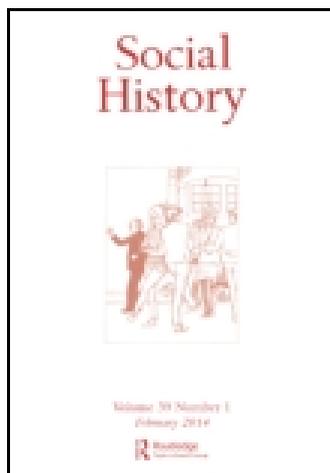


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Penelope J. Corfield

‘An Age of Infidelity’: secularization in eighteenth-century England*

Growing secularization and keen campaigns of religious revivalism are by no means polar opposites. The latter process is, indeed, often a response to the former. So it was in eighteenth-century England and Wales. It was not the case that everything changed at one dramatic point in time. Organized religion very obviously survived. Yet over the long term there was a palpable change of balance between the churches and the wider society, as numerous eighteenth-century contemporaries and religious reformers bore witness. The broad outlook of English society became secular, or this-worldly, within a continuing but slowly attenuating Christian tradition, as opposed to an outlook predominantly enshrined within a spiritual, or other-worldly, intellectual and cultural framework.

One linguistic pointer came in 1706, with the first English dictionary listing of the adjective ‘secular’. The concept was not itself a new one. To ‘secularize’ meant to transfer a person or property from clerical jurisdiction or ownership into lay control. In adjectival form, it was then extended to mean ‘worldly’, whether in praise or blame.¹ Thus readers in 1715 could understand a devout tract denouncing *Secular Interest, Insincerity and Double-Dealing in Religion*.² Too much this-worldliness was understood as inimical to sincere spirituality. (Rarely, too, the term ‘secular’ was used in a different sense, referring to events that happened once in a century.)³

In fact, the most common eighteenth-century term to indicate changing attitudes towards religion was the spread of ‘Infidelity’. By that, onlookers meant anything from free-thinking and scepticism through to outright atheism, or denial of God. (In parallel,

*This article began as a paper on 5 December 2012 to London University’s seminar on British History in the Long Eighteenth Century, with thanks to fellow panellists Jeremy Gregory and John Seed; panel chair Arthur Burns; Skype-discussant J. C. D. Clark; all the seminar participants; Gareth Atkins for subsequent debate; Tony Belton, David Clemis and Amanda Goodrich for constructive criticisms; and to *Social History*’s ever-vigilant editor and assessors, urging clarity and concision.

¹E. Phillips, *The New World of Words: Or, a Universal English Dictionary – fifth edition with large additions*, ed. J. Kersey (London, 1706).

²G. Felton, *Secular Interest, Insincerity and Double-Dealing in Religion, Detected and Exposed* (Salop, 1715).

³See, for example, W. Mason, *Secular Ode in Commemoration of the Glorious Revolution, 1688* (London, 1788).

the commonplace experience of breaking matrimonial vows was known in the eighteenth century as ‘conjugal infidelity’.) Meanwhile, ‘secular’ remained available in the lexicon. So eventually (1851) ‘secularism’ was coined for a humanist ethics, not dependent upon divine sanction.⁴ ‘Secularists’ advocated a fully secular constitution without an established church. In 1865 the historian W. E. H. Lecky noted, sweepingly, the ‘general secularization of the European intellect’.⁵ And in 1866 campaigners formed the National Secular Society to speed a process already in train.⁶ Hence, with such lexical associations, the decline in the centrality of organized religion has come to be known as ‘secularization’. In fact, a better description could well be the churches’ specialization as faith organizations, focusing upon pastoral and spiritual roles, within an increasingly secular society. Yet ‘secularization’ is the term used in scholarly debates and is thus retained here.

Over the *very* long term, there is general agreement that changes did occur, but there is no consensus about their nature or timing.⁷ Some scholars see the intellectual seeds of secularization in the sixteenth century, following the great schism between Catholicism and Protestantism.⁸ Others see its *de facto* momentum increasing in the long eighteenth century.⁹ On the other hand, revisionist historians, who generally reject scenarios of long-term change, stress the continuing strength of institutionalized Christianity in those years.¹⁰ By the nineteenth century, many see the secularization process as in full spate,¹¹ while others reserve sight of the full tide until the twentieth century.¹²

Given that no single deed transformed everything at a stroke, it is difficult to give precise dates for long-term but non-linear trends, which often fluctuate. Should changes be dated from their inception or unfolding stages or the high tide? Classic pointers to secularization include: a diminution of regular church attendance; a decreasing adherence to strict religious precepts in daily behaviour; a waning centrality of religion within systems of knowledge; a dwindling socio-cultural authority exercised by the clergy; a

⁴Classically, G. J. Holyoake, *Reasoner* (10 Dec. 1851). See also *idem*, *Principles of Secularism, Briefly Explained* (London, 1859); and *idem*, *The Origin and Nature of Secularism* (London, 1896).

⁵H. McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848–1914* (Basingstoke, 2000), 1.

⁶See E. Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791–1866* (Manchester, 1974); and www.secularism.org.uk

⁷See J. Morris, ‘Secularization and religious experience’, *Historical Journal*, LV, 1 (2012), 195–219; D. Erdozain, “‘Cause is not quite what it used to be’”: the return of secularization’, *English Historical Review*, CXXVII (2012), 377–400; O. Tschannen, *Les théories de la sécularisation* (Geneva, 1992); and S. Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford, 2011).

⁸C. J. Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to*

Religious Faith (Oxford, 1992); B. S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

⁹J. H. Nichols, *History of Christianity, 1650–1950: Secularization of the West* (New York, 1956), 6–13; Bruce, *Secularization*, *op. cit.*, 6–7.

¹⁰J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1985), 6–7, 64–93.

¹¹A. D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (London, 1980); McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe*, *op. cit.*; and C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London, 2007), 352–401.

¹²See C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization, 1800–2000* (London, 2000); and S. J. D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularization and Social Change, c.1920–60* (Cambridge, 2011).

changing role for the churches; a shift towards lay piety, often with a decreasing theological rigour; a heightened stress upon secular values; and a (generally much slower) decline in the number of people expressing a personal belief in divine power. Such adaptations do not all follow the same timetable.

An awareness of nuance is especially relevant when assessing personal beliefs.¹³ Some individuals lived non-religious lifestyles yet expressed repentance on their deathbeds. Should they be assessed as day-to-day secularists – or did their last-minute decisions mark an ultimate triumph of faith – or a yielding to fear – or a rational gamble? Conversely, how should people be assessed who partook in religious ceremonies but lacked inner belief? In England, in 1801, the author of *Reflections on the State of Religion* exclaimed tartly: ‘There is but little genuine Christianity, even among those who profess to be *Christians* – they have the name indeed, but not the reality.’¹⁴ A parallel barb was directed at the citizens of Edinburgh in 1825. They were impishly termed ‘the most religiously irreligious people that one can imagine’.¹⁵ Such teasing criticisms were intended to provoke, but they remind historians that contradictions between beliefs and behaviour should temper all generalizations about either the presence *or* the absence of true faith.

This article is concerned with the political, intellectual and cultural temperature of society as a whole. It argues that the long eighteenth century saw a palpable increase in secularization, against which the lively campaigns of religious revivalism were directed. In support of this case, three strands of evidence are examined. First, the impact of the extensive, though not absolute, religious toleration post-1689 in England and Wales is assessed in a comparative European context. Second, the advent of rival professions is shown as pushing the clergy into a more specialist role, which many themselves embraced. And, third, fresh evidence from contemporary witnesses is presented. Historians of change are often warned to avoid the anachronistic projecting of later viewpoints back into the past. It is salutary advice. Yet, by the same token, it is also anachronistic to ignore contemporary accounts by witnesses, many of whom in the eighteenth century were sincere believers agitatedly confronting change. Their verdicts need to be taken not literally, but seriously.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Everywhere, the skylines in cities, towns and villages were punctuated by church towers and steeples. They emphasized the country’s long Christian tradition. And during the Georgian era, many new-built churches and chapels joined the townscapes as visible signs of religious renewal. Nonetheless, the historic Christian culture, while remaining deeply embedded, was itself influenced by processes of secularization.

