

‘Priest-wrought and law-protected’? Approaches to the History of Secularism and *Laïcité* in Great Britain

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It is a great honour for me to speak today at one of the most celebrated venues in England, here at Conway Hall. Ever since 1929, when the Ethical Society moved to these premises from South Place in the City of London, this hall has been the spiritual centre of English free-thinking and radical liberalism. Conway Hall is named after Moncure Conway, an American Unitarian pastor, abolitionist and friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Devastated by the outbreak of the American civil war and disillusioned with Unitarianism, Moncure Conway moved to London. He joined what was then known as the South Place Religious Society and found in its discussion of basic ethical principles a new spiritual home. It was under Conway’s leadership that the South Place Religious Society finally in 1888 removed the requirement that its members should believe in God and became an ethical society. Moncure Conway took an immense interest in the British radical tradition, producing a famous biography of Thomas Paine and publishing the first scholarly collected edition of Paine’s works. Another famous radical name which is commemorated here is that of an associate of Conway, Charles Bradlaugh, the foremost atheist and advocate for the establishment of a secular republic in late Victorian Britain. Bradlaugh was the President of the National Secular Society which has its headquarters in this building and continues to campaign for greater division between church and state. Bradlaugh’s name is also of course indelibly associated with that of Annie Besant, the atheist campaigner turned socialist turned theosophist. Besant was introduced to Bradlaugh by Moncure Conway’s wife.

The vibrancy and close-knit character of the British radicalism associated with the names of Paine, Conway, Bradlaugh and Besant is particularly evident here. But there is another connection between these figures which has been little remarked, namely an interest in freemasonry. Thomas Paine, as part of a projected supplement to his deistic tract, *The Age of Reason*, wrote an essay arguing that Freemasonry was a remnant of the ancient sun religion practiced by the Druids. Paine’s essay influenced many British radicals, such as Richard Carlile who went on to take a special interest in Masonic ritual. Paine’s essay was included in Conway’s edition of his writings, while Conway himself lectured on Demonology and English Folklore at the New York Masonic Temple and published articles on Solomon and Solomonic literature. Bradlaugh was the most committed freemason of all, belonging to lodges under both the United Grand Lodge of England and the Grand Orient of France and writing extensively on masonic matters. And of course Annie Besant was largely responsible for the establishment in this country of Co-Masonry, a form of freemasonry admitting both men and women, although in a form which abandoned the largely secularist outlook of the French orders and suffused co-masonry with spirituality.

An engagement with freemasonry is a particular feature of that British radical tradition commemorated in this hall. This engagement – frequently antagonistic, often controversial but always there – has only recently disappeared. The British radical interest in freemasonry relates to a wider theme, the struggle for the establishment of a secular society marked by a division between church and state. In France and elsewhere on continental Europe, the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw a move towards a greater separation between church and state. The French Third Republic gradually asserted itself as a civic space from which religion was firmly

excluded. Eventually, in 1905, a law was passed formally separating the French church and state. The French state was no longer concerned whether a French citizen was catholic, protestant, muslim or atheist – religion was of no consequence. In this process, freemasonry, with its insistence that matters of religion and petty party politics should be put aside in the lodge, played a very important part. But the emergence in France and elsewhere of a civic freemasonry, open even to atheists, led to an increasing divergence with English-speaking freemasons, for whom atheists like Bradlaugh were immoral and untrustworthy, even if they found worthy to be Governors of the Royal Masonic School for Boys. Eventually, in 1878, the Grand Orient of France was excommunicated by the British Grand Lodges for its willingness to countenance the admission of atheists.

