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**Talking to Ourselves: An Investigation into the Christian Ethics Inherent in Secularism**

The argument in this chapter is that when we investigate the cultural and religious nature and identity of Western society we find something more complex and confusing than a straightforward decline and removal of Christianity by secularism, understood as the triumphant forces of rationality and liberalism. In this sense Charles Taylor is correct when he engages in what he calls a “continuing polemic” against subtraction stories, that is, stories “of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Taylor argues that the “modern subtraction story of the Enlightenment” in which people “started using Reason and Science, instead of Religion and Superstition,” is not “a neutral and uncontestable fact, but part of the self-image of Enlightened unbelief.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Taylor’s argument is that these positioned narratives miss important elements of the history of belief, and also fail to generate a complete picture of contemporary cultural and religious identity. I wish to argue that if we are to have a fuller picture of Western cultural, religious and philosophical identity and a more complete historical account of its development, then we need to be thinking of the persistence of Christianity, especially its ethical persistence, rather than its demise and the emergence of a godless secularism.

To illustrate and discuss this hypothesis, I want to do three things. First I want to call into question the narrative of Church decline which powerfully shapes the Western discourse of secularism. Secularism has a credibility as a hermeneutical notion because it is frequently assumed that churches across Western Europe are in decline. An alternate way of describing current patterns of church attendance is one of reversion, that is a return to the norms of attendance prior to the exceptional Victorian era. Second, I want to describe the most important shift in ideas during the Enlightenment period as one in which the technology of popular religion, dominant in the medieval period, was replaced by the technology that resulted from what we now think of as science. Finally, I want to argue that Christianity remains a persistent force in contemporary society through its ethics. In particular, the focus will be on individualism, how this emerged from Christian roots and is sustained by a popular commitment to the Christian idea of God. At this point the work of the political theorist Larry Siedentop is very important. If my hypothesis is correct, then any discussion of the relationship between Christianity and ideas such as freedom of belief or freedom of conscience is to some extent an internal Christian theological dialogue in which notions of individual choice are posited against an equal and opposite concern for the common good. However, before we get to that point, there is a need to explore more critically what is meant by secularism in the West, and before we get to that, it is necessary to say something about how we talk about religious identity and contemporary culture.

It should be clear that when the persistence of Christian belief in Western society and culture is discussed the point is not that certain individuals who previously were thought to be atheist or agnostic are in fact, perhaps unknown to them, really Christian. It is apparent that certain individuals are secular, that is, they profess atheism or agnosticism, and seek to promote secular ideas. Nor is this chapter a discussion or evaluation of certain important theories expressed and identified with well-known thinkers. Rather what is being analyzed and evaluated is what Taylor calls the “social imaginary”.[[3]](#footnote-3) By this Taylor means something broader, more general and more popular than academic theories. Taylor describes it in the following manner:

Our social imaginary at any given time is complex. It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. This understanding is both factual and “normative”; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is not the case that social theory is unimportant. Taylor argues that the norms of our social imaginary will be shaped by the theories advocated by a small group of people, intellectuals. But there is a sense in which the boundaries of what it is possible to think, or permissible to say, including by academics, are in dialogue and tension with the limits of any particular social imaginary. This does not mean that it is impossible for the ideas and norms of a social imagination to change; clearly they do, as Taylor describes. But at points prior to the changes, there are certain ideas which one imaginary accepts as norms, which for previous societies and cultures were inconceivable. In part, the aim of Taylor’s *A Secular Age* is to account for the emergence of the possibility of not accepting “transcendence” as a cultural, social and intellectual norm; a narrative that depends on simultaneously accepting a belief was impossible, and capable of emerging in history. The difficulty of focusing on the social imaginary of any particular society or culture is establishing what constitutes evidence of shared, underlying beliefs and values. As Taylor notes, this means not only identifying those who might be considered representative thinkers but also highlighting and analyzing popular beliefs and practices. As *A Secular Age* illustrates, such a task, if it is to have historical sweep, is enormous. It is also complicated by the diversity of practices and beliefs in any particular era, and the concurrent problem of establishing which examples might be illustrative of background norms. Such difficulties are unavoidable; but they are also the advantage of such discussions. The advantages lie in the breadth and sweep of its subject matter. An effective analysis and evaluation of shared background ideas and beliefs has a relevance and importance that is frequently more directly applicable to society than the analysis of individual key thinkers. It need not be an either / or, of course, but by focusing on the nature of shared ideas in society and culture there is a relevance to the discussions which is not always directly obvious at a popular level when individual scholars are examined. This is especially important for theology, which, because Western society is commonly referenced within its social imaginary as secular, has to make a case for its ongoing relevance and significance.