¹³J. Seed, ‘“Secular” and “religious”: historical perspectives’, *Social History*, XXXIX, 1 (2014), 3–13.

¹⁴T. Jervis, *Reflections on the State of Religion and Knowledge, at the Close of the Eighteenth Century: A Discourse* (London, 1801), 19.

¹⁵R. Mudie, *The Modern Athens: A Dissection and Demonstration of Men and Things in the Scotch Capital – by a Modern Greek* (London, 1825), 302.

The advent of religious pluralism, with many churches operating side by side in the same society, not only permitted consumer choice between churches but also unintentionally paved the way for the spread of religious indifference. Eminent advocates of toleration, such as the philosopher John Locke, were indeed accused of that very offence. Critics complained that he had opened the floodgates to ‘scepticism and infidelity’, even while his defenders denied the charge.¹⁶ Instead of the traditional view, that ‘one church’ was necessary to bind together ‘one people’, the new argument was that acceptance of plurality provided a better way of holding society together.¹⁷ And so it proved. That experience tended to discourage doctrinal absolutism and to foster an intellectual questing.

Consumer choice was being nurtured within England’s urbanizing and commercializing society,¹⁸ giving people the options of one religion, another religion or no-religion. A similar de facto pluralism prevailed in the trading and urban hothouse of the Dutch Republic. There, a plurality of religious groups worshipped privately alongside the official Calvinist church.¹⁹ In both countries, what is more, inter-faith marriage increased over time; people moved from one church to another with ease; and there were growing complaints at the spread of religious indifference. These contextual factors encouraged secularization.

However, it is unsatisfactory to explain specific developments by invoking general sociological propositions, which summarize outcomes as much as causes. Similar commercial and urban characteristics did not automatically result in identical histories. In the great East–West trading hub of Constantinople (Istanbul), different ethnic-religious groups of Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Armenians and Greek Orthodox were allowed to live in propinquity and to trade together.²⁰ On the other hand, an official Ottoman dress-code specified that distinctive coloured robes and headgear be worn by the different religious groups, so keeping them apart. There was much less cultural mingling. Moreover, the impact of urban Constantinople was comparatively restricted within the huge and sprawling territories of the Ottoman Empire, which remained firmly Islamic.

Still less can long-term changes be satisfactorily explained by a general reference to the *Zeitgeist*, under a name such as ‘Modernity’.²¹ Numerous commentators, myself

¹⁶V. Perronet, *A Vindication of Mr Locke from the Charge of Giving Encouragement to Scepticism and Infidelity* (London, 1736).

¹⁷J. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge, 1992).

¹⁸J. Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain, 1700–1850* (New Haven, 2009); R. C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective* (Cambridge, 2009); P. J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700–1800* (Oxford, 1982), 1–16.

¹⁹B. J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 102, 170–1, 177–83, 241–3, 276–84; R. Po-Chia

Hsia and H. van Nierop (eds), *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2002); and S. Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton, 2011).

²⁰E. Boyar and K. Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul* (Cambridge, 2010), 157, 177–8.

²¹S. Kalberg (ed.), *Max Weber: Readings and Commentary on Modernity* (Oxford, 2005); D. Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot, 2002); J. C. D. Clark, ‘Secularization and modernization: the failure of a “Grand Narrative”’, *Historical Journal*, LV, 1 (2012), 195–219.

included, note the slipperiness of that particular concept.²² Interestingly, one pessimistic commentator in 1800 did condemn both ‘Modern Philosophy’ and ‘Modern Infidelity’ for what he saw as the rotting of true faith: ‘Never was the world in so calamitous or so perilous state as at this moment.’²³ He had no doubt that the implications of new secular philosophies were hostile to Christianity. Yet it is more helpful to name the trends than simply to tag them as ‘Modernity’. Otherwise, there is a risk of again confusing outcomes with causation, and ending with a circular argument.

Specific to England and Wales, within the contingent framing of its urban and commercial society, was the advent of the 1689 Act of Toleration. It was a compromise, designed to end the political turmoil of the Glorious Revolution.²⁴ But it ushered in something new, by permitting freedom of worship to all Trinitarian Protestants.²⁵ Religious pluralism had burst through de facto during the mid-seventeenth-century civil wars. Now it had arrived legally and sustainably. Moreover, religious toleration was neither imposed nor revocable by an individual ruler. The earlier attempts by Charles II and the Catholic James II to broaden the religious settlement by royal declarations of indulgence had failed, because their motives were suspected and their use of prerogative powers resented.²⁶ In 1689, it was parliament and the broad ‘political nation’ that decided – taking a novel step as the price of getting an agreed settlement that would avoid another civil war on mainland Britain.

This arrangement contrasted notably, for example, with the 1648 settlement in Germany. There, after a very prolonged period of warfare, it was agreed that the official religious confession in each German state should be decided by each ruler. Minorities were given only limited rights of worship. Different views were accepted up to a point, but not publicly enshrined in the settlement, which retained the concept of ‘one church, one people’. In that case, the result tended to polarize confessional differences and to reduce the need for inter-confessional debates and convergence.²⁷

The 1689 Toleration Act in England and Wales was not in itself excessively tolerant. As is well known, it did not extend to non-Protestant religions (whether Christian or non-Christian), let alone to deists or atheists. The Anglican Church of England remained the established church. It was not until 1845 that an earnest minority among its membership began to campaign for disestablishment, to free themselves of state

²²P. J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (London, 2007), 122–49; A. Compagnon, *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, trans. E. Phillips (New York, 1994).

²³J. Bowles, *Reflections on the Political and Moral State of Society at the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1800), 122, 128.

²⁴Contrast W. A. Speck, *Reluctant Revolutionaries: Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688* (Oxford, 1988), 211–51 and S. C. A. Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven, 2009).

²⁵See Speck, *Reluctant Revolutionaries*, *op. cit.*, 166–87; P. Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration came to the West* (Princeton, 2003); J. Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early*

Enlightenment Culture: Arguments for Religious Toleration (Cambridge, 2006); and J. Israel, *Locke, Spinoza and the Philosophical Debate concerning Toleration in the Early Enlightenment, c.1670–1750* (Amsterdam, 1999).

²⁶For a pro-James II account, see S. Sowerby, *Making Toleration: The Repealers and the Glorious Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); but see also T. Harris, *Revolution: The Great Crisis of the British Monarchy, 1685–1720* (London, 2006), 290–307, 346–8, 350–2, 516–17.

²⁷R. G. Asch, ‘Religious toleration, the Peace of Westphalia, and the German territorial estates’, *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, xx (2000), 75–89.

'shackles'.²⁸ Its bishops were still ensconced in the House of Lords, and posts in the civil service, the armed forces and the universities were reserved for Anglican communicants. Yet things did not remain static. As time passed and emotions cooled, the 1689 settlement itself began to be quietly liberalized and various key restrictions relaxed or evaded.²⁹ Even the formally excluded Catholics had gained considerable de facto toleration, despite continuing hard-line Protestant distrust,³⁰ long before the next big constitutional overhaul in 1828/9. Georgian England was thus not a 'confessional state',³¹ on a par with the Germanic electorates. Instead, the state held the ring among a plurality of religious confessions, one having favoured status but no monopoly.