The differences in the development of secularism between France and England are reflected in the fact that the French word for this process, *laïcité*, has no exact English equivalent – it is a concept that has failed to cross the Channel. The contrast is expressed in an event which occurs at the beginning of each day in the British parliament. It is the most secret part of parliamentary business; no members of the public are admitted while this ceremony is performed. This mysterious event consists of the Christian prayers which, since at least the end of the sixteenth century, have been recited before the members of each house take their seats. The daily parliamentary prayers are a surprisingly uncontroversial aspect of British parliamentary procedure. There is little support for the view that religion should not feature in the work of the governing body of the nation. Rather, the consensus appears to be that there should be more, not less, religion. A recent proposal by a Muslim Labour MP that a multi-faith prayer room should be provided in the House of Commons was sympathetically considered. The first debate of the Scottish Parliament after its revival in 1999 was on a motion that its sessions should also begin with prayers, which was carried by a large majority.

It is perhaps not surprising that prayers intrude themselves into government in a country where, since the sixteenth century, the monarch has been the Supreme Governor of the Church of England and Defender of the Faith. The Church of England continues to form a prominent aspect of what the nineteenth-century commentator Walter Bagehot called the ‘dignified section’ of the British constitution. 26 bishops of the Church of England sit in the House of Lords, while the government still exercises considerable control over the Church of England. The authority for the form of services used in church ultimately resides in parliament and as recently as 1928 parliament rejected detailed proposals by the Church of England for the revision of the prayer book. However, despite the close relationship between church and state, most commentators would see Britain as a modern secular society; the distinguished historian A. J. P. Taylor commented of the 1928 prayer book crisis that it was an ‘echo of dead themes’ in an England which had already by then ‘ceased to be, in any real sense, a Christian nation’.

Taylor’s view that the relationship between church and state in England is now an issue of minor political significance was apparently confirmed by an event in 1983, when the Socialist leader Tony Benn made a speech in a London church calling for the denationalisation of the church. Benn’s attempt to launch a campaign on this subject created little interest. A leader in *The Times* declared that the issue was ‘of marginal importance to the life of the church and nation’. The apathetic reaction to Tony Benn’s speech contrasts with the furore caused by the comment of Prince Charles in 1994 that the monarch should be a ‘Defender of Faiths’ rather than

‘Defender of the Faith’. Prince Charles was reported as saying that the most important need was that people believed in something, even if it was not christianity. He has subsequently stressed his belief that all religions heal social division and fracture. The contrasting reactions to the speeches of Tony Benn and Prince Charles suggest that the most pressing concern in contemporary British society is not the separation of church and state but rather how a modern state can even-handedly protect and nurture different forms of religious belief. Secularity, for contemporary British politicians, both safeguards, and is safeguarded by, religious plurality.

This British outlook reflects the process by which modern British secularity was achieved during the nineteenth century. Many of the concerns which produced these legislative reforms in England were similar to those which underpinned parallel developments in Europe, namely the demand for free access to such basic human needs as education, health care and burial regardless of religious conviction.

Nevertheless, by contrast with Europe, the nineteenth-century legislative process by which the monopoly of the Church of England was dismantled was piecemeal and spasmodic. This is illustrated by the statutes governing the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In the 1830s, protestant nonconformists could study at Cambridge but not receive degrees; in Oxford, they were not admitted at all. In 1854, protestants of other denominations were permitted to study at Oxford and receive degrees. Two years later, the statutes of Cambridge University were reformed so that nonconformists who had studied there could receive degrees. However, many of the senior positions in both universities continued to be reserved to Church of England clergymen. This anomaly was not resolved until 1871. The *ad hoc* nature of these legislative changes often exacerbated rather than resolved anomalies in the constitutional role of the church. While the Tithe Commutation Act of 1836 reduced protests against one form of payment to the clergy of the established church, all house owners were still required to pay a tax to the church known as the church rate. The Church of England insisted that the church rate was a hallmark of its position as a national church, and the tax was only finally abolished in 1868.

The legislative process by which church and state were disentangled in Britain was driven primarily by the demands of nonconformist and other religious groups for equal legislative treatment - it was the consequence of tension between church and chapel. This partly explains its piecemeal character. In some areas of Britain the Church of England eventually lost its position as the established church, but this was because the majority of the population in those parts of the country subscribed to other churches. In Ireland, disestablishment was an attempt to pacify the catholic population, while in Wales the demand for disestablishment reflected the prominent role of protestant nonconformity in Welsh life. The disestablishment of the Welsh church was bitterly resisted by the Church of England, and delayed until the outbreak of the First World War.

