The Postmodern Challenge to the Secularization Thesis:
A Critical Assessment

Mark Edward Ruff

For nearly two decades, historians in the United States and, more recently scholars in the United Kingdom and continental Europe have waxed prolific about the impact of the linguistic and cultural turn. Many well publicized, prominent books and essays have debated the merits of appropriating approaches found in literary theory that were, in turn, derived from continental and some American philosophers.[1] These «social-cultural» approaches that are often subsumed under the heading of poststructuralism or postmodernism, in general, have arrived somewhat belatedly in the history of religion, an illustration of a time lag between mainstream historical scholarship and religious history that has existed in many (but not all!) national historical contexts.[2] Perhaps tellingly, a number of recent calls for revitalizing religious history through the so-called

---

[1] The literature here is extensive. For the German speaking areas, see Lucian Hölscher, Neue Annalistik, Umrisse einer Theorie der Geschichte, Göttingen 2003; Philip Sarasin, Geschichtswissenschaft und Diskursanalyse, Frankfurt a.M. 2003; Ute Daniel, Kompendium Kulturgeschichte, Theorien, Praxis, Schlüsselworter, Frankfurt a.M. 2001. For the United States and Great Britain, see Peter Burke (ed.), New Perspectives on Historical Writing, Second Edition, University Park, PA, 2001, especially pp. 19–21; David Cannadine, What is History Now? Hampshire, 2002; Callum G. Brown, Postmodernism for Historians, Harlow 2005; Keith Jenkins, Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline, London 2002; Richard Evans. In Defence of History, London 1997; Donald Kelley, The Descent of Ideas. The Ideas of Intellectual History, Aldershot 2002; Alun Munslow, Deconstructing History, London 1997; Arthur Marwick, The New Nature of History: Knowledge, Evidence, Language, Basingstoke 2001; Willie Thompson, What Happened to History? London 2000; Roy Porter (ed.), Rewriting the Self: histories from the Renaissance to the Present, London 1997; Mary Fulbrook, Historical theory, London 2002; Joyce Appelby/Lynn Hunt/Margaret Jacob, Telling the Truth about History, New York, 1994; Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The «Objectivity Question» and the American Historical Profession, New York 1988, especially, 598–629. For a summary of some of the recent literature on postmodernism and the historical profession, see the review article by Patrick Finney, Beyond the Postmodern Moment?, in: Journal of Contemporary History, 40,1 (2005), 149–165.

[2] This time lag is probably more true for modern religious history in the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany than the French speaking regions of Europe, where cultural history had deeper roots. Urs Altermatt and Franziska Metzger point out that French and Swiss

cultural turn have been sounded at the very moment when the entire postmodern literary enterprise has been declared passé and irrelevant by a number of American and British academic luminaries, including by some pioneers of the movement.[3]

Unaware of these recent disavowals of postmodernist efforts or perhaps undaunted by them, those scholars in the history of modern religion calling for a greater openness to such postmodern approaches have taken their cue from their predecessors and directed their fire at dominant paradigms and «master narratives».[4] An earlier generation of historians of modern Europe and modern America likewise sought to undermine received «master narratives» of freedom, progress and modernization. A number of current religious historians are now taking aim at the dominant paradigm or master narrative in European religious history, which they identify as the so-called secularization thesis.[5] In its crudest form,

---

religious history showed a greater openness towards approaches in cultural history at an earlier stage. Urs Altermatt/Franziska Metzger, Religion und Kultur – Zeitgeschichtliche Perspektiven, in: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religion und Kulturgeschichte, 98 (2004), 185–208. See also Franziska Metzger, Die kulturgeschichtliche Wende in der zweigeschichtlichen Freiburger Katholizismusforschung, 96 (2002), 145–170. Of course, there are notable exceptions in the realm of German history, but even these are connected to larger narratives of religious and cultural conflict. See David Blackbourn, Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Nineteenth-Century Germany, New York 1993. It may well be that scholars in medieval and early modern European religious history have been more willing to adopt these approaches, since the secularization thesis clearly does not serve as a master narrative for these eras.

[3] For recent calls to integrate the cultural approaches into the history of religion, see footnote #5. In addition, see Urs Altermatt, Plädoyer für eine Kulturgeschichte des Katholizismus, in: Karl-Joseph Hummel (ed.), Zeitgeschichtliche Katholizismusforschung. Tatsachen, Deutungen, Fragen. Eine Zwischenbilanz, Paderborn 2004, 169–188; Altermatt/Metzger, Religion und Kultur (see footnote 2). For the most noteworthy abandonment of postmodern literary theory, see the latest book by Terry Eagleton, one of the original pioneers of postmodernism. Terry Eagleton, After Theory, New York 2003, which certainly modifies his standard text from 1983, Literary Theory: An Introduction, Minneapolis 2003. For an article summing up the changes in literary theory, see David Kirby, Theory in Chaos, in: The Christian Science Monitor, 27 January 2004; Emily Eakin, The Death of Theory, in: The New York Times, 19 April 2003. For the British historical world, see Arthur Marwick, All Quiet on the Postmodern Front, in: The Times Literary Supplement, 23 February 2001, 13–14. Others, however, have contested such conclusions and contended instead that postmodernism has yet to lose its relevance. See Finney, Beyond the Postmodern Moment? (as footnote 1) and Patrick Joyce, A Quiet Victory, in: The Times Literary Supplement, 26 October 2001, 15.

[4] These phrases came into common currency during debates over postmodern narrativity in the 1980s and 1990s. See Konrad H. Jarausch/Martin Sabrow, Meistererzählung – Zur Karriere eines Begriffs, in: Konrad H. Jarausch/Martin Sabrow (ed.), Die Historische Meistererzählung. Deutungslinien der deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte nach 1945, Göttingen 2002, 13. Much of the writing on master narratives is heavily indebted to the ideas of Hayden White. See Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe, Baltimore 1975 and Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, Baltimore 1987.