Soon after 1689, critics began to complain that religious pluralism was allowing scope for absenteeism from church and religious indifference. And worse. One observer wrote urgently *In Opposition to the Growing Atheism and Deism of the Age* (1708).³² But his words were relatively moderate in comparison with those of the perfervid Anglican preacher, Henry Sacheverell. In a series of public sermons in 1709, he claimed that England had turned into 'a Church and Kingdom debauch'd in Principles, and corrupted in Manners, and ... given over to all Licentiousness ... all Sensuality, Hypocrisy, Lewdness, and Atheism'.³³ At a time of war-weariness and economic anxieties, his rhetoric struck a chord. Supporters of Sacheverell riotously attacked Dissenting chapels in London and elsewhere.³⁴ The next generation of Tory politicians, buoyed by Anglican resentment, won power in 1710–14, ousting the Whigs, who strongly favoured the 1689 settlement. Nevertheless, the potential backlash failed. Despite their large majority, the Tories did not dare to repeal the Toleration Act itself. They brought in new restrictions but could not reunite England's splintered Protestant churches, as the Dissenters were now determinedly establishing their own chapels and academies.³⁵ In 1714 the Whigs returned to power and repealed the recent Tory restrictions. The 1689 settlement, enacted in haste, was gaining new permanence.

Under its umbrella, and notably fostered by the liberalization of England's press in 1695, a rationalist approach to religion became publicly expressed.³⁶ The Bible remained

²⁸For the changing role of Anglicanism, see W. H. Mackintosh, *Disestablishment and Liberation: The Movement for the Separation of the Anglican Church from State Control* (London, 1972); A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740–1914* (London, 1976), 125–43.

²⁹P. J. Corfield, 'Georgian England: one state, many churches', *History Today*, XLIV (April 1995), 14–21.

³⁰C. Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth Century England, c.1714–80: A Political and Social Study* (Manchester, 1993).

³¹Here disagreeing with Clark, *English Society*, *op. cit.*, 89.

³²T. Smith, *Two Compendious Discourses ... Published in Opposition to the Growing Atheism and Deism of the Age* (London, 1708).

³³H. Sacheverell, *The Answer of Henry Sacheverell, D.D., to the Articles of Impeachment* (London, 1710), 16.

³⁴G. S. Holmes, *The Trial of Dr Sacheverell* (London, 1973); *idem*, 'The Sacheverell riots: the crowd and the church in early eighteenth-century London', *Past and Present*, LXXII, 1 (1976), 55–85.

³⁵M. R. Watts, *The Dissenters*, vol. 1: *From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1978); and *idem*, *The Dissenters*, vol. 1: *The Expansion of Evangelical Nonconformity* (Oxford, 1995).

³⁶R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Making of the Modern World* (London, 2000); J. Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, 2012); J. Black, *The Power of Knowledge: How Information and*

revered for its spiritual and ethical teachings. Yet the growth of specialist research in science and history meant that it was no longer expected to explain the entire story of the cosmos. Geological discoveries of the long eons of global development threw doubt upon the comparatively recent chronologies, based upon clues within biblical texts, that had been conventionally accepted.³⁷ Literalism began to wane (except among the most fundamentalist Protestants). The concept of Hell, for example, remained a potent metaphor for just punishment. Yet it was decreasingly envisaged as a real 'burning fiery pit', full of screaming sinners in torment for eternity.³⁸

Scepticism was also applied to England's harsh laws against witchcraft. These were repealed in 1735 and replaced, significantly, by an act against the *pretence* of witch-like powers. People claiming to summon spirits and foretell the future became punishable as vagrants, by fines and imprisonment.³⁹ Many individuals continued to express beliefs in witches, sprites and elves.⁴⁰ Yet witch-scepticism, which also preceded 1735, was gradually becoming the new cultural norm. The older views faded into penumbra of quaint superstition.

Arbitrary miracles also came under fresh intellectual attack. At the mid-century David Hume challenged their plausibility on grounds of logic and natural history.⁴¹ Coolly, too, the historian Edward Gibbon called for authenticated sources to provide historical evidence for Christ's life and death.⁴² Acute scepticism when applied to Christian teaching was initially shocking and controversial. But a climate of opinion was fostered, both within and beyond intellectual circles, which did not look for thunderbolts or magic to explain outcomes. A torrent of plays and, especially, novels interpreted individual behaviour in a secular social context.⁴³ Scientists were newly exploring aberrant behaviour in medical rather than moral terms. Chronic drinking, for example, was becoming seen as an illness rather than a sin to be denounced (though the timing of this transition, whether earlier or later in the eighteenth century, remains disputed).⁴⁴ Such materialist accounts assumed an orderly cosmos. Divine power was not precluded, yet the divine 'watch-maker' was not expected to intervene arbitrarily.⁴⁵

Technology Formed the Modern World (London, 2014).

³⁷M. J. S. Rudwick, *Worlds before Adam: The Reconstruction of Geohistory in the Age of Reform* (Chicago, 2008).

³⁸D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment* (London, 1964); G. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Theological Controversies concerning Eternal Punishment* (Oxford, 1974).

³⁹M. Gibson, 'Witchcraft in the courts' in M. Gibson (ed.), *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1550–1750* (Ithaca, NY, 2003), 1–9.

⁴⁰Clark, *English Society, op. cit.*, 169–71.

⁴¹D. Hume, 'Of miracles' in Hume, *Philosophical Essays concerning Human Understanding* (London, 1748), 173–203.

⁴²E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1776); and his *Vindication of Some Passages in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall* (Dublin, 1779).

⁴³C. Stewart, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics* (Farnham, 2010).

⁴⁴J. Hirsh, 'Enlightened eighteenth-century views of the alcohol problem', *Journal of the History of Medicine*, IV (1949), 230–6; D. Clemis, 'Medical expertise and the understandings of intoxication in Britain, 1660–1830' in J. Herring, P. Withrington, C. Regan and D. Weinberg (eds), *Intoxication and Society: Problematic Pleasures* (London, 2013), 33–51.

⁴⁵J. W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 1983).

Critical rigour applied to the Bible seemed to warrant a degree of doctrinal picking and choosing, as indeed many traditionalists feared. So in a 1697 Vanbrugh comedy, the worldly Lady Brute is reminded of the Christian teaching that good must be returned for evil. To which she replies pertly: 'That may be a mistake in the Translation.' No wonder Lady Brute's husband snorts: "'Tis a damned Atheistical Age, Wife.'⁴⁶ His comment acknowledged a changing cultural climate, at which Vanbrugh invited his audiences to laugh knowingly – or uneasily. Heterodoxy and unorthodoxy were already afoot – not necessarily for the first time but now in the open and in full media circulation.

PROFESSIONAL COMPETITION

Parish clergymen throughout all this remained significant figures among the pillars of local society, mediating between church and people. Traditionally, they were literate and educated men among largely illiterate flocks. As such, the clergy were not only spiritual pastors and teachers but also family advisers on countless aspects of daily life, including law, medicine and finances.⁴⁷ By the eighteenth century, however, that pattern was also changing. Not only were rising literacy levels making people more independent of clerical guidance, but also a new range of secular professions were offering a rival set of services.

Clerical numbers, as a proportion of England's total population, had probably peaked at an all-time high in the fifteenth century.⁴⁸ Two centuries later, at a time of renewed population growth overall, the clergy were still plentiful and continuing to expand in numbers;⁴⁹ but they were proportionately falling behind. Already, by the later seventeenth century, they were matched by a rival set of men in black robes. In 1710 John Arbuthnot declared that: 'One might justly call this the Age of the *Lawyers*.'⁵⁰ These brethren not only offered legal expertise but also began to absorb many erstwhile clerical tasks as family advisers and estate managers. Lawyers were far from universally loved, needless to say. Yet they acquired considerable authority in England's law-bound society – so much so that numerous unqualified 'hedge-lawyers' offered services to the poor alongside the qualified attorneys.