While nonconformists opposed the legislative privileges of the Church of England, they were anxious to retain the generally Christian character of Britain. Although they campaigned against the payment of church rates, they were opposed to the growth of leisure activities on Sundays and were horrified by the South Place Ethical Society’s institution of a series of Sunday evening concerts, which continue to be given in this hall. The act of 1880 permitting the use of non-conformist burial rites allowed Christian services of all types in burial grounds but prohibited the use of anti-Christian services or words. As Edward Norman has observed, ‘For all their appeals to a secular state, the Nonconformists were really only out to end the legal ascendancy

of one denomination over another'. The paradoxes created by a process of secularisation driven by religious pluralism are particularly evident in the controversies surrounding state support for education. Nonconformists on the whole did not advocate a purely secular system of education in state schools, but objected to using public money to support schools run by the Church of England. The compromise struck in 1870 was a dual system whereby state schools would teach a 'common Christianity', while state support for Church of England schools was dependent on a 'conscience clause' which allowed non-conformist parents attending Church of England schools to withdraw their children from religious instruction.

If the appearance of legislative provisions characteristic of a modern secular state in Britain during the nineteenth century was chiefly a response to the demands of religious equality and pluralism, is it appropriate to talk about a process of secularisation at this time? Callum Brown has recently argued that the assumption that the growth of an industrial society in Britain saw a decline of religious belief is based on excessively rigid measures of religious belief and reflects the anxieties of Victorian churchmen rather than the cultural reality. He argues that Victorian Britain was a profoundly religious society, and that Britain was not truly secularised until the 1960s. Other scholars, such as Hugh McLeod, have argued that there was a distinct secularisation of British society between 1870 and 1914, mirroring the process in other European countries such as France, Belgium and Germany. For McLeod, however, this secularisation of British life from 1880 was not so much a product of *laïcité* but of lifestyle. He identifies a number of social changes which helped drive these changes. One was the decline of paternalism. Another was the growth of new leisure activities which offered powerful competition to the churches. Alongside these social and economic changes was the intellectual challenge posed by the impact of new scientific discoveries and the criticism of the bible. This did not necessarily lead to outright freethinking, but, as a number of contemporary commentators observed, there was an increasing unwillingness to accept the dogmatic view of earlier generations and the emergence of a broader and more relativistic view of religion.

While the extent and character of any secularisation in Britain in the late nineteenth century remains controversial, there is one point on which all scholars seem agreed, namely that freethinkers and anti-clerical secularists had a limited impact on the British situation. Although Victorian commentators saw the secularist movement in Britain as a serious threat, subsequent research has suggested that the freethought movement in Britain was small and had limited impact. Even the most active local freethought organisations rarely had more than a hundred members. The period of the greatest success of the National Secular Society coincided with the dramatic battle waged by its president Charles Bradlaugh to be allowed to take a seat in parliament. Bradlaugh was the most influential and controversial advocate of freethought in Victorian Britain. He was born in humble circumstances in the East End of London. He became a Sunday School teacher, but when he asked his local clergyman to explain discrepancies in the bible, he was accused of atheism. Suspended from his Sunday duties, he attended radical meetings and became confirmed in his opposition to Christianity. He was sacked from his job and thrown out by his family. After a spell of military service, he became a solicitor's clerk and in his spare time wrote and campaigned against organised religion. In 1860, Bradlaugh became editor of the *National Reformer*, which he quickly established as the leading journal of secular anti-religious views. Bradlaugh was the first President of the National Secular Society and by his barnstorming speaking tours in the provinces was chiefly responsible for

turning it into a national organisation. From 1874, Bradlaugh formed a close alliance with Annie Besant and together they energetically lectured, wrote and campaigned to establish in Britain a secular republican society, free of established religion and hereditary privilege.

