

# The rise of secularization in 19th century



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The secularization of 19th century England was multicausal. Various factors contributed to this process. Among them were post-effects of The Enlightenment namely humanistic philosophy that manifested itself with the spread of deism and Enlightenment aesthetics. Other factors included science and natural theology. Natural theology was the attempt of the church to stave off secularization, but in fact hastened the process. Clearly science was more responsible for the secularization of nineteenth century England than Enlightenment humanistic philosophy. This essay will explore the watershed of natural theology and its demise in nineteenth century England.

Recognizing the intellectual context and environment that existed at the turn of the 19th century helps illuminate why humanistic causes contributed to England's secularization. There was, as Thomas Kuhn states, a "paradigm shift" in society. The industrial revolution led to massive urbanization that often occupied previously religious building for commerce and industry. Cathedrals, abbeys, and churches gradually became merely additional spots in a city and no longer the city centres or primary places of gathering. There was a shift from superstitions and spiritual explanations for different phenomena to physical and reason-based explanations especially between the 17th century before 1660 and the Enlightenment of the 18th century. (155) For example, before this paradigm shift people dealt with the insane via exorcism because their insanity was attributed to Satan. (Brook 1993, 155) Afterwards, new medical elites deemed these practices madness and attributed insanity to non-spiritual causes. Among these events specific

groups formed, which were led by this appeal of rationality over conventional religion such as the aesthetes and deists.

The aesthetes, such as Irish author Oscar Wilde, deists and other groups resented bourgeois society particularly the rigid conservatism, oppressive hypocrisy and suppression of intellectualism of the church. Historians of Victorian intellectual life such as David J. DeLaura have recognized that numerous Victorian atheists and agnostics left the Christian church because they believed Christianity was becoming immoral.

“ The loss of religious faith in such representative early Victorian agnostics as F. W. Newman (John Henry Newman’s brother), and J. A. Froude was not due to the usually suggested reasons of the rise of evolutionary theory in geology and biology. The dominant factor was a growing repugnance toward the ethical implications of what each had been taught to believe as essential Christianity –the doctrines: Original Sin, Reprobation, Baptismal Regeneration, Vicarious Atonement, and Eternal Punishment.” (DeLaura 1969, 13).

Murphy’s journal article *The Ethical Revolt Against Christian Orthodoxy in Early Victorian England* (1955) in *The American Historical Review* explains how it was predominantly ethical rejections of Christian Doctrine that led to the secularization of 19th century England. He presents case studies of three individuals F. W. Newman (1805-97), J. A. Froude (1818-94), and Mary Anne Evans (1819-1880). Murphy explains that contrary to the popular views, that once Darwin and Lyell demonstrated that neither the origin of the earth nor the origin of man according to Genesis was congruent with scientific

discovery that the majority of thinking people became agnostic or atheist, secularization occurred during the Victorian age predominantly due to conflicts between orthodox dogma and meliorist ethical bias of the times. (Murphy 1955, 801) Murphy argues that science did provide important ammunition once the attack on orthodoxy had begun, but it did not produce the attack. The records of these three people leave no trace of having read Lyell and they all had left the church 10-20 years before Origin of Species was published. Newman grows up in a Christian home but later writes a book Phases of Faith where he describes that he is disturbed by the dominant Christian doctrines believing them to be unethical. Newman finds through critical reasoning that the sacrifice of Christ serving as atonement was not logical because attacking the infinite strength of Christ was evading not satisfying justice as Christ was not really harmed. (Murphy 1955, 803) Murphy explains that Froude “ did not waste time on fine points of science or Biblical scholarship, but came straight to the main point: the intolerable ethical primitiveness of the vicari-ous-atonement principle” (808) Froude states the atonement principle’s claim that the guilt of a man’s sin be transferred, even voluntarily, to an innocent Christ is a perversion of justice. Furthermore to then state that a man’s sin is a loss that God suffers by which He would need satisfaction that needed to be paid, without it mattering by whom, is an insult to God’s persona. Finally, Evans deviates from the faith because she believes that it is unethical and untrue that religious faith is a necessary prerequisite to attaining moral excellence. In an article entitled “ Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming” (Westminster Review, October 1855) she writes about Dr. Cumming, a self-righteous admired London preacher to be teaching Christian doctrine found “ to be subversive of true moral

development and therefore positively noxious. " (Evans 1855, 1) Thus, these case studies demonstrate how the secularization of 19th century England occurred due to meliorist rejections of ethical issues found in church doctrine.

However, what even more greatly contributed to the secularization of nineteenth century England was the development of science. " Science was viewed as a vehicle of social and intellectual liberation." (Brooke 1993, 155) Natural Theology attempted to make theological claims about the existence of God by observing nature and drawing conclusions via the design argument instead of making claim's based on God's own self-revelation via scripture. The design argument is proposed by Paley in his work Natural Theology (1802) " There cannot be design without a designer; contrivance without a contriver; order without choice; arrangement, without anything capable of arranging." (12) Paley believes nature is a mechanism, and hence was intelligently designed. He made this connection because he was writing while England was experiencing the Industrial Revolution.