Fast on their heels, too, came the multiplying ranks of medical practitioners. Again buoyant demand created a lively market for doctors, who ranged from qualified experts to unqualified quacks. New medicines and treatments were widely advertised. People might thus shift their hopes from spiritual to medical salvation. So indeed Lady Mary Wortley Montagu argued in 1748: 'We have no longer faith in Miracles and *Reliques*, and therefore, with the same Fury, run after *receits* [prescriptions] and Physicians. The same

⁴⁶J. Vanbrugh, *The Provok'd Wife* (1697) in Vanbrugh, *Plays*, vol. 1 (London, 1730), 126, 191.

⁴⁷C. S. Dixon and L. Schorn-Schütte (eds), *The Protestant Clergy of Early Modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2003).

⁴⁸Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain 1700–1850* (London, 1995), 109–10, 131 (n. 49).

⁴⁹See the invaluable website www.theclergydatabase.org.uk

⁵⁰Anon. [J. Arbuthnot], *John Bull Still in his Senses: Or, the Law is a Bottom-less Pit* (London, 1712), 27.

money which, three hundred years ago, was given for the health of the soul, is now given for the health of the body.⁵¹ No doubt, in reality many hoped for salvation on all fronts. But the clergy now had rivals. Even at the classic deathbed scene, they were being joined by doctors and (for the propertied) lawyers.

No precise data on relative numbers survive for the eighteenth century. But the first reliable occupational census showed that by 1851 the 30,413 clerics and church officials in England and Wales had become substantially outnumbered by 32,394 lawyers and law clerks; and that both groups were outmatched by 33,504 (male) doctors. Moreover, if the 26,000 or more female nurses and midwives are added to the equation, as de facto family attendants, then the medical practitioners, broadly defined, were almost twice as numerous as the clerical.⁵²

Having lost their professional monopoly, the clergy were ceasing to be the omnipresent 'generalists' of old. Collectively, they remained very heterogeneous in their activities. They produced famed preachers,⁵³ as well as learned theologians; innovative scientists; wittily inventive novelists like Swift and Sterne; countless local magistrates; and schoolteachers of varying degrees of erudition. The clerical spectrum reached down to the poorest of poor curates, often struggling to make a living. None the less, their collective vocation was gradually becoming clarified, by their own deeds as well as by competitive pressures, into a more specialist guise, centrally focusing upon pastoral care, moral teaching and the salvation of souls.⁵⁴

Very few people openly rejected the consolations of religion at moments of personal crisis. The philosopher and arch-sceptic David Hume was rare in publicly declaring himself to be an atheist. On his deathbed in 1776, he insisted that a belief in the afterlife was 'a most unreasonable fancy'.⁵⁵ Such explicit infidelity shocked many, including some of his closest friends. Not only was there a fundamental issue of belief at stake, but atheistic attitudes also put at risk the *raison d'être* of the entire clerical profession. Nevertheless, there were throughout this period various publicly declared deists (who were somewhat less shocking to traditional Christians),⁵⁶ and an

⁵¹M. W. Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, vol. II: Edited by ... Lord Wharncliffe (Philadelphia, 1837), 110: letter, 17 July 1748. See also R. Porter and D. Porter, *The Patient's Progress: Doctors and Doctoring in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1989); A. Digby, *Making a Medical Living: Doctors and Patients in the English Market for Medicine, 1720–1911* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁵²Corfield, *Power and the Professions*, *op. cit.*, 32, 34.

⁵³See K. A. Francis and W. Gibson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon, 1689–1901* (Oxford, 2012); and J. Farooq, *Preaching in Eighteenth-Century London* (Woodbridge, 2013).

⁵⁴B. Heeney, *A Different Kind of Gentleman: Parish Clergy as Professional Men in Early and Mid-Victorian England* (London, 1976).

⁵⁵C. McC. Weis and F. A. Pottle (eds), *Boswell in Extremes, 1776–8* (London, 1971), 11. See also Anon., *Supplement to the Life of D. Hume containing ... a Circumstantial Account of his Death* (London, 1777), and riposte from George Horne [Bishop of Norwich], *Letters on Infidelity* (London, 1784).

⁵⁶Taylor, *Secular Age*, *op. cit.*, 221–69. See also W. Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (London, 2009); J. A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: The Discourse of Scepticism, 1680–1750* (Columbia, SC, 1997); P. Byrne, *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism* (London, 1989).

undeclared and probably fluctuating number who endorsed an irreverent irreligion,⁵⁷ or an outright atheism.⁵⁸

Alongside those who refused pastoral ministrations, there were many others who had no access to them. The established Church of England, with its national network of parishes, had the potential to reach everywhere. Its institutional and financial problems, however, meant that it struggled to keep the entire system working at the level of its best, which was good but hard to replicate universally.⁵⁹ There were Anglican parishes without incumbents and others tended only by curates (of varying quality) acting on behalf of an absentee pluralist. Thus some areas experienced poor or no sustained clerical teaching. Indeed, one reason for the success of the Methodists' open-air preaching in places like Wales was the organizational weakness of Anglicanism there.⁶⁰ Such factors left others slipping between all nets into weak faith or de facto irreligion.

All denominations sought to boost religious observance. 'Infidelity [is] the Ruin of a People ... Unbelief the Damning Sin' thundered one minister in 1748.⁶¹ The Dissenting churches, however, were voluntarist organizations, with no sanctions other than moral ones. And the old regulatory mechanisms of the Anglican church were either lost or much weakened. The controversial Court of High Commission, with jurisdiction underpinned by royal prerogative power, had tried to curb nonconformity but was abolished for its pains by the Long Parliament in 1641. Moreover, when the Catholic James II later tried to use the same monarchical authority over the Anglican church, his new Ecclesiastical Commission (1686–8) was equally resented and much shorter-lived.⁶²

A range of lesser church courts, up to and including the appellate Court of Arches, continued to adjudicate on business brought before them, under clerical authorization.⁶³ Their procedures, however, were often evaded; their sanctions weak. Excommunication

⁵⁷On this still under-studied theme, see R. H. Popkin and A. Vanderjagt, *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1993); J. Redwood, *Reason, Ridicule and Religion: The Age of Enlightenment in England, 1660–1750* (London, 1976); R. G. Lund (ed.), *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterodox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660–1750* (Cambridge, 1995).

⁵⁸D. Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London, 1990); M. Hunter and D. Wootton (eds), *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1992); M. Curran, *Atheism, Religion and Enlightenment in Pre-Revolutionary Europe* (Woodbridge, 2012).

⁵⁹Consult D. Spaeth, *The Church in an Age of Danger: Parsons and Parishioners, 1660–1740* (Cambridge, 2000); P. Virgin, *The Church in an Age of Negligence: Ecclesiastical Structure and Problems of Church Reform, 1700–1840* (Cambridge, 1989); J. Gregory and J. S.

Chamberlain (eds), *The National Church in Local Perspective: The Church of England and the Regions, 1660–1800* (Woodbridge, 2005); and A. Burns, *The Diocesan Revival in the Church of England, c.1800–70* (Oxford, 1999).

⁶⁰W. Williams, *Welsh Calvinistic Methodism: A Historical Sketch of the Presbyterian Church of Wales* (Bridgend, 1998).

⁶¹H. Piers, *Infidelity the Ruin of a People, or Unbelief the Damning Sin: A Sermon* (London, 1748).