Bradlaugh became a political *cause célèbre* when he was elected as MP for the nonconformist and liberal town of Northampton in 1880. Bradlaugh was under the impression that earlier legislation allowed him to affirm on taking his seat in parliament, rather than swearing an oath on the bible. It was ruled that new members of parliament should take an oath on the bible. Bradlaugh expressed his willingness to do so, but the idea that a notorious atheist should take a sacred oath created outrage and it was ruled that Bradlaugh should not be allowed to take the oath. This precipitated one of the most virulent political controversies of the period. Bradlaugh was repeatedly re-elected by his constituency. At various points it became virtually impossible to get any business through parliament. Eventually in 1885, a new speaker allowed Bradlaugh to take an oath, followed by legislation the following year which allowed MPs to affirm.

It has been suggested that the Bradlaugh case was a political side-show, 'a footnote in constitutional history', but this underestimates the impact of the public controversy at the time. The Bradlaugh case triggered a widespread public debate about the role of religious belief in British political life which was no less impassioned than those which were then convulsing other countries in western Europe. Indeed, it is clear that both Bradlaugh and his opponents saw the controversy over his admission to parliament as analogous to the debates in France about *laïcité*. One of Bradlaugh's opponents pointed to the history of France as a warning of the dangers of godless government, protested against the proposal to build a Channel Tunnel (which Bradlaugh supported), and argued that to admit Bradlaugh to parliament would 'destroy the distinctions between the basis of government in the two countries'. Correspondingly, Bradlaugh insisted that religion had no place in a political assembly.

Bradlaugh was well informed about the debates on *laïcité* in France, Belgium and elsewhere. He had close contacts with the French refugees who fled to Britain after the *coup* of 1851. Bradlaugh was the secretary of a committee which defended the publisher of a pamphlet supporting Count Orsini's attempt to assassinate Napoleon III, and he organised public meetings in support of the French émigré physician, Simon Bernard, who was tried in London for allegedly supplying guns and explosives to Orsini. Bradlaugh was a critical figure in rallying support in Britain for the establishment of the Third Republic in France. He had been a prominent supporter of Garibaldi, and undertook a hazardous journey to Spain to deliver a message of support for republicans there in 1873. Above all, through Simon Bernard, Bradlaugh became a member of a lodge of French freemasons meeting in London. Most of the members of this lodge were French refugees from Napoleon III's regime who, on arrival in England, had sought to join English lodges and had been horrified by the loyalist and religious character of English freemasonry. They wished to create a form of freemasonry in England which was more like French freemasonry: more socially inclusive, less dominated by the clergy, open to freethinkers and willing to campaign on social and religious issues. They formed close links with like-minded lodges in France, Belgium and elsewhere. Following the breach between the Grand Lodges of England and France over the admission of atheists in 1877-8, Bradlaugh used the pages of the *National Reformer* to make the position of French freemasons better understood in England. Bradlaugh's European vision and stature were expressed in

his work in establishing the International Union of Freethinkers founded in Brussels in 1880.

Moreover, Bradlaugh was not an isolated figure. As we have heard, he was the heir to a tradition of English freethought which had its roots in the works of such figures as Thomas Paine and Robert Owen. When he was thrown out of his home as a young man, Bradlaugh was taken in by the common law wife of Richard Carlile, the Devon tin worker who had been the populariser of Thomas Paine's works in England. Carlile was imprisoned in 1819 for reprinting Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, but in a bravura campaign, conducted from his prison room in Dorchester, he managed to defy the government's attempts to prevent the publication of Paine's book and eventually the government gave up trying to ban the work, a key victory in establishing freedom of the press in Britain.

Carlile was also a major influence on George Jacob Holyoake. Holyoake had first been led to question conventional views of religion by his association with Robert Owen and Holyoake's Owenite roots are reflected in the fact that his most influential work was in the promotion of the co-operative movement. Holyoake developed from Owen's ideas a philosophy which he called secularism. While Holyoake was himself an atheist, he argued that secularism should not be taken as implying the existence or otherwise of God. It was a movement for freedom of expression and belief without interference from church or state. Holyoake's friendship with intellectuals such as John Stuart Mill and Harriet Martineau enabled him to promote in educated society the view that Victorian religious pluralism should accommodate those who did not believe in a God. The arrival of European political refugees in London after the events of 1848 and 1851 made Holyoake aware of the European dimensions of secularism.