One final preliminary point. The discussion here focuses primarily on the UK context because this is my context. A brief overview of the *European Values Study* shows that there are differences between Western European countries and the extent of their Christian belief and practice. In particular, some historically Catholic countries, such as Poland, but also Italy and Ireland, have higher levels of belief and practice than the UK. My defense for focusing on the UK is that, if anything, it makes my hypothesis harder to establish than if it were explored in relation to many of these more Catholic countries because levels of Christian practice and belief are lower in the UK.

The UK is frequently described as a secular country. It would appear to fit easily into Taylor’s second definition of secularity, that is “the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Callum Brown has traced the decline in Christian practices since the 1960s; identifying a decline in Sunday morning church attendance, the numbers who choose to have their children baptized, those electing for Church funerals for their loved ones, and those who serve as priests and ministers in churches.[[6]](#footnote-6) Brown challenges the idea that there has been a steady and constant decline in church attendance beginning in the 19th century. Instead he traces a more wave like pattern, periods of growth in support for the churches interspersed with periods of decline. However, he argues that since the 1960s there has been a period of substantial and possibly fatal decline due, in part, to the changing identity of women. Whereas prior to the 1960s, women were key supporters of Christian practice, regularly taking children to church and encouraging the occasional attendance of their husbands, since the 1960s this pattern has changed. This is because before the 1960s, and especially at the end of the 19th century, the accepted image of a good woman included a notion of personal piety, however since the 1960s, and second wave feminism, the image has changed to a picture of women as more independent, career-oriented and no longer the bearers of cultural traditions like religious practice. Brown is not criticizing this development, rather he is arguing that this substantial cultural shift means the decline in church practice may be longer term than previous fluctuations.[[7]](#footnote-7) Other scholars, like Steve Bruce, have argued that church decline is more closely aligned with the emergence of Modernity and that key features of Modernity, like bureaucratisation, urbanisation, and associated social fragmentation, together with a technological consciousness, create a context, what we have been calling a social imaginary, with which Christianity is incompatible.[[8]](#footnote-8)

There are three critical questions which can be asked of this account of secularism as decline in Christian belief and practice. The first, and major, question is how does such a theory of secularization account for persistent levels of stated belief in God or self-identification as Christian. In the UK, which, as I said, describes itself as a secular country, around 70% of the population affirm a belief in God. In the government’s 2001 official census people were given the option of self-identifying as religious. 72% of the population identified as Christian, with major cities having lower rates, around the mid-60s, whilst some areas of Northern England and North Wales reaching 80% or 4 out of every 5 people calling themselves Christian. In the 2011 census the number of Christians shrank quite dramatically, to 59% on average, with again urban and regional variations. In 2011 the number of people stating they had no religion rose from about 15% to 25%.[[9]](#footnote-9) The reasons for this shift are not clear, and remain contested. It is clear that secular groups in the UK were concerned that the strong showing of Christianity in the 2001 census gave the churches a political status that threatened individual liberty. These groups therefore campaigned quite vigorously in the lead up to the 2011 census to convince people to identify as non-religious. The disputed point is then what impact did this campaigning have on people’s self-identification. It might be that as a result of this vigorous campaign a more accurate picture of declining Christian belief and practice emerged, or it may be that the number of non-religious people in fact reached a maximum, that is the campaign brought out all those ever likely to identify as non-religious. If the former explanation is correct, we can expect further reductions in the 2021 survey; if the latter, then there may be growth in Christian self-identification in 2021. Either way, and we do also need to take account of supporting data from other research sources, it is the case that one of the odd features of UK secular society is that, at the moment, almost two-thirds of people identify themselves as Christian and say they believe in God. In other words, one aspect of the UK social imaginary is a simultaneous self-description as secular and wide-spread stated religious affiliation. Grace Davie has famously described this phenomena as “believing without belonging”, that is people do believe in God, and such belief is reliable and stable, but, for sociological reasons, they no longer practice forms of voluntary association, be they social, political or religious.[[10]](#footnote-10) So churches experience decline in attendance in much the same way that political parties do, as well as community and social clubs. Christian practice is thereby morphing whilst Christian belief stays pretty much the same.

