Secularisation, Pluralism and the ‘Death’ of Religion - A Nineteenth-Century Conversation (Western Europe) (Geneva, June 22 and 23, 2023)

The international colloquium Secularisation, Pluralism and the ‘Death’ of Religion - A Nineteenth-Century Conversation (Western Europe) was held at the University of Geneva on June 22 and 23, 2023. Organized by Sarah Scholl (University of Geneva) and Géraldine Vaughan (Universities of Rouen and Lille), the event brought together a dozen historians, all specialists in contemporary European Christianity, thanks to funding from the Swiss National Research Fund, the Faculty of Theology of the University of Geneva and the History Research Group of the University of Rouen. They were hosted in Geneva by the chair of the history of Christianity of the Faculty of Theology. The aim of the colloquium was to ask speakers to reinvest their historical sources by deliberately focusing on the nineteenth century; an assertive chronological choice designed to question the now widely accepted idea that the second half of the twentieth century constitutes a key moment in secularisation with a general decline in church membership. According to recent historiography, «the secularising 1960s have become a central focus point, at times oblivious of Christianity’s own invention of secularisation in the long nineteenth century». The symposium therefore sought to take stock of what specialists of the nineteenth century had to say about «secularisation»: its definition but above all its forms and contours. The organizers proposed a paradigm and methodological shift, in order to redefine the concept of «secularisation». «No, we no longer believe in secularisation, either as a master narrative
or even as a major factor in explaining the nineteenth century itself», stated Sarah Scholl in her introduction, borrowing a phrase from David Nash.

The sociological concept of secularisation is not always the most helpful tool when exploring nineteenth century Western European societies. However, the concept does remain useful for describing institutional redefinitions, both of the state and of the churches, and more generally, the changing place of religion in society. A broad definition of the term secularisation might include three trends: religious toleration, together with the growth of religious liberty and pluralism (and thus a more competitive religious market); the progressive separation of churches and state (with the secularisation/laicisation of education and charity); revivals and the more global transformation of religious practices and rituals. The aim of the symposium was therefore to ask the nineteenth century a nineteenth-century question: how did Christianity adapt to pluralism? What was the intimate connection between secularisation and Revivalism? Did state-driven secularisation encourage what has been termed as «reconfessionalization»?

As the British historian Hugh McLeod, one of the speakers, wrote back in his book *Secularisation in Western Europe* (2000): «There are many ways of ‘telling the story’ of religion in Western Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All are to some degree arbitrary». In contemporary religious history, there are at least three different labels given to the nineteenth century: the «secular age»; the «second confessional age»; the «age of revivals». This symposium’s objectives intended to understand how the three labels connected.

During the two days of presentations, the concepts of secularisation, secularist; secularity; dechristianization; laïcité; laïcisme; religious freedom/liberty; tolerance; Säkularismus, Säkularisierung, Laizismus, were at the heart of collective discussions. The speakers, because of their geographical and cultural origins – Britain (Hugh McLeod, David Nash, John Wolffe); Spain (Francisco Javier Ramón Solans); France (Guillaume Cuchet); Belgium (Vincent Genin); Germany (Christina Schrörer); Switzerland (Annelies Lannoy) – and their respective national languages and historiographies, all brought a unique perspective to these concepts. These differences in methods and vocabulary demonstrated, once again, the fundamental need to pool knowledge at international level to better understand historical phenomena and develop concepts. The presentations showed that it is always perilous to confine the concept of secularisation to an overly rigid paradigm: Is it a process? Is it a result or a cause? A narrative principle? A contradictory and ultimately elusive dynamic? A phenomenon specific to a geographical area or one that can be internationalized (at the risk of over-generalizing)?
Vincent Genin («Un désir d’extension du marché religieux en France») explored the demand for religious freedom specific to mid-nineteenth century France, at a time when the concordat system was seen as a system of tolerance, implying state supervision of worship. Annelies Lannoy, in her paper on «‘The Vitandus and the Republic’. Alfred Loisy’s Secularisation of Catholicism and Saccralization of the State» proposed the idea that the partial secularisation of Alfred Loisy’s Catholic beliefs was followed by a profound spiritualization of his religious identity and a congruent sacralization of the secular institutions of the state. Christina Schröer («Réformateurs et objets de culte : scientifique français et allemands au 19e siècle entre religion et sécularité») proposed to tackle the concept of «multiple secularities», showed the importance of observing together the evolution of religious and scientific discourse, with particular attention to possible transfers. John Wolffe chose to explore one year in particular for the British context («1851: Exploring the Balance of the Religious and the Secular at Mid-Century»), thus proposing a method capable of grasping religious issues in all their complexity. 1851 was the year of the only religious census in England. Hugh Mcleod, in his talk entitled «New Paths to Salvation in 19th Century Europe», dwelt for a moment on the phenomenon of «muscular Christianity», reminding the audience that religion actively nourished the English sporting movements of the nineteenth century, and that the sports culture in our contemporary society is not without the influence of Christianity. There emerges a new «religion of sport», which is gradually gaining in autonomy, while at the same time adopting moral values derived from Christianity. David Nash demonstrated how secularisation was fought for by freethinkers («Exploring Agency amongst the agents of Secularisation. The British secular movement – seizing the day or working for the ‘inevitable’»), by insisting on the tactics and tools that they deployed. Francisco Javier Ramón Solans («Echoes of Westphalia. Religious nationalism and the limits of religious freedom in 1869 Spain») reflected on the intersecting issues of religious freedom and Spanish nationalism. Lastly, the relevance of the concept of «secularisation» was once again reconsidered and even criticized, as illustrated by Guillaume Cuchet’s case study («Le ‘culte des morts’: religion du deuil et invention sacrale au 19e siècle»). Exploring the contemporary phenomenon of the cult of the dead in French cemeteries in the nineteenth century, Cuchet described an unprecedented form of the solemn sacralization of cemeteries, graves and the «respect» for the dead – a historical fact that runs counter to a disenchanting historical reading of contemporary societies’ relationship with death.

One of the key points to emerge from the discussions was an assessment of the actual level of Christianity of the nineteenth-century societies under study.
For if one explores the past reality of Christian practice with the help of reports and statistical data (when available), the risk is always to under- or over-estimate the actual levels of religiosity, and thus the depth of secularisation in Western Europe at a given time period. In the same vein, religion, too, needs to be defined if historians are to measure its influence on society – is it best defined with belief, practice or institutionalisation for instance? Similarly, the question arises of the uses to which religion is put in a given society: e.g. social, moral, political, and spiritual. What replaces religion when it loses its predominant role? Another element shared by all participants was the importance of precisely redefining the boundary between the religious and the secular in the nineteenth century. These issues will be furthermore explored in October 2024 at the University of Lille, France.

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