[5] For the most vociferous advocates of abandoning the secularization thesis as a master narrative, see Jeffrey Cox, Master Narratives of Long-Term Religious Change, in: Hugh McLeod/Werner Ustorf (eds.), The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750–2000, Cambridge 2003, 201–217; Jeffrey Cox, Secularization and Other Master Narratives of Religion in Modern Europe, in: Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte, 14,1 (2001), 24–35; Callum Brown, The Secularisation Decade: The 1960s, in: McLeod/Ustorf (eds.), The Decline of Christendom in

this argument stipulates that «modernization» undermines both religious institutions and belief itself.[6] This paradigm has been so prevalent that it is probably no exaggeration to assert that most scholars who have examined the fate of Christianity in the second half of the 20th century in Western Europe or the position of religion in the so-called «modern» world have been forced to wrestle in some manner with existing paradigms on secularization. Even those writing on earlier periods of time, such as the 19th century or the 1920s, frequently must grapple with these frameworks, if only to modify or refute them.

It seems almost superfluous to point out that the secularization thesis has been laden with heavy baggage. As early as the 1960s, its supposed heyday, this overly prescriptive model came under fire.[7] Critics excoriated its undue teleologies, its unwarranted determinism, especially in light of the religious revivals that have swept the world since the 1980s. Detractors attacked its broad range of meaning, including institutional differentiation, societalization, generalization, pluralization, relativization, this-worldiness, autonomization, rationalization, privatization, and institutional segmentation.[8] Fellow sociologists of religion, the so-called «rational choice» theorists of the 1980s and 1990s, criticized traditional secularization theories for ignoring what they called the «supply-side» of

---

Western Europe, 1750–2000 (as footnote 5), 37; Callum G. Brown, The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000, Cambridge 2001; David Nash, Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History: Secularization's Failure as a Master Narrative, in: Cultural and Social History, 2004: I, 302–325; Christian Schmidtmann, Katholische Studierende 1945–1973. Ein Beitrag zur Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Paderborn, in Vorbereitung. Schmidtmann advocates abandonding paradigms which focus on the «erosion» of the Catholic milieu in the Federal Republic of Germany. For an overview of changes in religious history which notes the shift in the profession, albeit one which does not make an explicit call for poststructuralist approaches but which is ultimately indebted to these changes, see Olwen Hufton, What is Religion Now? in: David Cannadine, What is History Now?, Hampshire 2002, 57–79.

[6] See William H. Swatos, Jr./Kevin Christiano, Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept, in: William H. Swatos Jr./Daniel V.A. Olson (eds.), The Secularization Debate, Oxford 2000, 1–20; Steve Bruce, Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians debate the Secularization Thesis, Oxford 1992; Roy Wallis/Steve Bruce, Secularization: The Orthodox Model, in: Steve Bruce (ed.), Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians debate the Secularization Thesis, Oxford 1992, 11; Steve Bruce, Religion in the Modern World; From Cathedrals to Cults, Oxford 1996. Although most of those expostulating on secularization agreed with the basic proposition that modernization eroded religious belief and institutions, a universally accepted theory of secularization failed to take hold at this time. David Martin actually put forward a number of very nuanced arguments on secularization but few sociologists bothered to take up the approaches he ventured. David Martin, A General Theory of Secularization, Oxford 1978.

[7] Interestingly, one of the stronger criticisms of this concept stemmed from David Martin, who later wrote «A General Theory of Secularization», which appeared in 1978. In 1969, however, his task was different: demolishing the term «secularization». See David Martin, The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization, New York 1969. For another critical work, see Larry Shiner, The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research, in: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 6 (1967), 207–220.

[8] See Karel Dobbelaere, Toward an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization, in: Swatos (ed.),The Secularization Debate (as footnote 6), 21–39. The closest definition that was reached was put forward by Bryan Wilson, who stipulated that secularization involves the «diminishing social significance of religion».

religion: many supposedly secularized societies were the result of longstanding religious monopolies which lacked genuine freedom of religious choice.[9] Arguing that the secularization theories should be put to rest, these critics quickly aroused a series of controversies with defenders of more traditional secularization arguments.[10] Partially as a result, historians especially have presented their accounts of religious change in the 19th and 20th centuries with far more nuance: gone is the unilinear process of religious decline and in its place an often much more differentiated picture of religious transformation along the lines of class, gender, region and nation.[11] In fact, most European historians now see much of the 19th and even parts of the 20th century as eras characterized, by and large, by religious success and revival, and not predominantly decline.[12]

Yet in the eyes of postmodern critics, such attacks have paradoxically and infuriatingly only served to strengthen secularization paradigms, even though almost no historians and sociologists employ the grand secularization theories from the 1960s. Jeffrey Cox argues that rational choice theorists who attempt to deny the phenomenon of religious decline have been easily refuted by empirical evidence. «When the facts of decline are conceded, the explanatory power of the theory comes into play spontaneously.»[13] This apparent resilience of the secularization thesis in the wake of such criticism has led these critics to argue against

[9] For the fullest statement of this position, see Rodney Stark/Roger Finke, Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion, Berkeley 2000, 38. See also Roger Finke/Rodney Stark, The Churching of America, 1886–1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy, New Brunswick 1992. For another version, see Rodney Stark/Laurence R. Iannacone, A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the Secularization of Europe, in: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 33 (1994), 230–52.

[10] These debates took place between, most prominently, the Aberdeen sociologist Steve Bruce and the sociologist Rodney Stark, now of Baylor University. For Stark, the conclusion was simple: secularization was a dead concept. «After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophesies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper, ‹Requiescat in pace›.» Rodney Stark, Secularization, R.I.P., in: Sociology of Religion, 60 (1999), 249–73. See Steve Bruce's counterattacks, Steve Bruce, The Truth about Religion in Britain, in: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 34,4 (1995), 417–30, and more extensively in his book, God is Dead: Secularization in the West, Oxford 2002.

[11] This is a point also stressed by Callum Brown, who argues, however, that the net result of such efforts has been to push back the timing of secularization from the late 18th and early 19th centuries to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Brown, The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5), 11. For an example of a nuanced text on secularization, see Hugh McLeod, Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848–1914, New York 2000. Even the recent writings of Steve Bruce, one of the leading proponents of secularization theories, show much greater differentiation than the accounts of the 1960s. See Bruce, God is Dead (as footnote 10).