One explanation for the prevalence of the discourse of secularism in the UK, despite such high levels of Christian belief and identity, is to suggest that both the churches and society experience Christian practice to be in decline. It would seem that church attendance rates are around 10%, again depending on where you live, how such figures are measured, and what account is taken of festivals and other special occasions. Whether this figure is low, and indicative of a secular social imaginary, depends on what comparisons are drawn. There are historical periods when such rates would be considered high, for example the early medieval period and the late 18th century.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, the period which most immediately precedes our own is the Victorian era when Christian practice was high, although the Victorians did not believe that to be the case. In 1851, Thomas Mann conducted a major census for the UK Parliament. He found that something in the region of 40-50% of the population attended Church.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is difficult to know the exact figure because the literal head count did not take into consideration things like “twicing”, that is the practice of people going to church twice on a Sunday, often upper class women who went again in the evening to ensure that their servants attended after their day’s work. The key point, however, is that even if the accurate figure is somewhere near the bottom of the scale, around 30-40%, this still represents three to four times as many people attending church as today. In other words, compared with the Victorian era, contemporary church life in the UK looks like it is in major decline. However, if we compare contemporary attendance figures with other eras, then we start to get a sense that the Victorian era itself was exceptional. The missionary activities of the Victorian churches provide further evidence of the exceptional nature of their church life. Driven by fear of social unrest, with increased urbanization, and fear of political revolution, not least as a result of observing revolutionary events in France, the middle-classes dedicated enormous efforts at recruiting people, especially poor people, to churches. It was believed that if people were Christian, then they were less likely to be socially and politically disruptive.[[13]](#footnote-13) Callum Brown analyses these enormous efforts at mission. For example, the production of large quantities of accessible literature and images, pamphlets and tracts, as well as systematic door to door visitations, and the targeting of pubs and theatres. All in order to encourage people, especially the urban working classes, to adopt the Christian life. Brown writes:

From 1796 to 1914, Britain was immersed in the greatest exercise in Christian proselytism this country has ever seen. It focused the individual on personal salvation and ideals of moral behavior and manifestations of outward piety. It reconstructed the local church in its modern form – not a parish state of regulatory courts, church discipline and landowner power, but the congregation as a private club and a parliament of believers. And it spawned the “associational ideal” by which true believers could express their conversion in the assurance shown through commitment to evangelizing work in voluntary organisations.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The Victorians were concerned these efforts were not sufficiently effective, only about half the population were attending churches. But of course compared with today it seems like a huge success leading to large numbers in church. And, in comparison, the contemporary churches look like they are in decline. However, an alternate narrative would be to describe the Victorian era as exceptional, and therefore the contemporary patterns of Christian practice as a reversion to historic norms. These norms are characterized by a minority active Christian population, something around 10%, supported by a much more passive, but still supportive majority, around 50-60% who think of themselves as Christian and believing in God, but not as serious or committed as the 10%. It is something like a political party, and the distinction between those who are committed party workers and those who vote for the same party. That the party workers are the minority does not mean that politics has been abandoned or abolished. Whilst UK churches and society compare themselves with the exceptional Victorians, then the narrative of secularism, understood as declining Christian belief and practice, appears to be the most convincing. However, the persistently high levels of Christian belief, supported by an alternative narrative of reversion in church attendance rather than decline, calls into question the idea that we live in a secular society, or at least one in which Christianity is irrelevant.

If UK society and culture is not to be straightforwardly described as secular, the question emerges, how should it be described? It is clear that it is not Christian, in any medieval or Christendom type sense, so something changed even if what has changed is not the eradication of Christianity. My argument is that what changed at the Enlightenment is technological, the emergence of what we call a scientific mentality, which replaced aspects of popular Christianity, especially the reliance on pilgrimage, ritual and prayer to effect medical cures and protect lives from natural disasters. Alongside this, and more significantly for the argument, what has not changed is the Christian identity of ethics. My intention is to focus in more detail on how Christianity shapes our contemporary ethical discussions, but before that a brief word to indicate that there was a change during the period we call the Enlightenment.