⁶²R. G. Usher, *The Rise and Fall of High Commission* (Oxford, 1913); C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1964), 344–53; R. Milne-Tyte, *'Bloody Jeffreys': The Hanging Judge* (London, 1989).

⁶³R. B. Outhwaite, *The Rise and Fall of the English Ecclesiastical Courts, 1500–1860* (Cambridge, 2006); B. Till, *The Church Courts: The Revival of Procedure, 1660–1720* (York, 2006).

(exclusion) from a national church that was already splintering was but a 'rusty sword', as a senior government minister had already noted in the early seventeenth century.⁶⁴

After 1689, in a pluralist society, moral reformers looked to secular agencies. Successive Societies for the Reformation of Manners tried at various times to prosecute drunken and disorderly persons under common law. None the less, the scale of sins and misdemeanours proved far too extensive for a voluntarist system to police effectively.⁶⁵

Not only did all the emergent professions, including the clergy, serve as public opinion-formers, but so also did a predominantly lay intelligentsia, drawn from the ranks of authors, publishers, intellectuals and scientists. Informal networks of educated men – and some women – wielded a degree of 'soft' power. They were a noted feature of the Georgian intellectual townscape, ensconced in coffee-houses, taverns, clubs, societies and fashionable drawing-rooms. In 1818, the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined a name for his fellow pundits, updating the old 'clergy' into a new secular 'clerisy'.⁶⁶ The power of the pen, in an era of growing literacy, facilitated communication at a distance with strangers.

Majestic among the secular cultural 'panjandrum', to use an eighteenth-century term, was the lexicographer Dr Samuel 'Dictionary' Johnson. His mastery was of 'words', not 'the' word. And as proof of his fame he received the accolade, shortly after his death in December 1784, of burial in Westminster Abbey. Secular stars with cultural heft were in this way given recognition by the established church, even though they were not local Westminster parishioners. Others similarly honoured immediately after their deaths included poets (Dryden), actors (Garrick), musicians (Handel), scientists (Newton) and sporting celebrities (Jack Broughton, the bare-knuckle fighter).

There was no systematic policy to create anything like a national Pantheon. But Westminster Abbey, as a royal 'peculiar' outside traditional episcopal jurisdiction, was being propelled de facto into its still-continuing role as a civic shrine to Britain's literary lions and civilian heroes (while St Paul's in parallel became the chief place of interment for national military leaders). Such ad hoc actions were indicative of the ways in which the established church was gracefully accommodating itself to cultural change. Interestingly, too, Westminster Abbey was ecumenical in the religious worthies who were honoured there. In 1748, shortly after the death of the hymnodist Isaac Watts, it erected a memorial to that staunch Nonconformist, whose designedly simple hymns were and remain adopted by many different Christian denominations.⁶⁷ National commemoration was trumping sectarianism.

⁶⁴Anon., *Cabala: [Or] Mysteries of State, in Letters of the Great Ministers of State ... Faithfully Collected by a Noble Hand* (London, 1654), vol. 1, 103.

⁶⁵T. C. Curtis and W. A. Speck, 'The Society for the Reformation of Manners: a case study in the theory and practice of moral reform', *Literature and History*, III (1976), 45–64; M. J. D. Roberts, *Making English Morals: Voluntary*

Associations and Moral Reform in England, 1787–1886 (Cambridge, 2004).

⁶⁶C. Woodring (ed.), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Table Talk*, vol. 1 (Princeton, 1990), 285; B. Knights, *The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1978), 1–42.

⁶⁷E. P. Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Hymns* (Belfast, 2001).

CONTEMPORARY WITNESSES

Eighteenth-century contemporaries, both lay and clerical, had access to a prodigious output of ecclesiastical sermons, hymnals, commentaries and new editions of the Bible. Yet, despite that cornucopia, there were serious challenges to all established faiths. Hence there was a new genre of writings on the state of religion. Some witnesses gave their assessments in a markedly cool tone. A tract in 1734, entitled *Some Observations upon the Present State of Religion*, noted simply: 'That there is a spirit of *Irreligion* very common here, is obvious to everyone.'⁶⁸

Readers were not expected to be surprised. Five publications, dating from 1721, 1736, 1746, 1750 and 1773, discussed either the *Decay of Religion* or the *Decay of Practical Religion*.⁶⁹ These also took their subject matter for granted, as did three more books, entitled *The Decline of Religion*, appearing in 1761, 1819 and 1821.⁷⁰ Their authors were all keen to reverse a trend whose reality they thought irrefutable. 'That religion is decayed, hath, for a long time, been the general complaint', mourned William Thom in 1761.⁷¹

Sweeping statements like these naturally need careful scrutiny. All contemporary sources purporting to describe eighteenth-century English society have their strong and weak points. Conduct books, for example, tended towards idealized and often old-fashioned expectations. Conversely, preachers' cries of woe were liable to exaggerate. The greater the crisis, the more urgent the need for repentance. Thoughtful clerics were themselves aware that gloom could be overdone. In 1721 Jonathan Swift, Dean of St Patrick's Dublin, warned against the fashion of denouncing from the pulpit the twin evils of irreligion and atheism. Such diatribes, he indicated, were counterproductive: being unheard by the absent sinners, while tending to annoy the present congregation.⁷²

Accordingly, historians need to deflate both excess idealization and excess gloom. Christianity, after all, did not disappear, despite some over-heated claims in the 1790s that it was about to be eradicated. Such complaints formed part of a literature of linked anxiety about national decline and religious degeneration.⁷³ For true believers, in the eighteenth century as well as earlier, military and political disasters could be taken as manifest signs of divine wrath. As a result, any evidence of irreligion, especially in a

⁶⁸Anon. [J. Denne], *Some Observations upon the Present State of Religion in England* (London, 1734), 2.

⁶⁹Anon., *A Letter to the Protestant Dissenters, Relating to the ... Decay of Practical Religion amongst Us* (London, 1720); Anon., *The Decay of Practical Religion Lamented* (London, 1736); [N. Neal], *A Free and Serious Remonstrance to Protestant Dissenting Ministers, on Occasion of the Decay of Religion ... by a Layman* (London, 1746; 1779); J. Weatherly, *Irreligion the Grounds of God's Displeasure ... on Account of the Decay of Religion* (London, 1750); and A. Taylor, *A Humble and Impartial Enquiry into the Causes of the Decay of Practical Religion: A Sermon* (London, 1773).

⁷⁰W. Thom, *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Decline of Religion: A Sermon* (Glasgow, 1761); J. Griffin, *The Decline of Religion: An Inquiry into the Causes of the Decline in Religion* (London, 1819); and T. B. Clarke, *The Church and State in Danger: Or, Causes and Effects of the Decline of Religion* (London, c.1821).

⁷¹Thom, *Inquiry*, *op. cit.*, 5.

⁷²J. Swift, *A Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately Enter'd into Holy Orders* (London, 1721), 25.

⁷³For debates between pessimists and optimists see P. J. Corfield, research in progress on Georgian Britain as observed by contemporaries.

wartime crisis, was urgently denounced. Yet it should be noted that many claims about the 'age of infidelity' were made in peacetime, using coolly measured language.