[12] See Jeffrey Cox, The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870–1930, Oxford 1982; Hugh McLeod (ed.), European Religion in the Age of Great Cities 1830–1930, London 1995. For a controversial work in German, see Olaf Blaschke, Das 19. Jahrhundert: Ein Zweites Konfessionelles Zeitalter?, in: Geschichte und Gesellschaft, 26 (2000), 38–75. The German literature has also focused on the success of the so-called Catholic milieu in the second half of the 19th century. For an extensive bibliography of this literature, see Johannes Horstmann/Antonius Liedhegener (eds.), Konfession, Milieu, Moderne: Konzeptionelle Positionen und Kontroversen zur Geschichte von Katholizismus und Kirche im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, mit Beiträgen des AKKZG, Münster, Olaf Blaschke, Christoph Kösters/Antonius Liedhegener, Wilfried Loth, Wolfgang Tischner, Schwerte 2001.

[13] Cox, Master Narratives of Religious Change (as footnote 5), 205-6.

any attempts to salvage remaining elements of the secularization story. Like the rational choice theorists, they argue that this paradigm should be dropped completely, but their criticism is far more radical than that of these sociologists.[14]

The post-modern theorists envision the creation of alternative master narratives for the history of religion in modern Europe that do not necessarily focus primarily on the phenomenon of religious decline.[15] To this end, they urge religious historians to eschew traditional sociological and statistical analysis and instead adopt alternative methodologies derived from cultural history and oral histories. The task of the religious historian today is to describe various pasts, memories of the past, constructions of the past, the construction of religious identities, and religious discourses. Why? As with the newer cultural history in general, the motives certainly are wide ranging, including an epistemological scepticism, an interest in semiotics, the desire to enhance social history by including culture and the hope to discuss the past on its own terms and not those of today.[16] But on the secularization thesis, there is a consensus that this master narrative itself is an artificial construction. In the words of Callum Brown, «The problem is social science and its definition of religion.»[17] For Brown, social science privileges statistics, ignores discourses and leads to a simple reductionism. The theory of secularization itself, he claims, was constructed in the 19th and 20th centuries around a specifically Christian social-scientific discourse of religious decline. As a result, «[...] this social-science method obliterates whole realms of religiosity which cannot be counted. [...] If you understand the origins and non-universal nature of those texts, you undermine the foundations of secularization theory.»[18]

This essay is an attempt to assess preliminarily these postmodern challenges to the master narrative of secularization. Some laud these as a golden, innovative opportunity to revitalize the field and what others might reprove as a destructive and methodologically unsound challenge to existing paradigms, one that is no less radical for being belated. This essay will suggest strategies by which some of the suggestions made by postmodern critics might be used even more efficaciously but also point to limitations and even philosophical misconceptions in

---

[14] In the words of David Nash, «We should also be at pains to remind ourselves that the critiques of secularization have strangely been unable to fatally damage the concept's own enduring appeal. This, more than anything else, is the strongest argument for leaving it behind entirely and for embracing new ways of approaching and writing religiously informed history.» Nash also argues that the tenacious hold of the secularization thesis on the profession has rendered religious history relatively insignificant in the larger profession. Nash, Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History (as footnote 5), 304. Callum Brown concurs, «By merely rescheduling the timing and gradient of seculariation, revisionism has left unmodified the core notion of religious decline as a prolonged, unilinear and inevitable consequence of modernity.» Brown, the Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5), 11.

[15] Cox, Master Narrative of Long-term Religious Change (as footnote 5), 214, 217. In a footnote, Cox mentions that a conference at the Research Center Religion and Society attempted to take up this challenge, but he regrettably provides no details as to what these alternative visions actually contained.

[16] On the motives of the newer cultural historians, see Hölscher, Neue Annalistik: Umrisse einer Theorie der Geschichte (as footnote 1), 93. Metzger and Altermatt have expressed the desire to expand social history by including the necessary dimension of culture.

[17] Brown, The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5), 11.

[18] Ibid, 12.

these approaches. It will argue that these approaches have the potential to illuminate when used judiciously, but also the potential to call into question common notions of agency, historical significance, and casuality when pushed too far. Ultimately, it argues that the shortcomings in the postmodern challenge to the secularization narrative unintentionally and paradoxically lead us back to the problem of secularization, precisely because it fails to address these basic problems of casuality, significance and historical agency. In addition, the postmodern critique relies on the same categories it seeks to undermine, categories that are a part of secularisation theories themselves.

Unfortunately, this essay cannot delve into a fuller analysis of the often contested philosophical presuppositions of postmodernism to which these issues are necessarily connected: scores of books, articles and essays have already been written on this topic.[19] It will discuss these only insofar as they pertain directly to the attempts to call into question the master narratives of religious history. Though postmodern approaches are in their infancy in the field of religious history, one can nonetheless observe the results of several decades of postmodernist approaches in other fields of history and apply them to the potential trajectory of postmodernist religious history.

The Construction of the Secularization Narrative

In light of the manifold weaknesses of the secularization thesis, postmodern critics of the secularization thesis begin with the assumption that one should conceive of it as a narrative or a story. As Jeffrey Cox sees it, «One task on scholarship on modern religious history is the unmasking of the master narrative. We do not always realise how dependent we are on it until it is identified and labelled.»[20] The secularization thesis, in other words, is to be historicized and seen as a construction itself, which can be studied like any other historical event or phenomenon. Theoretically, this assumption poses few difficulties, as it entails studying secularization theory as one would any other topic in intellectual or cultural history.

Conceiving and writing this necessary piece of intellectual history or «Begriffsgeschichte», however, may well prove to be a fascinating but Herculean task, as the secularization narrative assumed many forms depending on the era and national-cultural context. Both non-churchmen – Marxists, social scientists – and churchmen had long put forward theories of religious decline with and without recourse to the actual term «secularization», which was laden with diverse meanings. For Brown, the secularization thesis, at least in Britain, was a product of the Enlightenment's influence on evangelical churchmen of the late 18th and early 19th century and not just the creation of those theorists hostile to Christianity such as Marx or Engels. The definitions of religiosity, he writes, «used by today's Christian churches rely on the social-science method initiated by evange-

---

[19] For a small sampling of these writings, see Alex Callinicos, Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique, Calbridge 1989; Christopher Norris, What's Wrong with Postmodernism? Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy, Baltimore 1990; John O'Neill, the Poverty of Postmodernism, London 1995.