American Philosopher Alston in Perceiving God defines natural theology as " the enterprise of providing support for religious beliefs by starting from premises that neither are nor presuppose any religious beliefs" (Alston, 1991b, p. 289) Natural theology as defence of Christian theology proves fatal. Swiss theologian Barth rejects Natural Theology. He states that this belief causes a bifurcation of knowledge of God into natural knowledge of God and revealed knowledge of the triune God, which is scientifically & theologically intolerable. " Barth argues that unless rational structure [is] bound up with the actual content of the knowledge of God it [becomes] a

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distorting abstraction.”(Torrance, 1970, 128). American philosopher Platinga views Natural Theology as an attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God. This is a problem because it supposes that belief in God rests upon evidential basis. Hence belief in God is not a basic belief and self-evident. Belief in God necessitates being grounded on a more basic belief, but doing this gives the more basic belief greater epistemic status than belief in God. Platinga argues that belief in God is itself basic and does not need justification with references to other beliefs.

Natural theology provided deists and atheists new ammunition to establish their own arguments. If God could be explained exclusively with empirical evidence, then His non-existence could also be explained exclusively with empirical evidence if that evidence could be attributed to another origin. Lyell in his *Principles of Geology* (1830) argues for “ uniformitarianism” stating that the same physical and geological forces observed in the present have been active over a colossal span of time in the past. Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) poses a similar argument along with counter-teleological arguments of natural selection, presenting “ directionality within nature without implying progression or purpose.” (McGrath 2010, 36)

Biologist Thomas Huxley and Physicist John Tyndall make significant contributions in delegitimizing natural theology and using science to secularize England. Huxley debates and rebukes Oxford bishop Wilberforce when Wilberforce denounces Darwin’s evolution theory in their debate of 1860 at the British Association meeting at Oxford. This was but one of many events concerning the clergy’s lost domination of intellectual life in Britain. When the British Association for the Advancement of Science was founded in <https://assignbuster.com/the-rise-of-secularization-in-19th-century/>

1830 clerics composed 30% of its total members. During the period 1831-1865 forty-one clergy were in association. Then in the period 1866-1900 only three remained. (Brooke 1993, 50) “ Between 1660 and 1793 the scientific world established more than 70 official scientific societies (and almost as many private ones) in urban centres as far removed as St. Petersburg and Philadelphia”. (Brooke 1993, 152) Huxley and his colleagues use the conflict thesis of science vs. religion to attack the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. Draper’s *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* (1874) and White’s *History of the Warfare of Science and Theology in Christendom* (1896) made the Conflict thesis well known arguing that it is the nature of science & religion to be in opposition. Draper in his work states, “ The history of Science is not a mere record of isolated discoveries; it is a narrative of the conflict of two contending powers, the expansive force of the human intellect on one side, and the compression arising from [traditional] faith and human interests on the other.” (Draper 1874, vi) Northwestern University History Professor Heyck argues that Victorian scientists “ wanted nothing less than to move science from the periphery to the centre of English life” (Heyck 1982, 87) Tyndall in 1874 gave a speech in Belfast, a very religious city, before the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He argues that science holds greater authority than religion or non-rationalist explanations. In his attack on religion Tyndall upholds rationalism, consistency and scepticism.

Thus, at the close of the 19th century, the concept was cemented into the English psyche that science and religion were in grave conflict and that, as such, science needed to be divorced from religion or non-rationality. Natural

theology had been warped into a new breed of naturalistic science where the observations of nature provided evidence for an evolutionary origin not needing a religious explanation.

Although post-effects of the enlightenment clearly did contribute to the secularization of 19th century England, they were not as significant as the contributions of science. Secularization in England had to do with changing society so that it was no longer under the control or influence of religion. The argument that meliorist objections to the ethical components of Christian Doctrine were the driving force that disempowered the church does not hold. Issues regarding ethics did decrease the membership of churches, but it did not disempower the church like science did. Science through the rise and fall of natural theology gave birth to a whole new generation of figures such as Huxley and Darwin who undermined the role of the church in society. Ethical grievances marginalized specific groups of people such as the aesthetes from the church but it did not remove the church's influence over society to the same degree that scientific development did. The demise of natural theology led to a series of publications and conferences that took away the church's predominant role in the field of science and society. Post enlightenment effects such as questions on ethics acted as a catalyst for secularization, but it did not lead to significantly greater removal of church influence. The enlightenment and science are inextricably linked but the effects science and natural theology had on removing church influence and supremacy in Victorian England caused greater paradigm shifts in society than ethical conflicts as evinced by the sources.



Thus, it is clear that science to a far greater extent led to the secularization of nineteenth century England. The evidence demonstrates that Natural Theology did not strengthen but instead weakened the church. By attempting to demonstrate God's existence and presence by empirical analysis exclusively theologians provided a platform for a new emergence of deism and atheism. Lyell, Darwin, Huxley, and Tyndall acted as catalysts to this process as they used the premises of Natural Theology to draw new conclusions about the origins the earth and living organisms. Draper and White towards the end of the nineteenth century concluded that science and religion had become enemies in their conflict thesis undermining religious activity as non-rational. Post effects of the enlightenment, such as the meliorist objections to the ethics of church doctrine and the emergence of new anti-religious groups such as the aesthetes did contribute to England's secularization but to a lesser extent. Hence, science was the predominant factor in the secularization of England in the 19th century.

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