Significantly, no eighteenth-century contemporaries advanced the claim that the era represented an 'Age of Faith', or some variant. The nearest version discovered (so far) dates from 1800. It came from Robert Hall, an evangelical Baptist, arguing that the end of the world was nigh. Only the elect few would be saved. Their true belief indicated that 'real Religion is evidently on the increase'. Yet that last-minute gain, Hall made clear, was one of quality not quantity. Millenarian excitement, heightened at significant dates or in times of apparent crisis, was fervent but not widespread. So Hall himself argued that the era in general was characterized by 'the ravages of Atheism and Infidelity'.⁷⁴

Complaints did not merely highlight the moral backslidings of a degenerate people. That message might provide the subject matter for many a displeased pastor. But the commentators, taken together, made a more substantive case. One common theme focused upon people's failure to attend church regularly and to follow Christian precepts in their daily lifestyles. Such faults were sufficiently obvious to trigger evangelical campaigns, such as those for the Reformation of Manners. A second theme was that there was too much routine scoffing at the clergy, at religion and even at God. Such attitudes tended to undermine both beliefs and institutions. Hence the third observation was that there was a creeping irreligion and a widespread erosion of faith.

'Infidelity' emerged as the favoured catch-phrase to express such fears. One popular tract began as a sermon by a Baptist minister to his Cambridge congregation at the turn of the century. Hall's *Modern Infidelity Considered* (1800) was then reprinted in 1804, 1811, 1816, 1824, 1830, 1831, 1834, 1857 and 1858. A Welsh-language edition also appeared in 1840. As his title indicated, Hall was one of those commentators who equated religious infidelity with 'Modernity', by which he meant the advent of a critical urban population. Indeed, strictures against the immorality and corruption of townspeople were commonplace, although later Vaughan's *Age of Great Cities* (1843) hoped that corrupted cities would also provide reformers to cure these ills.⁷⁵

Hyperbolic complaints were at a premium during the French Revolution and the prolonged European wars that followed. The woes of the church in France seemed to confirm the danger, even for those Protestants who had no great love for Catholicism. It was 'an Age of Infidelity, when it is become so fashionable to reject and even ridicule the scriptures' remarked one commentator in 1796.⁷⁶ The masses were ignorant and worldly. 'Do not adultery, gaming, Sabbath-breaking, neglect of public worship, and, above all, lukewarmness and indifference about Religion itself, prevail, to a degree unknown in any former age?' demanded a pamphlet in 1798, offering the choice of *Reform or Ruin*.⁷⁷ And a further tract in 1799 invited readers to gasp again at 'the astonishing progress made by Infidelity in the present age of the world'.⁷⁸

⁷⁴R. Hall, *Modern Infidelity Considered* (Cambridge, 1800), 78.

⁷⁵See the Congregationalist R. Vaughan's *The Age of Great Cities: Or, Modern Society Viewed in its Relation to Intelligence, Morals and Religion* (London, 1843).

⁷⁶T. W. [T. Williams], *The Age of Credulity: A Letter ... By the Author of 'The Age of Infidelity'* (Philadelphia, 1796), 7.

⁷⁷J. Bowdler, *Reform or Ruin: Take Your Choice!* (Dublin, 1798), 21.

Although many claimed to be professing Christians, there was too much insincerity and mere lip-service – or so complained *The Sacred Outcry upon a View of the Principal Errors and Vices of Christendom in the Eighteenth Century* (1788): ‘Look upon the *Articles of Faith*, and the *Holy Precepts*, contained in this Revelation [the Bible], on the one Hand; then examine the *enormous Sentiments and Lives of Modern Christians*, on the other. *LORD! What a Contrast!*’⁷⁹ An evangelical reformer, also in 1788, declared flatly: ‘A man must be a perfect stranger to the state of religion in this nation, who does not perceive how fast we are verging to absolute scepticism and infidelity.’⁸⁰ And as a Kidderminster clergyman mused in 1785, ‘Many of our parishioners live insensible of their state, unmindful of their own mortality, careless about another world, and wholly attached to earthly things.’⁸¹ In one way, as already noted, it can be argued that these were professional cries of woe, from pastors chiding their errant flocks. But what people choose to complain about is always indicative. Many clerics worried that they were failing at their pastoral tasks – and they were, furthermore, advertising their failures in print.

Scroll back through time to anxieties expressed during the war with the American colonies. An Anglican curate in Yorkshire in 1780 agonized at the extent of ‘Atheism and Deism (so prevalent among us)’. Lesser failings included scoffing at religion, swearing, drunkenness, lewdness, lying and cheating.⁸² A London colleague concurred, also in 1780: ‘Want of piety, of zeal, of faith’ were ‘characteristic vices of the age’.⁸³ Again in 1780 the anonymous ‘Clericus’ joined the litany. ‘It is a fact, too notorious to be denied that the present Age is an *Age of Infidelity*; [and] that the Religion of the Bible . . . [is] lost in the exceeding depravity and corruption of the times’.⁸⁴ Excess ‘luxury’ was taken to be spiritually deleterious.

But it did not take a crisis to encourage use of the phrase. In the peaceful year of 1738, the Anglican scholar-clergyman and later bishop William Warburton preached against ‘this Age of Infidelity’.⁸⁵ He too assumed his observation to be commonplace. Edmund Gibson, the Whig Bishop of London, had already circulated a pastoral letter in 1729 warning against recent writings extolling ‘Infidelity’. In that case, he was taking specific aim at deist thinkers like Viscount Bolingbroke, who was an advocate of ‘natural religion’ and, implicitly, a sceptic about Christian revelation.⁸⁶ But for Gibson, all such publications, even if too erudite for the masses, were still culturally corrosive.

⁷⁸H. Kett, *History the Interpreter of Prophecy: Or, a View of Scriptural Prophecies*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1799), v.

⁷⁹M. W., *The Sacred Outcry: Upon a View of the Principal Errors and Vices of Christendom in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1788), vii, x.

⁸⁰G. Burder, *Evangelical Truth Defended* (Lancaster, 1788), 14, 16.

⁸¹W. Jesse, *Parochialia: Or, Observations on the Discharge of Parochial Duties* (Kidderminster, 1785), 188.

⁸²G. Ion, *A Sermon Preached at Bubwith* (York, 1780), 16, 18, 20–3.

⁸³Anon., *A Sermon Preached in Hackney Church* (London, 1780), 16.

⁸⁴‘Clericus’, *The Excellency of the Sacred Writings: Illustrated in a Sermon* (London, 1780), iv.

⁸⁵W. Warburton, *Faith Working by Charity to Christian Edification* (London, 1738), iv. With thanks to John Walsh for drawing this source to my attention.

⁸⁶See E. Gibson, *The Bishop of London’s Pastoral Letter . . . Occasioned by Some Late Writings in Favour of Infidelity* (London, 1729); echoed later by Anon., *A View of Lord Bolingbroke’s Philosophy . . . In which his Whole System of Infidelity and Naturalism is Exposed and Confuted* (London, 1756).

British publications with title pages worrying about the current *Age of Infidelity* (or a reasonably close variant) appeared with considerable regularity. At least twelve have been found, counting backwards from the 1790s to the 1690s – published in 1796; 1795; two in 1783; one more in 1765, 1752, 1736, and 1734; two in 1729; and again in 1715 and 1695.⁸⁷ *Infidelity* was the *leitmotif*, often yoked with *Scepticism*. These twin foes of true faith were often denounced but obstinately continued to flourish. So the verse prediction of *The Fall of Scepticism and Infidelity* (1785)⁸⁸ turned out to be spiritually hopeful but mistaken.

Diverse causes of these continuing changes were canvassed. One category of explanations laid the blame upon the clergy. They were variously accused of preaching dull sermons; of living worldly lives; of loving the bottle too much; of focusing too much upon abstruse doctrinal squabbles; of being divided and quarrelsome; and, in the case of Anglicans, of gathering tithes too zealously and/or toadying obsequiously to patrons in order to gain preferment.⁸⁹ As a body, the men of the cloth were known for their love of doctrinal disputes, often conducted with passion. The proverbial *odium theologicum* – ‘the intemperate Zeal of Divines’, as cited ruefully by Bishop Berkeley⁹⁰ – was rife. ‘Unspeakable is the mischief done to the interests of religion by the divisions of Christians,’ grieved one ecumenical Methodist in 1777.⁹¹ None the less, his plan for a pan-Protestant reunion did not gain any significant support.