[20] Cox, Master Narratives of Religious Change (as footnote 5), 208.

lical churchmen of the 1790s and 1800s. Seduced by Enlightenment rationality, it was they who gave us the definitions of religion with which we today are still obsessed.»[21] They were reacting against changing power relations in the wake of the industrial revolution and urbanization and agricultural improvement; others feared Methodist dissenters, while others feared a loss of power politically.

How all of this took place, still needs to be sketched out in a more complex manner. Brown argues that evangelical Christians needed to tabulate the number of conversions, the age and occupation of the converted, all of which led Christians down the path of social science. But describing such evangelical clergymen as «seduced» by Enlightenment rationality obscures the possibility that they may have taken the initiative in creating such rational categories themselves a priori. In the same vein, it has been argued that elements of classical economics had distinct roots in Christian evangelical thought.[22] Might not Christian thinkers, independently of the Enlightenment project of rationality, have perhaps unwittingly created their own contribution to the project of modernity themselves for the goal, to use Callum Brown's formulation, of the «puritanisation of society?»[23] As such, Christian thinkers may well have been original but unintentional participants in creating a modern discourse of religion and even their own discourse of modernity – not just reacting to or against it or appropriating it out of a defensive necessity as would later be the case for many continental Catholics who used «modern means to fight modern society».[24]

In addition, explicating the narratives and discourses they created raises potentially provocative questions. How did evangelical Christians reconcile such theories of religious decline to a teleological Christian theory of history, which envisioned final struggles and apocalypse?[25] Were they, in fact, focused upon the «end times»? Discussing religious decline, moreover, entailed imagining and constructing a religious golden age in the past as a counterpoint to the supposed decline and struggles. Side by side stand, it seems, Christian leaders juggled Enlightenment notions of rational progress, rising numbers of converts, a perception of religious decline (the cities supposedly became bastions of irreligiosity), golden pasts, and a Christian theory of history. Strange bedfellows indeed! That the construction of such theories overlapped with genuine religious revivals in the late 18th and 19th centuries means that historians must analyze how religious

---

[21] Brown, The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5), 12.

[22] On the influence of evangelical Christians on the emergence of economics, see Boyd Hilton, The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865, Oxford 1988; Gordon Bigelow, Fiction, Famine and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland, Cambridge 2003; Gordon Bigelow, Let There be Markets: The Evangelical Roots of Economics, in: Harper's Magazine, May 2005, 33–38. Callum Brown acknowledges the close connection between economics and evangelicals, particularly what came to be known as the «salvation economy». Brown, The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5), 35–57.

[23] Brown, The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5), 41.

[24] Urs Altermatt, Katholizismus und Moderne. Zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte der Schweizer Katholiken im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, Zürich 1989.

[25] For a brief mention of the echelon, see Lucian Hölscher, Religious Change in Modern Germany in: McLeod/Ustorf (eds.), The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750–2000 (as footnote 5), 184–197, 185.

leaders reconciled their perceptions of religious decline with the imperative to save souls and carry out missionary work both at home and abroad. Is not for religious thinkers of almost any era, a notion similar to secularization a precondition for launching religious revivals? Virtually every religious revival has been undergirded by the premise that the religious community was beleaguered and surrounded by a sinful, if not secular, pagan or hostile world. In this sense, this notion of secularization is merely a more fully developed and theorized extension of a motivating impulse common to many Christian communities on the eve of revival. One might explore how religious leaders went from seeing the world not only as sinful but as secular, the latter at least partially the product of the Enlightenment. At the same time, one wonders how secularization narratives changed as the austere evangelicalism of the early 19th century was gradually replaced by a doctrine of Christian compassion, in which Christians were increasingly urged to emulate Christ and teachings.[26]

What also becomes clear is just how differently Catholics and Protestants constructed secularization narratives. Brown's discussion of the construction of the secularization focuses largely on evangelical Christians in Britain, and does not look at the Catholic minority there. Certainly, the notion of a «salvation economy» would have been absent from the Catholic world-view in most parts of Europe. As a result, the discourse he reconstructs omits crucial components of the continental Catholic construction which was not derived from social science methods, and instead defined very strongly intellectually against individualism, the Enlightenment and rationalism. Pivotal here was, in particular, the French Revolution and its accompanying «secularization» (Säkularisation) or forcible confiscation of church lands and properties, which was seen as one part of a much larger assault on Catholicism. This was both a process and a term which was much less applicable to Protestants for obvious reasons.[27] As Catholics in a number of German states and European nations increasingly came under the hegemony of a national Protestant majority, the conservative Catholic formulation of secularization (now «Säkularisierung») came to emphasize growing and pernicious influence of Protestants in culture and society, whereby the root cause was the Protestant reformation. To provide but one example: an article in the founding issue of «Der Katholik», a German publication launched in 1821, insisted: «Es war nicht genug, daß die katholische Religion in Deutschland durch die Säkularisation gänzlich darnieder geworfen worden.» («It was not enough that the Catholic religion in Germany had been cast asunder by secularization.»)[28] A similar account from the 1830s insisted that Protestants were sent

---

[26] On the changes in Victorian Christianity, see Boyd Hilton, The Age of Atonement. The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865, Oxford 1988.

[27] In German, one must note the critical distinction between «Säkularisation» and «Säkularisierung», a distinction which does not exist in English. For the complicated relationship between these two terms, see Hermann Lübbe, Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs, München 1965, 27–32. One can also make distinctions between secularism and secularization.

