Chapter Eight

The Last Puritan Age

In his important study of religious life in Britain during the last 200 years, Callum Brown describes the Victorian era as the 'nation's last puritan age'.[1] During the nineteenth century Britain was a 'deeply Christian country', with remarkably high levels of churchgoing and a culture which promoted exceptional standards of individual moral conduct. In this chapter, I shall explore the evidence for this claim. The contemporary story of Church decline stems from comparing twentieth-century churchgoing with that of the Victorian period. This is a comparison between a relatively normal period of Church allegiance, our own time, with one that stands out for its high levels. As such, the story of decline is unavoidable and, if it is assumed the Church's demise will surely follow, unfair.

I shall also examine two further points that inform our understanding of Christian life today and are related to the Victorian period. The first is the failure of atheism. This is demonstrated by the chequered history of secular societies. Secularism as an organized force developed during the nineteenth century. It has not, however, been able to make a major impact on British cultural life. The second is ongoing belief in God. The oft-quoted statistical evidence shows how persistent

belief in God is. What is important about this for my study is twofold. First, we need to be aware that a number of important nineteenth-century thinkers sought to challenge belief in God. Second, there is a close connection between ethics and belief in God. Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the prophets of God's death, argues this point. He suggests that the death of God has led to the collapse of ethical values. In the West, the opposite has happened. Western society combines an ongoing belief in the existence of God with a commitment to thinking and talking in public about ethics. This will lead to the proposition that Christianity in the West is of central importance because we live in what can be called the ethics society. The proposition will then be explored in the final chapter.

Christianity in the Victorian Era

The starting point for my investigation into Christian belief and practice during the Victorian period is the statistical data. I have already mentioned Horace Mann's 1851 Census of Religious Worship, but it bears reiterating. Around about 60 per cent of the population of England, Scotland and Wales were recorded as being in church on census Sunday. To find the absolute number of people in the population who attended church, the figure has to be lowered. This takes account of a large number who went to church twice. Even so, the most conservative estimates suggest at least a third of the population was in church.[2] More generous estimates calculate the figure at between 40 and 50 per cent. This is an exceptionally high figure. It could be even higher if we add to the number those regular attendees who will have missed the census Sunday because of illness or unavoidable commitments.

The majority of those who attended church were women.[3] This had an impact on churchgoing patterns. If the household were wealthy enough to have servants, then the women attended in the morning. Domestics servants and those too poor to have hired help attended in the evening. This was because Sunday lunch was so important. If women had to cook

the meal themselves, then they were unable to attend the mid-morning services. Instead, they went in the evening along with the servants who had been preparing the meal. Brown also argues, against scholars such as Professor Hugh McLeod, that working class attendance was higher than previously thought. The exception to this was the unskilled working classes, although this may have been because they went to unrecorded services such as mid-week worship or irregular religious gatherings.

The question these figures raise is: why were so many people in church? To answer this, we need to take a step back and look at how the evidence of religious practice has been gathered. We shall see that the statistical data provides a very limited picture of religious belief and practice. When we have a fuller picture of what was going on, then we shall see the major effort that was made to attract people to church. But first, we need to start with the question of how religious behaviour is monitored and assessed.

Callum Brown has argued that there is a problem with the way in which Christian belief and practice is measured.[4] The overriding emphasis has been on counting the number of people in church at services. This has the effect of superficially dividing people into one of two polar opposites. People are either churchgoers or they are not. They are either believers or they are not. Such results, and the categories they generate, lack any nuance given the wide variety of people's religious commitments. It is also a highly institutional approach to religion. Attending church becomes the only mode by which people can express their Christian faith. This might be what the Church itself advocates. It may also suit those wishing to study Christian behaviour, since it is a simple means of accumulating hard evidence. But religious life is not so easily reduced to such empirical measures. What figures for church-going tell us is roughly how many people are likely to be in church – week by week or month by month. This is not the same as telling us how much allegiance people feel towards the Church or what importance Christian beliefs have in their

lives. Even if we add figures for baptisms, weddings and funerals or attendance at Sunday school, we still do not get a full picture of belief and practice. For this, a much more subtle approach is required.

