Christians by the media in their reporting of religious affairs, it is difficult to see how else such a re-imagination might have happened.

On this view, Brown was right to identify 1963 as a turning-point in British religiosity, but wrong to attribute that turning-point to a moment of popular secularization caused by a ‘short sexual revolution’—a revolution which, as he freely concedes, is placed by most scholars at some point after 1965.176 The religious beliefs and habits of the British people did not transform overnight in 1963.177 Indeed, given the regional variations in wealth, popular taste, and material consumption, not to mention nationality and denominational affiliation, it is hard to see how they could have done. Yet elite perception of religiosity, wired as it was to a relatively small network of academics, journalists, and clergymen, could and did undergo a revolution between 1961 and 1964. Ironically, this revolution itself had important secularizing consequences. It also ensured that when the post-1963 church statistics became public, as they did from 1965, they merely served to nuance an already dominant narrative of severe religious decline.

These considerations suggest a number of wider arguments concerning the nature and timing of the religious crisis of the 1960s.

175 Cf. Brown, Death of Christian Britain, 188ff.
177 McLeod, Religious Crisis of the 1960s, 262–3.
Since the turn of the twentieth century, the churches had suffered a slow but substantial shrinkage of congregations, manpower, and Sunday schools.\textsuperscript{178} If this pattern had lasted indefinitely, the relationship between Christianity and Britishness would at some point have had to have been renegotiated. Yet given the remarkable ability of British Christianity to linger on in diffuse, non-institutional and kaleidoscopic forms,\textsuperscript{179} it was not inevitable that this renegotiation had to take the form of an abrupt crisis in the seventh decade of the twentieth century. If that crisis was discursively constructed upon problematic intellectual foundations, then its occurrence, and the rapid (rather than gentle) shrinkage of Christian congregations which ensued over the following decades, were contingent events. They did not have to happen. On this view, the religious crisis of the 1960s was like a stock-market crash; once enough people believed that there was a crisis, they therefore and thereby became correct. Further, to use one of Brown’s three ways of framing the debate,\textsuperscript{180} if the idea of religious crisis was initially constructed by Christians in intramural Christian discussion, and then spread by them into the public sphere, then factors internal rather than external to the churches were crucial in the ‘making’ of the religious crisis in the years up to 1963. Only after 1963, once the idea of religious crisis had become common property, did external factors overtake them in importance. Such internal factors, especially the rise of radical forms of Christianity, deserve further investigation. Finally, this essay has sketched some of the far-reaching impacts of one particular set of myths about the future. If this approach is persuasive, a methodological shift towards examining the origins and consequences of the various contemporary myths of rapid social change might shed a good deal of light on the cultural crisis that Britain experienced in the 1960s.

\textsuperscript{179} Garnett et al., \textit{Redefining Christian Britain}, 290.
\textsuperscript{180} Callum Brown, ‘What was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?’, 473ff.