[28] Nothwendige Rüge eines Lügen- und Lästerartikels gegen die katholische Kirche und ihr ehrwürdiges Oberhaupt, Pius VII in: Die Neckar Zeitung, 12 November 1820; Der Katholik, 1 (1821), 146–7.

from Hell «to destroy the work of God», through a rebellion during «the so-called Reformation».[29] The author clearly drew an analogy between the rebellion in the Garden of Eden and the Reformation, for the Protestants created an individualistic spirit that helped create false philosophies that were no longer anchored in true Christianity. Gradually, the term secularisation («Säkularisation») assumed larger, metaphorical meanings («Säkulaisierung»), no longer referring just to a specific event – the confiscation of church properties at the start of the 19th century. By the mid 20th century, this discourse as well as the related discourse of materialism has assumed pessimistic, even terrifying dimensions.[30]

As tempting as it is to make confession one of the founts of secularization theories, analyzing even such seemingly transparent discourses requires great care. German Catholics and European Catholics were anything but homogenous groups. Even within the clergy, one could find conservative Catholics, old Catholics («Altkatholiken») and liberal Catholics with ambiguous if not even clashing views of the Enlightenment, religious decline and confessionalism. In addition, it took much longer to wed these existing and even contested notions of religious decline to discourses of modernization and to modern social science. Critical here were not just sociologists as Max Weber but liberal Kulturprotestant narratives, which also like the Catholic narratives saw secularization as an outgrowth of the Reformation and the emancipation from the church but gave them a more positive meaning.[31] But here too one wonders whether conservative Protestant theologians such as Hengstenberg or Kliefoth who drew sharp distinctions between this world and the gospel would have shared the optimism of such liberal theologians as Ernst Troeltsch.

Still, the construction of the secularization thesis is most commonly associated with the writings of sociologists mostly of Western European origin from the 1960s who derived their theories now prescribing religious decline throughout the world from a mixture of modernization theory, the ideas of Max Weber and Durkheim, and the unprecedented spectacle of the collapse of religious cultures throughout Europe at that time.[32] It is commonly associated with a host of assumptions about the irreversible paths of economic development, interdependent social, economic and political structures, and a dichotomy between

---

[29] Der Zeitgeist historish dargestellt, in: Der Katholik, 1 (1821), 113–23. See also Unsigned review of G. Friederich (ed.), Der Protestant, pp. 211–22 and Der Protestantismus und die schlechte Presse, in: Der Katholik, 25 (1845), 1–2.

[30] It would be a grave mistake, however, to assume a line of unbroken continuity here between the use of such terms, concepts and discourses from the early 19th century through the mid 20th. On the use of the term in the mid-20th century, see Lübbe, Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs (as footnote 27), 109–127. In many conservative Catholic accounts as late as the 1940s, the Reformation continued to be viewed negatively, as the starting point for doctrines of individualism.

[31] Lübbe, Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines indeenpolitischen Begriffs (as footnote 27), 68–85, Hölscher, Semantic Structures of Religious Change in Modern Germany (as footnote 25), 184–185.

[32] See, for instance, Peter L. Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion, New York 1967; Peter L. Berger/Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality, Harmondsworth 1973.

tradition and modernity.[33] In retrospect, many of these beliefs proved to be enormously misguided, as even some of the original proponents of these theories have now come to admit.[34] In the words of Peter Berger, who has since disavowed much of his earlier writings in support of the secularization thesis, from a work fittingly entitled «The Desecularization of the World»: «The world today, with some exceptions to which I will come presently, is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled ‹secularization theory› is essentially mistaken.»[35] Some of this is wishful thinking, as some sociologists of religion have sought to make Europe out to be more religious than it is in reality.[36] It may be more productive to analyze a so-called European exceptionalism, when examining the often explosive growth of religion in the last thirty years throughout the world.

But the fact that narratives of secularization have a history and have been constructed does not mean that there is no correspondence to past and present realities or that the narration they tell is fundamentally, and a priori, invalid. This has been one of the basic epistemological mistakes in such postmodern approaches. Science is a construction, but this does not mean that its findings do not correspond to reality. One could, of course, argue that the social sciences are poor science, but this is an argument which could lead us to refine and improve upon the models of social science themselves. The fact remains that since the 1960s, almost all Western European nations, Canada, Australia, New Zealand have witnessed a vast fall-off in religious attendance, membership and even beliefs, even if one can dispute the meaning of these trends by asserting that one can «believe without belonging».[37] But still, there is no fallacy in continuing to use the term «secularization» in a descriptive and not prescriptive manner, in which we assume that as a result of this concept there is a course of history that must be followed. Nor must it follow that word «secularization» is irrevocably tainted, because it automatically invokes the prescriptive models from the 1960s: the «secularization master narrative» does not have to be conflated with secularization itself. Even Callum Brown concedes this point, arguing that secularization theory needs to be discarded but that secularization in Great Britain itself became a reality after the 1960s.[38]

---

[33] Thomas Mergel, Geht es weiterhin voran? Die Modernisierungstheorie auf dem Weg zu einer Theorie der Moderne, in: Thomas Mergel/Thomas Welskopp (eds.), Geschichte zwischen Kultur und Gesellschaft. Beiträge zur Theoriedebatte, München 1997, 203–232.

[34] This is also a point made by David Nash, who writes, «The tools of scientific rationalism were also intent on proving that the work and value of the expert offered emancipation to a damaged and incomplete world [...] what this points to is that rationalism in this context deserves not to be seen as a theory but indeed as a belief.» Nash, Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History (as footnote 5), 315–6.

[35] Peter Berger (ed.), The Desecularization of the world: Resurgent Religion and World Politics, Grand Rapids 1999, 2.

[36] Rodney Stark, in particular, has argued that the demand for religious goods in Europe remains strong: the supply, in his estimation, has remained weak. See Rodney Stark, Secularization, R.I.P. (as footnote 10), 71–72. See also footnote 37.

[37] Grace Davie, Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging, Oxford 1994.

[38] Brown, The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5), 193.