Added to this problem is a second dilemma. We need to be suspicious about the people who wanted to measure churchgoing. Gathering the statistics was not a disinterested science. The Victorians who commissioned the studies and gathered the evidence had an agenda which motivated their work. What they sought to do was illustrate a Church in decline. Horace Mann, when presenting his report on church attendance to Parliament, did not celebrate the remarkably high figures.[5] Instead, he spoke of 'the alarming numbers of non-attendants' at church. In particular, he pointed out the absence of working class-people in congregations. He argued that the working classes were as unaware of religious teaching as people in 'heathen countries'. In this, Mann agreed with Thomas Chalmers, who, in 1815, had moved from a rural parish to minister in Glasgow. Chalmers worked vigorously to collect information on churchgoing patterns. From this, he constructed a picture of the godless city. It was an image of the city as a great mass of pagan and heathen humanity. The population, especially the poor, were unchurched and, more worryingly for the dominant social class, dangerously immoral. Chalmers achieved national fame through his study of the religious state of the city. He was mobbed on a visit to London in 1817. His work was almost universally referred to in discussions of churchgoing census material. The heathen city was the dominant myth of the nineteenth century. The studies of churchgoing, not least of which was Horace Mann's, added to this picture.

But why would people want to create alarm about the Christian state of the population? To answer this, we need to look at who was complaining about the low figures. The first and main group were the clergy of the established Church. They felt threatened. They were in danger of losing the power that came with their status. In particular, they feared the rise

of nonconformity. Nonconformist churches were growing and, as the century progressed, their members were being granted full political rights. Church of England clergy saw the rise of nonconformity as a threat to the parish church system. People had the option of leaving the established Church, of going to do their own thing. For parish clergy this was unacceptable. They often equated nonconformity with godlessness. They wanted to draw people back into their congregations and stoking up fears about godlessness would help this aim.

Of lesser concern, but nevertheless prevalent, was the fear that atheism and religious apathy were rising. The number of atheists and secularists never reached the levels or influence of the nonconformists, but they were part of a picture in which clergy could see their standing diminished and their power decline. They needed to start warning people about the perilous state of churchgoing before the situation got any worse.

The second influential group who felt threatened by changing patterns of religious behaviour were local landowners. The Church of the eighteenth century had been closely allied with the land. Clergy gentlemen, not unknown to the novels of Jane Austin, shared the civilized preoccupations and manners of the local gentry. They were often in their employ and frequently taken from their families. The shift of large numbers of people to the cities with the rise of industrialization, combined with the growth of Methodism and other nonconformist churches, alarmed those used to traditional ways. It broke the link between landowner, church and local community. The social hierarchy, physically represented by who sits where in the church, was under threat. The local gentry were not happy with the breakdown of the rituals and rites of the local community, of which church attendance was an important example, if it undermined the deference and obedience they might expect throughout the working week. They themselves would complain about the decline in Christian belief and they would encourage their clergy to do the same.

What was in the interests of both these groups were a set of results which inspired and motivated good Christian people

to redouble their efforts to bring the local heathen back into church. The statistical data provided these results. The numbers counted not only provided a partial assessment of Christian belief and practice, but also set out to confirm a pre-existing picture. This is not to say that results were deliberately falsified, which is most unlikely. But it is to say that when seeking to examine Victorian Christianity, those who were leading the research desired and expected a picture that was pessimistic. A comprehensive account of Christianity was not the factor which motivated the research. It was not the intention to demonstrate the variety of ways in which people lived out their Christian faith. The aim of the research was to show the reduction in importance of the parish church. However, the fears expressed by the clergy and social elite about the Christian life of the urban population were unfounded. There is plenty of evidence of a remarkable amount of Christian belief and practice. In fact, the widespread concern about churchgoing was itself a sign that Christianity had an important role in society. When actual secularization occurred, then it would only be the minority left in church who would care. They, because of their diminished status, would find it hard to draw anyone else in to share their worries.