At the Enlightenment a new scientific mentality emerged to compliment the established Christian ethical norms. Two figures exemplify this new scientific mentality, Sir Isaac Newton and Denis Diderot, editor of the famous symbol and vehicle of the Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie*.[[15]](#footnote-15) Newton is perhaps the more significant figure as the champion of the new scientific methodology; one of mathematics, observation, and experiment. Voltaire, who promoted and popularized Newton, described him as the “greatest man who ever lived”. Newton’s new science replaced the metaphysics of Descartes with an inductive empiricism. It led to a technological revolution. Peter Gay has described the Enlightenment as, “the age of academies”, that is “academies of medicine, of agriculture, of literature, each with its prizes, its journals, its well-attended meetings.” Gay goes on,

In the academies and outside of them, in factories and workshops and coffeehouses, intelligence, liberated from the bonds of tradition, often heedless of aesthetic scruples or religious restraints, devoted itself to practical results; it kept in touch with scientists and contributed to technological refinements.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The pace of technological change is illustrated by the number of new patents granted for new discoveries; rising from about 60 per decade between 1660 and 1760 to 325 per decade between 1760 and 1790. A great number of these scientific and intellectual innovations were captured in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, a collection of 17 volumes mainly published between 1750 and 1763. Peter Gay notes the sheer breadth of the subject matter covered in the volumes, exploring as it did the arts and crafts, philosophy, politics, theology and language. But for all this the new science was at its heart. The volumes illustrated, Gay argues, “the recovery of nerve, of the variety, wealth, and energy of eighteenth-century civilization.”[[17]](#footnote-17) It was the handbook of the materialist triumph over metaphysics, the victory of a scientific mentality over the myths and superstitions of the churches, with their magical practices and rituals. There are similarities between what I am describing here and Taylor’s notion of disenchantment, which owes so much to Weber. Taylor is keen to argue that the emergence of a disenchanted humanity is not explained simply by subtraction narratives, that is the removal of religion by a more objective, factual or even truthful science. There is a more complex, in some cases, accidental, interaction of different intellectually dominant narratives which have led to the social imaginary in which humanity can be either enchanted or disenchanted. Taylor’s argument is difficult to pin down, a methodological problem generated by his investigation of such a vast historical canvas. But a repeated theme is that one aspect of the possibility of his notion of secularism is that humanity can discuss politics, society and culture without reference to a concept of the transcendent. What I am calling the scientific mentality and what he refers to as disenchantment makes this possible. However, the mistake would then be to say that therefore Christianity cannot mutate and remain a significant cultural force, albeit its location is now in ethics, rather than technology.

My final discussion, and more substantial point, concerns Christian ethics, and the argument that the dominant Western social imaginary conducts its major ethical debates within the framework of Christian theology. To explore this point, I want to examine the recent work by Larry Siedentop, a political theorist working at Oxford University. In 2014 Siedentop published a new book, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*.[[18]](#footnote-18) This book developed one of the ideas in his previous work, *Democracy in Europe*. Siedentop’s argument can best be summarized in the title of his final chapter, that is, “Dispensing with the Renaissance”. Siedentop wants to challenge the idea that contemporary liberalism, and especially individualism, have their origins in the recovery of ancient Hellenistic ethics, politics and philosophy. He argues that Hellenism was rejected and usurped by medieval Europe, and that what emerged as secular liberalism can be understood as the product of Christianity. To make this case, Siedentop argues three fundamental points. First, there was no individualism, in the contemporary sense, in Hellenistic culture, and the concept of reason was reason understood as the arguments in favour of maintaining a static hierarchical social order. So there has been no contemporary return to these ideas, rather a rejection of them. Second, that Christian ideas of free will and moral choice, beginning with the Christian Apostle Paul, continuing through Augustine of Hippo, and then importantly William of Ockham, enforced by Christian orders of priests, monks and lawyers, have laid the foundation for contemporary secular liberalism. Finally, that the reason secularism is associated with the absence of belief is because of the virulent anti-clericalism that arose from the Wars of Religion and the association of the churches with conservative, hierarchical political orders. My aim is to describe each of these points in turn and evaluate the overall argument at the end.

Siedentop argues that the key to understanding Greek and Roman society and culture is the family. At the head of the family was the father, the *pater familias*, who exercised tyrannical authority over his women and children. It was this aspect of Hellenistic culture that was missed by Enlightenment thinkers because of their anti-clericalism. Siedentop makes the point, when describing Greek and Roman society,

(Evidently) we are a long way from the Enlightenment’s vision of a free, secular spirit dominating antiquity, a world untrammelled by religious authority or priesthood. Driven by anti-clerical convictions, these eighteenth century thinkers failed to notice something important about the Graeco-Roman world. They failed to notice that the ancient family began as a veritable church. It was a church which constrained its members to an extent that can scarcely be exaggerated. The father, representing all his ancestors, was himself a god in preparation. His wife counted only as part of her husband, having ancestors and descendants only through him. The authority of the father as priest and magistrate initially extended even to the right to repudiate or kill his wife as well.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Siedentop’s argument is that the family, with the father supported by the religious *cultus*, is the ontological foundation of the city state and then the Empire. Reason is that thinking which confirms the validity of the static, right-ordering of society; this is how Plato is to be understood. Virtues are the right behavior of those who have assumed the headship role of citizen in the city-state. Enlightenment thinkers failed to understand Greek and Roman society and culture correctly because they viewed it through a lens which had ironically been shaped by the Christianity they thought they were rejecting.