Ministers of religion were not setting sufficiently good examples, opined the *Spectator* in 1731, adding that: ‘It is a Matter of melancholy Observation that men are now-a-days afraid of being thought Religious, as it if were a real *Reproach* – which seems owing to

⁸⁷Anon. [T. Williams], *The Age of Infidelity, in Answer to Thomas Paine’s Age of Reason: By a Layman* (London, 1796); J. Jamieson, *An Alarm to Britain: Or, an Inquiry into the Causes of the Rapid Progress of Infidelity in the Present Age* (Perth, 1795); J. Bennett, *Divine Revelation Impartial and Universal: Or, an Humble Attempt to Defend Christianity, upon Rational Principles, against the Infidelity and Scepticism of the Age* (London, 1783); J. Ogilvie, *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Infidelity and Scepticism of the Times* (London, 1783); ‘Credens’ [Caleb Fleming], *An Antidote for the Rising Age, against Scepticism and Infidelity ... in a Series of Epistles from Credens to Scepticus* (London, 1765); Anon., *An Essay ... Serving to Illustrate ... the Truth and Certainty of Christianity against the Prevailing Infidelity of the Age* (Edinburgh, 1752); Anon. [H. Lindsay?], *An Essay ... against the Infidelity of the Age* (Edinburgh, 1736); W. Crawford, *A Short Manual against the Infidelity of this Age* (Edinburgh, 1734); W. Tilly [Anglican clergyman], *A Preservative against the Growing Infidelity and Apostasy of the Present Age*

(London, 1729); A Gentleman, *Reflections on the Great Infidelity and Depravity of the Times* (London, 1729); T. Curteis, *Essays Moral and Divine ... Designed to Illustrate the Necessity, Authority and Amiableness of Reveald Religion ... As a Seasonable Check to the Late Growth of Scepticism and Infidelity* (London, 1715); and J. Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Several Causes and Occasions of Atheism, Especially in the Present Age* (London, 1695).

⁸⁸Anon. [W. Cockin], *The Fall of Scepticism and Infidelity Predicted: An Epistle in Verse* (London, 1785).

⁸⁹Anon. [G. Burder], *The Good Old Way: Or, the Religion of our Forefathers* (London, 1781), iii. See also Jesse, *Parochialia*, *op. cit.*, and Corfield, *Power and the Professions*, *op. cit.*, 52–4, 125.

⁹⁰Anon. [G. Berkeley], *A Defence of Free-Thinking in Mathematics* (London, 1735), 10.

⁹¹J. Fletcher, *The Reconciliation: Or, an Easy Method to Unite the Professing People of God* (London, 1777), 3.

the ill Conduct of the Professors of it.⁹² Even supporters of the clergy accepted that some had faults, such as prosinness, laziness and worldliness.⁹³

Yet, after all, the prospects for doing pastoral good were limited, argued an anonymous author in 1732. The 'Libertinism of the Age' provided a hostile climate. Moreover, the financial inequalities of church livings produced nothing but arrogance among the senior clergy and penury among the rest. Hence young gentlemen should think twice before taking holy orders.⁹⁴ This cool assessment signalled a distinctly calculating attitude to a clerical career, as one option among many in a secularizing society. The path to the pulpit was not automatically the 'highest' calling.

Simultaneously, the accusing finger was pointed at many other external factors. A tract on the *Causes and Occasions of Atheism ... in the Present Age* (1695) worried specifically about the impact of critical scholarship. Rival theological interpretations of the same biblical texts encouraged scepticism among the laity,⁹⁵ as Vanbrugh's *Lady Brute* had exemplified. So increasingly pervasive in the intellectual culture was a cool rationalism that Gibbon in 1776 was moved to observe: 'In modern times, a latent and even involuntary scepticism adheres to the most pious dispositions.'⁹⁶

Furthermore, all those who thoughtlessly jeered at ministers of religion were culpable, asserted another commentator, analysing in 1783 the *Infidelity and Scepticism of the Times*.⁹⁷ The same explanation was invoked in 1800, in a further diatribe on the *Origin of Modern Deism and Atheism*. Its author added that breakaway religious sects were undermining the established church's authority, as were all readers of Tom Paine's deistic *Age of Reason*.⁹⁸ That title threw down the gauntlet to all Christians, claiming the entire era for a secular rationality. A host of polemicists quickly challenged Paine.⁹⁹ Yet no opponent offered to replace his pithy name for the century, except the lay preacher Thomas Williams. And his *Age of Infidelity* tended to confirm by its title the very process that his tract sought to deny.¹⁰⁰

Corrosive dangers, above all, were deemed to stem from the spread of commerce and 'luxury'. In 1757 (a year when Britain was doing badly in war) the ultra-pessimistic

⁹²*Spectator*, CLXV (December 1731), reprinted in *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1 (December 1731), 514.

⁹³For example, see Anon., *A Defence of the Clergy of the Church of England* (Gloucester, 1786).

⁹⁴Anon., *A Dissuasive from Entering into Holy Orders, in a Letter to a Young Gentleman* (London, 1732), 24, 56–7.

⁹⁵Edwards, *Some Thoughts*, *op. cit.*, 96, 123 and [repeated pagination] 119.

⁹⁶Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 478.

⁹⁷Ogilvie, *An Inquiry into the Causes of... Infidelity*, *op. cit.*, 436–8.

⁹⁸W. H. Reid, *The Rise and Dissolution of the Infidel Societies in this Metropolis, Including the Origin of Modern Deism and Atheism* (London, 1800).

⁹⁹Quick off the mark were T. Bentley, *Reason and Revelation: A Brief Answer to Thomas Paine's ... Age of Reason* (London, 1794); G. Wakefield, *An Examination of the Age of Reason* (London, 1794); A Citizen of the World [J. Tytler], *Paine's Age of Reason, with ... a Vindication of the Doctrines of Christianity* (Belfast, 1794); H. More, *A Country Carpenter's Confession of Faith: With a Few Plain Remarks on the Age of Reason* (London, 1794); J. Osborne, *Scripture and Reason: A Poem, containing ... Arguments in Refutation of Mr Paine's ... Age of Reason* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1795); T. Meek, *Sophistry Detected: Or, a Refutation of T. Paine's Age of Reason* (Newcastle, 1795), followed by other commentators in France, Ireland and America.

¹⁰⁰Anon. [T. Williams], *The Age of Infidelity, in Answer to Thomas Paine's Age of Reason* (London, 1795).

Newcastle clergyman John Brown issued a jeremiad on the state of the nation. He specifically linked the 'Age of Irreligion' with 'national Luxury'. Increasing wealth was making people worldly and negligent of their Christian duties.¹⁰¹ A Scottish Presbyterian minister in 1761 concurred. 'This is an age wherein commerce flourishes, and riches have greatly increased, and both these, it should seem, are unfriendly even to the profession of religion.' Even when seemingly hoping for religious renewal, the same author continued tartly: 'We are at the same time, perhaps, with more keenness, wishing and praying for a still greater influx of wealth into our country.'¹⁰² This accusation, though unprovable, was sharply observant about England's commercial culture. It fitted with frequent comments about public attitudes from foreign visitors. After a stay in 1729, for example, Montesquieu remarked: 'Money here is highly estimated; honour and virtue but little.'¹⁰³

Jeremiads from pessimistic commentators do have their unwittingly comic side. When a poem in 1736 prophesied *England's Doom*, occasioned by the *Notorious Increase of Atheism, Immorality, and Profaneness*,¹⁰⁴ or when John Bowdler agonized in 1798 that the nation's lack of faith seemed to portend nothing less than 'the eradicating [of] Christianity in this Quarter of the World',¹⁰⁵ it is hard not to smile. Nevertheless, there is abundant evidence that sincere observers, over many different decades, were aware that organized religion was in retreat or, at the very least, experiencing a significant redirection. It was being pushed into its specialist role. 'Infidelity' was on the march.