Even if there was no widespread swell of opinion in support of freethinkers like Carlile, Holyoake and Bradlaugh, they nevertheless made, through their campaigns on such issues as the freedom of the press, fundamental contributions to the process by which during the nineteenth century the legislative monopoly of the Church of England was dismantled. The process of secularisation is a complex one, but one component is certainly the establishment of a legislative framework which allows for freedom of religious belief. As far as Britain is concerned, the contribution of freethinkers such as Carlile and Bradlaugh to such legislative reforms was of central importance. Moreover, the careers of Holyoake and Bradlaugh show that British freethinkers were an important conduit by which the struggle for *laïcité* in countries such as France, Belgium and Italy impinged on reform movements in Britain.

Bradlaugh would have relished the controversy at the beginning of 2006 over the publication of cartoons showing the Prophet Mohammed. An illustration of the contrast between the British and European views of secularity is that, while the cartoons were republished in many countries in continental Europe, in general they were not reproduced by the British media. A curious exception was a Welsh language church publication in which one of the cartoons was used to illustrate an article by the editor of the magazine, the Archdeacon of Bangor, described as a balanced and intelligent discussion of inter-faith relations. The Archdeacon resigned as editor after the Archbishop of Wales issued an apology to the Muslim community in Wales. The Archbishop wrote to all 400 subscribers to the magazine asking them to return their copies so that they could be destroyed.

Bradlaugh, Carlile and Holyoake would have appreciated the irony of an archdeacon who stood up for the freedom of the press being disciplined by an archbishop.

Bradlaugh would doubtless have pointed out that it was Welsh-speaking nonconformists who were in the forefront of the campaign in the nineteenth century to dismantle the constitutional monopoly of the Church of England and who helped forge at that time a new religious establishment in Britain which had religious pluralism as its central tenet. A further irony is that, while this settlement left freethinkers like Bradlaugh beyond the pale, Bradlaugh himself was dependent on nonconformist support in his struggle to take up his seat in parliament.

It is tempting to see the emergence of this religious pluralism in the nineteenth century as distinctive to the British situation. Yet many of the compromises and accommodations made by Bradlaugh were also forced on supporters of *laïcité* in continental Europe. In emphasising the need to protect religious belief of all sorts in British life, commentators like the Prince of Wales are harking back to the idea that a distinctive form of religious pluralism emerged in Britain in the nineteenth century. This not only over-simplifies the British situation and its European context, but also overlooks the important contribution to the British radical tradition of men like Bradlaugh and their connection with wider European movements. If he had been alive today, Bradlaugh would certainly have argued that, in the light of events such as the July 2005 bomb attacks in London or the controversy over the cartoons, the case for more *laïcité* in both Britain and Europe should be revisited.

Contrast Prince Charles's remarks with those of Bradlaugh which I used in the title of this talk: 'Thought is prison-bound, with massive chains of old church-welding; human capacity for progress is hindered, grated in by prison bars, priest-wrought and law-protected; the good wide field of common humanity is over-crowded with the trunks of vast creed frauds, the outgrowth of ancient mythologies ... Atheist, without God, I look to humankind for sympathy, for love, for hope, for effort, for aid'. They are words which nowadays seem even more pressing and relevant. Within this context, Bradlaugh saw freemasonry as playing a fundamental part. Like eighteenth-century freemasons such as John Theophilus Desaguliers, Bradlaugh cherished freemasonry because it set aside religion and sects and focussed on common humanity.

In a pamphlet published in support of the Grand Orient of France, Bradlaugh eloquently expressed his vision of What Freemasonry Is, What It Has Been, and What It Ought To Be: 'True Freemasonry should be of no religion. under the temple roof the strife of creeds should be hushed, work should be the only worship: work for the redemption of long-suffering mankind'.