In response to this problem of measuring belief and practice, Callum Brown employs an alternative to what he describes as the reductionist social science methodology which has dominated debates about secularization. He looks for a wider range of sources which reveal people's religious sensibility. For example, he is interested in what popular literature, novels, magazines and religious tracts tell us about personal beliefs. The testimonies of people in diaries, autobiographies, obituaries and interviews give us a sense of the religious climate of the time. In these testimonies, people report the informal aspects of their religious practices. That is the saying of grace before meals, forms of Sabbath observance and the singing of hymns on a Sunday evening. Alongside this, the publications and utterances of the institutional Church have a place. They will reflect back to the population, and thereby

the researcher, the concerns clerics have about the religious life of the time. The picture generated from such wide-ranging and diffuse evidence will not be as precise as a figure produced by a statistical survey. In some instances, complex or contradictory patterns will emerge. But then our expectation is that people's religious allegiances and beliefs are generally messy. What is being investigated is the multifarious personal, religious and social identity of human beings.[6]

All of which takes me back to the question of why so many people were going to church during the Victorian period. One value of the methodology proposed by Brown is that it accounts for the high levels of churchgoing. What it shows is the importance of a strong religious culture. In a free society people cannot be forced into church. There is a tendency to suppose that people go to church solely because of their private beliefs. That is, someone who believes in God will attend church because it is a logical consequence of their belief. If they do not go to church then their profession is suspect. But this is a simplistic picture of how and why church attendance occurs. A major influence on people will be the social and cultural environment in which they live. This might consist of overt social pressure or it might be the result of an intense religious culture which people find hard to ignore or resist. What we shall see is that the Christian culture of the Victorian period was widespread and enormously influential. It was this diffuse and pervasive culture which shepherded large sections of the population into church. It combined with an enormous evangelizing effort to produce the high levels of churchgoing which was characteristic of the times.

The Godly Life

During the Victorian period, remarkable efforts were made to convert the people of Britain to Christ. The nineteenth century was a time of intense, organized and strategic evangelization. Brown summarizes the situation well:

> 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 behaviour 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 organizations.[7]

There are two points to be noted here. First is Brown's argument that at the beginning of the nineteenth century evangelicalism took the notion of the individual and turned it into the focus for salvation. What this means is that evangelicals prompted the individual to make a personal decision about their faith. This was necessary to be saved. It was not enough to belong to the parish. This choice of salvation was then made manifest in the individual's behaviour. Whether Brown is correct about the timing here is controversial. However, it is not significant for our argument. What is significant is the next point. From the Victorian age onwards, underpinned by the culture of individual salvation, an organized, vigorous effort was made to bring people to church. Alongside this was a concurrent campaign to ensure people were sober, clean, hard-working, faithful in marriage and abstemious out of it. In other words, the reason so many people went to church during the Victorian era was that they were subject to an intense campaign of Christian propaganda. People were urged to live godly lives. The culture in which they lived bombarded them with the message that they must be godly, and to be godly they must be clean, sober and churchgoing.

There were three main tools used to create the culture of godly living. These were the Sunday school, tract distribution

and local visiting. Each of these grew during the Victorian period. They were supported by the committed congregation who would provide the funds and personnel to ensure their successful operation. The congregation was more like a voluntary club eager to attract new members and promote its life. Sunday schools were the first of these three developments in church life. They emerged during the late eighteenth century. The resilience of the schools was remarkable. As late as the mid-twentieth century a majority of children attended schools, and the memories of recent generations' Sundays is one of afternoons in class.