So varied were the efforts at religious revival that references are sometimes made to a 'second Reformation' in England, in parallel with campaigns for a spiritual 'Great Awakening' in the American colonies.¹⁰⁶ As already noted, the evidence of spirited resistance to the creeping spread of irreligion is itself one sign of the pervasiveness of the trend. In eighteenth-century Britain, however, it was easy to elude the efforts even of an outstanding evangelist preacher like the ever-itinerant John Wesley. He founded a vibrant movement which became a new church. Yet its membership, even while growing in the early nineteenth century, was only small in absolute terms in the 1840s, when it reached its proportionate peak.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, Methodism itself was prone to the internal disputes and breakaways which affected many congregations in this era. Revivalism, in a permissive climate, could easily sharpen old arguments or trigger new ones.¹⁰⁸

Collectively, the rival confessions lacked an overwhelming preacher-power and strict enforcement agencies. They were also contending with the long eighteenth century's unrepentantly secular sources of information/education/inspiration/distraction/lifestyles.

¹⁰¹Anon. [J. Brown], *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times*, vol. 1 (1757), 56, 158–66, 170–1, 181.

¹⁰²Thom, *An Inquiry*, *op. cit.*, 13, 35.

¹⁰³C. L. Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Notes sur l'Angleterre* (Paris, 1729) in E. Laboulaye (ed.), *Ouvres complètes de Montesquieu*, vol. VII (Paris, 1870), 187.

¹⁰⁴Anon., *England's Doom ... A Poem [instancing] the Notorious Increase of Atheism, Immorality, and Profaneness, and ... the Accursed Heresy of Socinus [unitarianism]* (London, 1736).

¹⁰⁵Bowdler, *Reform or Ruin*, *op. cit.*, 21.

¹⁰⁶See, for example, E. Miller, *John Wesley: The Hero of the Second Reformation* (London, 1906); T. S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, Conn., 2007).

¹⁰⁷Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, *op. cit.*, 38–9.

¹⁰⁸See, for example, I. Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland: The 'Second Reformation' and the Polarization of Protestant–Catholic Relations, 1800–40* (Madison, Wisconsin, 2005).

Moreover, despite alarmist fears of the negative effects of religious pluralism and indifference, society had not collapsed. There was an alternative narrative, which gained increasing public traction. Alongside pessimistic accounts of moral decay, a new chorus announced the advent of 'improvement' and 'progress'.¹⁰⁹ That rival narrative had its own problems – but it marked a historic change. Earlier crises tended to encourage governments to impose a common faith to avert divine wrath. Now there was an emergent secular faith in 'progress' (whether divinely instituted or not) which could both explain and endorse a wider secularization. Thus, gradually, opinion came to accept non-religion as well as rival religions.¹¹⁰

SECULARIZATION

Post-1689 toleration bred pluralism, which, however unintentionally, bred scepticism and indifference. There was no conscious 'secularization project', but there was a long-term outcome. Some critics took action to halt the process. 'Clericus' in 1780 not only decried the 'Age of Infidelity' but simultaneously raised a subscription to give free copies of the Bible to the nation's notoriously profane soldiers and sailors.¹¹¹ Equally, John Bowdler did not stop at denouncing 'Modern Infidelity', 'Modern Philosophy' and (for good measure) 'Modern Female Manners'. He co-founded in 1818 the Anglican Church Building Society, which worked to construct new churches in England's fast-growing cities, old and new.¹¹² None the less, the faint hearts continued to outstrip the missionary counter-attack.

Locationally, Britain's religious census in 1851 revealed that rural parishes everywhere had much higher levels of church attendance, for socio-cultural as well as religious reasons, than did the urban areas.¹¹³ These offered a much greater range of options and a lower level of informal social supervision of churchgoing. It is also observable that the towns with the lowest levels of attendance in 1851 were closely correlated with centres of Dissent in the early eighteenth century;¹¹⁴ that is, with centres of religious pluralism. The census figures remain complex to interpret, since they counted not the number of individuals but their 'sittings' – and many parishioners attended more than one service every Sunday. Furthermore, non-standard forms of worship, including private gatherings, were not recorded.¹¹⁵ But overall, the returns revealed a lax standard of church attendance – so lax, indeed, that the religious census has never been repeated.

Broadly, then, the census confirmed a long-term correlation between urbanization and secularization, in open societies without press restrictions. An interesting and oft-

¹⁰⁹J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Enquiry into its Origin and Growth* (London, 1920); D. Spadafora, *The Idea of Progress in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, 1990); C. Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (New York, 1991); Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*, *op. cit.*, 74–5, 84–7, 127–8.

¹¹⁰Bruce, *Secularization*, *op. cit.*, 157–76.

¹¹¹'Clericus', *Excellency of the Sacred Writings*, *op. cit.*, 27.

¹¹²For the Church Building Society, now part of the National Churches Trust, see www.churchplansonline.org

¹¹³K. D. M. Snell and P. S. Ell, *Rival Jerusalems: The Geography of Victorian Religion* (Cambridge, 2000), 35–46, esp. 37; Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, *op. cit.*, 147.

¹¹⁴Snell and Ell, *op. cit.*, 17.

¹¹⁵Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, *op. cit.*, 145–9.

cited contrast is the present-day USA, which is a highly marketized, consumerist and urbanized society (where church and state are constitutionally separate). It also has very vocal religious lobbies, which contend against the prevailing ethos. None the less, detailed research reveals that the numbers of Americans attending church regularly are actually much lower than those claiming a religious affiliation.¹¹⁶ It offers a reminder that secularization does not happen automatically across the board, with all indices of change recording the same result. Instead, it is a process.

Fluctuations in the long-term trend were certainly observable in England and Wales. By the 1830s, the evangelical revivalism associated with William Wilberforce and Hannah More – both lay reformers, incidentally – encouraged a greater public decorum, especially in respectable middle-class circles. One sign was the campaign for stricter Sunday observance.¹¹⁷ It was still hard, however, to fire inner convictions by regulating outward behaviour. And there were risks of hypocrisy and lip-service, when outward conformity (political or religious) does not accord with people's real attitudes.

Yes: there are some observable historical trends. They are usually slow and insidious – not inevitable, and, in many cases, unintended. Eighteenth-century England and Wales after 1689 saw the floodgates of toleration and religious diversity quickly opened; the enforcement of religious observance by either church or state ended; a more specialist role for the clergy encouraged by professional rivalries; a changing balance between established church and competitor chapels; a shift towards a doctrinally looser lay piety; sceptical attitudes towards biblical literalism propounded; de facto irreligion and indifference spreading; the newly public circulation of reasoned alternatives to Christian worldviews; and a gradual Christian accommodation with these changes. All this, without the social order collapsing. It was a notable stage in the advent of what the Georgians called 'Infidelity' and which later generations labelled as 'secularization'. Moreover, the trend is now worldwide, still controversial ... and still developing.

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¹¹⁶C. K. Hadaway and P. L. Marler, 'How many Americans attend worship each week? An alternative approach to measurement', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, XLIV (2005), 307–22.

¹¹⁷J. Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and*

Finney (Downers Grove, Ill., 2007); D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989); J. Wigley, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Sunday* (Manchester, 1980).