Alternative postmodern master narratives and their shortcomings

But even after conceding that secularization is a reality in Western Europe, postmodern theorists insist that abandoning the master narrative nonetheless opens up far more interesting and historically significant possibilities for research.[39] But what might these new avenues of research and alternative master narratives look like? So far, postmodern approaches have produced an alternative master narrative that is, first and foremost, historiographical, since post-modernism is referential upon the notion of modernism, in which the act of rejection thus becomes the new meta-narrative. The ensuing historiographical master narrative focuses on generational conflicts, the desire of every generation to separate and distinguish itself from the agendas of its predecessors. This paradigm shift in religious history was a belated response to the transformation in the historical world from social history in the 1970s to cultural history by the 1990s. More broadly, however, it was part of the larger intellectual transformation in the second half of the 20th century in which the discourses and the ideals of the Enlightenment were called into question. The assault on secularization theories represent the attempt to knock down one of the last pillars of modernization theories of the 1960s still apparently left standing, since many of the other components of modernization theory had been dismantled in the 1980s and 1990s. Why the transformation took place so tardily may no doubt be an interesting topic of inquiry. In this vein, the secularization narrative reflected the rationalist and sometimes utopian cultural assumptions of an academic elite from the 1960s. It masked a Western arrogance which asserted that there were certain universal paths to economic and cultural development that also led to the disappearance of religion. Unmasking such hidden assumptions, for many postmodernists, can discredit the larger metanarratives.

But this historiographical narrative can also be a double-edged sword. Perhaps most immediately and superficially, the deconstructionists may be deconstructed since many of those attempting to decenter the notion of secularization no doubt have their own ideological agendas. If it can be shown that secularization is an artificial construction, for instance, the jeremiads of conservative believers about the increasing secularism of western society lose credibility. Deconstructing postmodernist accounts is not always an easy task, however, in part because of the manner in which their accounts are sometimes structured. In some instances, postmodernist historians deliberately insert their personal narrative voice into the text – a common feature of some literature that has been deemed postmodernist.[40] Such narrative intrusions deliberately blur the border between past and present, the voices from the past and today, in order to show that the historical process is an ongoing dialogue between past and present. In so doing, they also potentially confuse, give the impression of arrogance or narcissism or lead one to question the very point of historical endeavour by making it difficult to deter-

---

[39] This is the fundamental premise of David Nash, Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History (as footnote 5).

[40] See many of the writings of the Czech émigré and author, Milan Kundera, for instance.

mine what is real and what is a construction.[41] Why, in ostensibly reading about the past, would a reader wish to encounter first and foremost the political agendas and digressions of unknown historians? It seems to be common sense that a story that is primarily historiographical does not seem to provide the most satisfactory basis for a master narrative of religious history.

In response, postmodern critics argue that becoming aware of our own pre-judices will open the possibility of discovering alternative forms of piety, precisely the sort of research that has been done much more extensively for medieval and early modern Europe.[42] One can also analyze the meanings that forms of religious practice had for their participants, in much the same way that medieval historians have examined the meanings of pilgrimages, crusades, amu-lets, etc.[43] One can show how religious identities were created and constructed, how religious groups imagined the past and their own traditions. A number of recent books have thus examined the meanings that Marian apparitions had for individuals and societies, most commonly in French history.[44]

But the potential drawback to this approach involves the question of historical significance. We as historians are forced to constantly make decisions about the significance of our topics. One can show how religious narratives were construc-ted to meet certain needs at certain points in time. How do we determine whether these were significant without adopting a doctrine of relativism, in which one asserts that the importance of historical events completely depends upon the eye of the beholder. Taken to the extreme, one might see a random assortment of people for whom religion (and or secularization) had certain personal meanings but lacked a larger historical context. This is, perhaps, the equivalent of reading dozens of competing blogs with no claims to larger significance, a historical landscape devoid of mileposts and larger narratives. After all, we create narra-tives to give meaning and order to events that we or others have experienced. One solution here might be to examine why alternative narratives and discourses failed to catch on and become dominant. Why did alternative narratives that were not necessarily predicated on religious decline, or the stories of liberal Christianity, various cults and sects become secondary to the narratives of secularization?

---

[41] Callum Brown, for instance, writes «There is a dissonance between the traditional theory of secularisation and my personal experience of secularisation, and this book is its product», but reads the reader hanging, as he never elaborates on what his «personal experience of secu-larisation» entailed. See Brown, The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5). Christian Schmidtmann audaciously insists on letting himself remain fully in his text, «als Autor im Text sichtbar zu bleiben und dadurch zu weiterem Nachdenken und Widerspruch einzuladen», but one is still forced to ask for what purpose and how this will enlighten the reader. Schmidtmann, Katholische Studierende 1945–1973 (as footnote 5).

[42] For several well-known examples, see Carlo Ginzburg, The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller, Baltimore 1980; Carolyn Bynum Walker, Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women, Berkeley 1987; Carolyn Bynum Walker, Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion, Cambridge 1991; Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Montaillou: Village Occitan de 1294 a 1324, Paris 1975.

[43] Nash, Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History (as footnote 5), 321.

[44] Ruth Harris, Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age, New York 1999.

Postmodern approaches that focus on the construction of identity paradoxically might lead not to fragmentation but to a revival of secularization narratives, now used here in the plural. Narratives of secularization and religious decline often served as a way to create religious identity, defining it against a hostile outside world. Religious identities often clearly distinguish insiders versus outsiders in an effort to create coherent communities. As we have seen, renewing such communities often takes place by underscoring the threats from hostile outsiders who do not share the religious values of the community. Here, one needs only to look at American evangelicals today who define themselves against secular humanists, liberal academics and cultural elites.

The fact that secularization was so widely used as a concept in the past, means that it cannot simply be suddenly brushed aside. Historians must examine precisely why for nearly two centuries so many churchmen believed it to be critical to elevate religious decline to a master narrative and how they shaped their own discourses and program for renewal around this phenomenon. They were clearly reacting against something – against larger forces such as urbanization, industrialization, liberalism, the new nation-states, the Enlightenment and socialism which did, in reality, pose a challenge to the health of their institutions and were not simply a myth created by paranoid churchmen. That church leaders were often able to withstand and in many even strengthen their own institutions in the face of these challenges in the 19th and early 20th centuries does not diminish the fact that these forces had the potential to undermine existing institutions and beliefs. No one would deny that many socialists and liberals eagerly awaited the day when the power of the church would be broken and worked steadfastly toward this end. Similarly, no one could plausibly controvert that the failure to build new churches and dispatch clergy and laity to rapidly industrializing and urbanizing areas would have spelled ruin for the churches in many locations. In fact, acknowledging these challenges restores agency to the part of church leaders, who created initiatives, built new churches, rallied the flock, created new organizations, and reshaped religious identities in what was perceived, not entirely incorrectly, to be a hostile world.[45]