The major part of Siedentop’s book is then taken up with demonstrating how Christian inspired liberalism emerged as a dominant force. What is important about Siedentop’s account is that it integrates key individual thinkers with the social and political changes which produced, developed and sustained their ideas. The account begins with Paul of Tarsus. Siedentop argues that Paul introduces the possibility of the individual; a person with a freedom arising from a moral and religious status separate from his or her position in the family or society. This meant there was an equality, grounded in Christianity, for all, including women, children and slaves. Siedentop argues that Paul, through “his understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection introduced to the world a new picture of reality. It provided an ontological foundation for ‘the individual’, through the promise that humans have access to the deepest reality as individuals rather than merely as members of a group.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The next key figure is Augustine of Hippo who develops a complex analysis of the nature of human will, an analysis which Siedentop believes undermines the rationality which offered intellectual support to the Hellenistic concepts of family, city-state and Empire.[[21]](#footnote-21) Alongside these key thinkers Siedentop also highlights the importance of the Christian martyrs, illustrating so dramatically the role of individual will, of free moral choice, and also the early desert monks, again choosing, as individuals, to commit themselves to a life outside of the city-state.

At the beginning of the third part of his book Siedentop makes the important point:

[I]t would be a folly to suppose that such fundamental changes in mind-set could take place overnight. Centuries would be required for the implications of Christian moral beliefs to be drawn out and clarified – and even more time would pass before long-established social practices or institutions were reshaped by these implications.[[22]](#footnote-22)

This point about the slowness of change is important for two reasons. First, it calls into question whether there has been sufficient time since the Enlightenment for substantial cultural, religious and intellectual change to have occurred. It is not essential to the argument that change must be slow, but it is an interesting aside. Second, and more importantly, it explains the need to examine in some detail the social, political, intellectual and religious shifts that occurred between the early medieval period and the Enlightenment. This Siedentop does. Key points along the route include the emergence of reforming monastic movements, notably the Franciscans and the Dominicans, the rise and fall of the power of the Papacy, the development of canon law, and with it natural law and natural rights, and thereby canon lawyers, the political and religious reforms of Charlemagne, leading up to the climax of the narrative in William of Ockham. Siedentop’s sweep is historically vast, in some ways reminiscent of the alternative narrative of MacIntyre in *After* *Virtue*. At each point the centuries long progression to secular liberalism is traced, significant steps being identified along the way. So Siedentop identifies the emergence of scholasticism in the twelfth century, and the concurrent arrival of universities, as “a decisive transition”. “‘Reason’ (understood as a faculty commanding reality and very unequally distributed in society) was giving way to ‘reason’ (understood as an attribute of individuals who are equally moral agents).”[[23]](#footnote-23) The Papal revolution of this period was in some ways responsible for secularism as we now understand it because, by claiming exclusive authority over spiritual matters, the Papacy left matters of peace keeping and property rights to the ruling aristocratic elites. Fundamental equality before the law was enshrined as a governing principle of the new urban communities. As Siedentop states, “If Christianity declared all men (*sic*) equal in the sight of God, should not they all be equal in the sight of the law? However indistinctly at first, that was the novel idea ‘carried’ by the rapidly growing boroughs.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

Siedentop’s narrative culminates in the ideas of William of Ockham. Siedentop argues that while they would not have understood the issues in contemporary terms, both Duns Scotus and Ockham “put in place the building blocks of modern secularism.” He goes on:

In refining the idea of Christian liberty – separating the idea of freedom from that of justice and making both conditions of morality as well as well as distinguishing rights of ownership from a right to rule – they prepared a revolution in the understanding of the “proper” ground of authority. They moved from an aristocratic towards a democratic idea of authority.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In the subsequent chapter Siedentop develops these points in more detail. Ockham understood human freedom and God’s freedom as “mutually reinforcing characteristics”; humans were created with free rational agency which was necessary for moral choice.

The final point to be mentioned from Siedentop’s work is the straightforward point that the traditional historical account which links the emergence of secular liberalism with the recovery of classical ideas is, in his view, mistaken. Two trends were conflated, the new interest in Antiquity, and the Christian confessional violence of the Wars of Religion. So, Siedentop argues, “Taken together, these trends suggested that the emergent secularism or proto-liberalism had little to do with moral intuitions generated by Christianity, but rather that their inspiration should be located in antiquity and paganism. Suddenly, ‘superstition’ was associated more with the church than with paganism”; a narrative Siedentop had devoted 400 pages to demonstrating was historically inaccurate.[[26]](#footnote-26) Rather, Siedentop wants to argue that “liberalism rests on the moral assumptions provided by Christianity. It preserves Christian ontology without the metaphysics of salvation.”[[27]](#footnote-27) And the danger is that, cut off from its cultural and intellectual roots, it is a plant that will wither and die, unsustained by a vibrant ontology.

This has been a superficial tour of Siedentop’s detailed argument. If Siedentop is correct, then we need to revise our philosophical and historical narrative that posits secularism and liberalism, against Christianity, as opposing intellectual regimes competing for social and cultural dominance. However, before we consider this possibility, there is the substantial prior question of whether Siedentop is correct. There are two means for evaluating Siedentop critically. The first is almost to repeat his work and consider in detail the account Siedentop offers at each stage of the narrative, or at some key moments. This is a vast task, beyond the possibility of being achieved here. Siedentop usually relies upon the work of leading scholars in the field at each historical point. At this stage we are reliant on the gradual work of scholars to confirm or deny aspects of Siedentop’s thesis, but this is a time-consuming process.

A second means of evaluating Siedentop is to consider the implications of his ideas for contemporary debates. In particular, we would need to consider how the analysis that liberalism has its origins in Christian ideas would impact on the tension sometimes posited between individual freedom and Christian belief and practice. This seems a more fruitful avenue to me. In particular Siedentop’s work offers an explanation of why some Christians find an easy compatibility between their liberalism and their faith commitment. It also offers grounds for understanding why liberal ideas are rejected by groups other than Christians, for reasons many Christians would oppose.

However, there is not the space to examine this point in greater depth. My aim in this chapter has been to question the straightforward binary opposition that is sometimes posited between Christianity and secular liberalism. I have done this by focusing on the social imaginary of Western European society. What has come to the fore is a confused picture. First, it is not clear that the changes in church belief and practice since the Victorian era are necessarily best described as a decline in Christianity. An alternative narrative might view such changes as a reversion to more historically normal patterns of belief and practice. This is not to say, however, that nothing changed at the Enlightenment, and I have argued briefly that a new technology, based around what we think of as a scientific mentality emerged in the 18th century. Finally, I have traced Larry Siedentop’s argument that to posit an opposition between Christianity and secular liberalism is to identify with one particular religious and ideological position. Alternative narratives can be constructed which view secular liberalism as a product of Christianity, a coming together of theological positions and social changes, which means that ethical discussions in Western Europe are frequently debates that are internal to Christianity. This argument is difficult to evaluate and in many ways our response depends on prior religious and ideological positions, and the extent to which the narrative fits comfortably on predetermined positions.

1. Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., pp. 171ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brown, Callum, *The Death of Christian Britain*, London: Routledge, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a fuller discussion see Smith, Graeme, *A Short History of Secularism*, London: IB Tauris, 2008, pp. 61-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Bruce, Steve, *God is Dead. Secularization in the West*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Office for National Statistics data and analysis at: http://visual.ons.gov.uk/2011-census-religion/ accessed August 2016. PLEASE GIVE AN EXACT DATE. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Davie, Grace, *Religion in Britain since 1945. Believing without Belonging*, Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Southern, R.W., *Western Society and the Church of the Middle Ages*, London: Penguin, 1970 and Chadwick, Owen, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century*, Cambridge: CUP 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Smith, Graeme, *A Short History of Secularism*, op. cit., p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brown, Callum, *The Death of Christian Britain*, op. cit., p. 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a developed discussion see Smith, Graeme, *A Short History of Secularism*, op. cit., pp. 143-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Gay, Peter, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Science of Freedom, Vol. II*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1996, pp. 9-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Siedentop, Larry, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, London: Penguin Books, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., p. 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p. 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 356. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., p. 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)