A more radical postmodern alternative, however, suggests recognizing and examining the persistence of an evangelical religious language and religious narrative well into the present. David Nash has suggested that the culture of therapy and dieting strongly depends on evangelical narratives of sacrifice and salvation; backsliding (eating that extra cookie) is akin to sin and temptation.[46] To these, he might also have added the culture of bodybuilding and women's empowerment. Far from being a diffuse and ultimately unsatisfying form of religion, as Steve Bruce and others argued, the evangelical narratives implicit in the new age and therapy culture is proof for Nash that the current age is emphatically not one of secularization.[47] But this position is also fraught with epistemological difficulties. To make this argument, Nash has to eliminate the distinction between the secular

---

[45] A radical alternative would be to see all of these forces as mere constructions, in much the same way the «modernization» can be seen as a construction. But to see urbanization and industrialization as a mere linguistic construction seems fatuous.

[46] Nash, Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History (as footnote 5), 320–321.

[47] Bruce, God is Dead (as footnote 10).

and the sacred, which he, in fact, has categorized as «an increasingly artificial divide».[48] But abandoning the notion of the sacred (secularization theory fundamentally presupposes a difference between the sacred and the secular) would make it difficult to even categorize religious language and religious thought. It would render the transcendent and the sacred a human construction that bears no relationship to larger truths, ultimate or partial. It would conceivably allow everything to be redefined as religious or sacred. The transcendent would become immanent, the immanent transcendent. From certain religious perspectives, all life is potentially sacred; from certain secular perspectives, the sacred is, in reality, an artificial profane construction. As such, the notion of the religious (and the possibility of language to express this) becomes potentially meaningless, a welter of artificially constructed human narratives with no larger transcendental significance.

But there is something useful in this distinction between the secular and the sacred that allows us to engage in meaningful discussion, even without resorting to simple dualisms. One can distinguish, as many others have done, between different levels of transcendence or create notions of «secular religions» without throwing out the baby with the bathwater.[49] One could also discuss the sacralization of otherwise secular institutions or the secularization of the sacred. Alternatively, Nash's suggestions might even illustrate a process of secularization (meant here descriptively), as they show how many religious traditions have now come to emphasize the immanent rather than the transcendent. The diffuse «spirituality» of the new age and the therapy cultures has undeniably minimized the transcendent, made it immanent and above all, left it bereft of any binding authority either from the institutional church or from scripture. Piety has become that which helps the individual cope with life.

More likely, however, abandoning the master narrative of secularization will lead not to fragmentation or the erosion of a religious vocabulary but to the creation of a new master narrative, one likely based on the so-called «feminization» narrative, the fruits of gender history. This story tells how women in both Protestantism and Catholicism came to be overrepresented in church pews in the 19th century, as forms of piety became progressively feminine and the institutions struggled anxiously with masculinity.[50] But raising this story to that of a post-secularization master narrative raises some of the same problems of the old secularization narrative. The secularization master narrative has been criticized for not corresponding to empirical realities, especially in the 19th century. It has yet to be seen whether the same can be said for the feminization narrative, since much of the empirical research has yet to be done. In addition, one could raise many further

---

[48] Ibid., 318.

[49] On the different levels of transcendence, Peter Berger, A Rumor of Angels. Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural, Garden City 1969.

[50] Callum Brown writes: «In short, if the gender division of work create the separate spheres for men and women of the new working classes between 1780 and 1850, it was evangelicalism which provided the community location for the elaboration and affirmation of those separate spheres as domestic ideology. Faith was being privatised as an individual choice, but one which the potential to privilege female piety and institute anxiety about masculinity.» Brown, The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5), 42. See also Raymond Sun, ‹Hammer Blows›: Work, the Workplace, and the Culture of Masculinity among Catholic Workers in the Weimar Republic, in: Central European History, 37, 2 (2004), 245–271.

questions. What meanings did the feminization of the church have not just for women but for men? Did men and women, in fact, embrace this narrative? Who created this story and for what purposes? Did women and men accept these discourses? Why did some religious men buy into competing masculine discourses provided by «muscular Christianity» or the «bündisch» youth movement in Germany?[51]

But more importantly, historians also have to focus on questions of change to show how certain narratives gain acceptance, are eclipsed and/or transformed. Callum Brown refers to the «waning» of discourses, and argues that secularization was the result of the collapse of a gendered discourse from the 19th century what he calls «discourse change».[52] But, again, this forces us to ask how such «discourse change» took place and how it is to be measured. How does one determine what is a dominant discourse? Similarly, how do we measure the ascent and waning of discourses and determine whether these discourses were, in fact, culturally significant? How does one set of values gradually (or suddenly) replace another set? What values replace «religious values»? To address such concerns, Callum Brown has advocated making use of oral histories, but one must also determine how representative they are.[53] One could measure the frequency with which they appear in journals, sermons and newspapers but then one has paradoxically returned to the quantitative approaches of social sciences and to the clunky terminology of social science.

Alternatively, those postmodern thinkers inspired by Foucault have made the case that power is ultimately decisive, but to date, few discussing theories of secularization have attempted to integrate power into their analyses. For one, power is conspicuously absent from most theories of secularization (and modernization). It is especially difficult to reconcile a style of history based on discourses of power to another based on the impact of larger, more impersonal forces such as economics, demographics, industrialization or urbanization. But one could easily discuss discourses of power while discussing the construction of secularization narratives or in the feminization narrative.[54] One could pose questions such as how the religious discourse of gender differed from discourses on gender put forward by more powerful bourgeois elites in the 19th century, especially where Catholics were disproportionately represented in the lower classes. Did the clergy cynically exert power over the flock? What did the exodus of women from religious institutions in the 1950s and 1960s say about the nature of institutional power, and the power of this gendered discourse?[55] What replaced such power by the 1960s in a culture of consumption and entertainment?

---

[51] Donald Hall (ed.), Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age, Cambridge 1994.
[52] Brown, The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5), 175, 181.
[53] Ibid., 14.
[54] Callum Brown does this to some extent in The Death of Christian Britain (as footnote 5). For other examples, Irmtraud Götz von Olenhusen (ed.), Frauen unter dem Patriarchat der Kirchen. Katholikinnen und Protestantinnen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, Stuttgart 1995; Christine Aka, Frauenorden – Krankenpflege – Caritas. Katholisches Frauenbild und bürgerliches Tugendideal im ausgehenden 19. Jahrhundert, in: Werner Frese (ed.), Die Mauritzer Franziskanerinnen, Münster 1994, 287–299.
[55] On this point, see Mark Edward Ruff, The Wayward Flock: Catholic Youth in Postwar West Germany, 1945–1965, Chapel Hill 2005, 86–120.

An alternative: A dialectical master narrative of secularization

The postmodern challenge has performed a valuable service to religious history. Its epistemological scepticism forces historians to be extremely clear how they define their terms and to be cognizant of how such terms came into existence.[56] Such is the meritorious achievement of even the most extreme relativists and nominalists, for whom even language is a mere construction with no necessary correlation to the objects they represent. It requires historians to be constantly aware of alternatives to existing paradigms and prescriptive assumptions that may be embedded in their theories. And so one can disagree strongly with David Nash's argument that the secularization paradigm is useless and should be discarded.[57] The challenges to this theory, the result of both fellow sociologists and postmodern critics, have spawned much important research, especially for 19th century that shows just how religious this era was. Without the theory and the doubt it engendered, the fruits of the research would not have emerged.

These notions remind us just how dialectical the historical profession and certain eras of history can be. Churchmen, thinkers inspired by the Enlightenment and social scientists created the secularization thesis – leading many to struggle forever against it. I would suggest creating an alternative master narrative that proceeds from this dialectical approach and integrates a deconstructed secularization narrative into the history of religion in modern Europe. Impulses that were potentially hostile to existing Christian institutions – «modernization», nation-states, urbanization, liberalism, certain types of science, rationalism, individualism, social differentiation – frequently worked dialectically. Of course, they varied substantially from nation to nation, confession to confession, region to region. In some cases they led to what might be called secularization, when individuals did not take the necessary measures or when some churchmen began to self-secularize their own institutions. In other cases, these challenges produced the opposite outcome – religious renewal – as churchmen created new identities in an effort to stave off these trends. And it was here that narratives of religious decline, created in the late 18th and 19th centuries, proved absolutely critical in rousing religious leaders to action, to build new churches, to launch religious revivals, to attack the agents of modernism.

These efforts, however, were never perfect. They were a generational phenomenon, requiring regular renewal and the reinvention of tradition. The 1920s and 1930s saw both severe erosion of religious subcultures and waves of significant revival. Especially from the late 1950s onward in much of Western Europe, the churches appeared to be flummoxed by an often bewildering array of new challenges, including greater mobility, mass entertainment, mass culture, women's emancipation and growing welfare states, which paradoxically the churches in

---

[56] For one attempt to use the term «secularization» with greater precision and distinguish it from terms such as secularism, see John Sommerville, Secular Society/Religious Population: Our Tacit Rules for Using the Term, ‹Secularization›, in: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 37(20) (1998), 249–253. For criticism of Sommerville's proposals, see David Yamane, A Sociologist comments on Sommerville: The Whole is Less than the Sum of its Parts in: Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 37(2) (1998), 254–256.

[57] Nash, Reconnecting Religion with Social and Cultural History (as footnote 5), 303–304.

many countries had actually helped create. In the wake of these forces, the received discourses no longer found resonance especially amongst young European persons and women. Yet unlike their predecessors in previous generations, church leaders were unable to create alternative identities that worked. Contrary to expectations, liberal Christianity actually helped dilute the faith. Its master narrative of ecumenism and the coming together of faiths actually helped to secularize religious institutions. Religious cultures and subcultures thus disintegrated throughout Western Europe. While the tempo varied substantially according to nation, denomination, region and gender, the net result was similar – remnants of religious subcultures, a diffuse and highly individualistic spirituality at best, and a growing lack of belief at worst.[58] And so, bolstered by their prescriptive theories of secularization, many sociologists predicted that religious decline would soon become a global phenomenon. But in many other parts of the world including Africa, the Middle East, the United States and many immigrant quarters in Europe, however, such a secular tide generated a backlash. Individuals grounded in conservative orthodoxies renewed their institutions, adeptly using modern means, from praise bands, power point presentations and the Internet, in their efforts to fight modern society. In some areas, conflicts emerged as individuals sought to secularize the sacred, while others strove to sacralize the secular.

Such a story brings together the fruits of social science research and insights into the constructed nature of the secularization thesis, restoring agency, historical significance and historical casuality in the process. It leaves the end of the story still open and awaiting its telling. More importantly, it allows historians to ask a new set of challenging questions that have scarcely been addressed. How concretely did discourses of religious decline and secularization work to mobilize clergy and religious groups, even if the secularization thesis they employed may have been based on a false or only partially accurate representation of reality? Was this primarily an elite discourse or did it find popular support, especially in the 19th century, when new forms of popular piety and religious observance were taking shape?

Of course, this narrative also oversimplifies. Many forms of religious piety had little to do with these existing narratives; it leaves other groups out. But it roughly corresponds to the picture painstakingly put together by many historians in recent years. Any master narrative requires simplification in order to be understood. And that is precisely the reason why we need master narratives, simplified as they are, for without them, we are unable to tell coherent stories about the past.

Mark Edward Ruff, Assistant Professor of History, St. Louis University

---

[58] For several accounts of the erosion of religious subcultures in Western Europe, see James Carleton Kennedy, Building New Babylon: Cultural Change in The Netherlands during the 1960s, Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1995. This has now appeared in print as Nieuw Babylon in Aanbouw. Nederland in de Jaren Zestig, Third Edition, Amsterdam 1999; Wilhelm Damberg, Abschied vom Milieu? Katholizismus im Bistum Münster und in den Niederlanden, 1945–1980, Paderborn 1997; Mark Edward Ruff, The Wayward Flock: Catholic Youth in Postwar West Germany, 1945–1965, Chapel Hill 2005; Altermatt, Katholizismus und Moderne (as footnote 24).