More interesting for our purposes are home visiting and tract distribution. Home visiting developed during the first half of the nineteenth century. Its scope and efforts are stunningly impressive. A number of agencies were employed to do the work. The London City Mission is an example of one major agency:

> In 1863, the London City Mission was reported as having 380 paid agents who closed 203 shops on Sundays. They made 2,012,169 home visits during the year at which the Scriptures were read 579,391 times. They distributed 9,771 copies of the Bible and 2,970,527 tracts, and held 46,126 indoor meetings. They 'induced' 1,483 persons to become communicants of Christian churches, 619 families to begin family worship, and 360 cohabiting couples to marry; and 'saved from ruin' some 619 'fallen ones', presumably women.[8]

This is but one example. The whole operation was enormous. It was also very well planned. The agents would target individuals by age or gender or occupation. They would visit places of 'sin', such as public houses, betting premises and shops open on a Sunday. This required a certain degree of courage or faithfulness. Homes were visited in a systematic manner. Visitors would be assigned streets and houses and were asked to record what they found. This could range from

the clean, friendly and pious to the dirty, drunkard and immoral. The latter can hardly have been pleased to receive the visit. When the visit was successful, then services would be held in the front room, tracts and Bibles distributed, and families encouraged to visit the local church.

The main consequence of this vast visiting programme was to promote Christianity in a way never attempted before or since. Church congregations grew as a result of the efforts of the faithful. Alongside this primary impact, it is worth noting an important side-effect. In a remarkable way the working classes and the poor opened up their homes to the evangelists. This is surprising to contemporary eyes. What it meant was an interaction between different elements of society. Sometimes this was between the pious and the 'fallen'. Sometimes the middle classes or prosperous working classes would be exposed to the lives of the poorest and most destitute. This cannot but have had an impact on the more sensitive of them.

One element of home visiting was the distribution of religious tracts. During the nineteenth century, tract publication and distribution became a vast undertaking. As an illustration, the Drummond Tract Enterprise in Scotland was established in 1848.[9] Within ten years the company had printed more than 200 publications and sold eight million copies. By the start of the First World War there were more than 300 different tracts, as well as novels, short stories, religious poems and children's books.

Tracts were distributed freely to aid conversion. There was a belief that tracts could reach parts of the nation from which even the most committed visitor was debarred. Miss V.M. Skinner distributed texts of scripture to public houses. Tracts were short, usually one piece of paper folded to produce either one, two or four pages. Those who distributed the tracts needed funds to purchase them from publishers. Typically, tracts included a short sermon, an attack on some social or personal evil and an exhortation to improve one's life. Sunday trading, gambling, drinking and 'living immorally' were unsurprising targets for criticism. Also, subjects for condemnation

were dance halls, theatres and ballrooms. These, whilst perhaps not as bad as public houses, were not places of serious moral improvement.

There was advice on how to deliver a tract. It was not appropriate to rush up and thrust a tract at someone before leaving quickly. It was far better to make a casual approach, read the tract oneself and then offer it to the person with a warm recommendation. This could be along the lines of saying that one has read the tract a number of times and believe the stranger may profit from a similar reading. If this was too time-consuming then a bright smile and a warm word, however brief, were the order of the day.

In addition to the short tract, there developed a healthy market for magazines. Novels were normally serialized in magazines. As the century progressed stories became more popular, although they had had a place from the start. Tales were told of those who succumbed to bad ends as a result of immoral lives. Charles Cook visited prisons and used the stories he heard there as a basis for his tales of unfortunate people suffering for their crimes. Equally, the rags-to-riches story, based on hard work and resisting temptation, could teach a valuable moral lesson. Efforts were made to integrate tales of romance and religious improvement or adventure and morality.

What this combination of religious education, improving literature and home visiting achieved was the Christianization of a nation. This was not a matter of getting people to attend church. Even by more generous estimates, one-half of the population was not counted in church on census Sunday. It was instead the creation of a Christian culture. Evangelical Christianity dominated the discussion of what was good and holy behaviour. The social and cultural expectations of what constituted the moral and responsible person were defined by Christianity and in particular evangelical Christianity. This was as true for the Victorian political scene as it was in the local community or the home. This does not mean everyone agreed with the evangelicals. It does not mean everyone went to church or lived a good life. But everyone shared the same

notion of what made up the moral life. If someone did not go to church or observe the Sabbath or drank excessively, then they knew, as did everyone else, that they were sinning in the sight of God and their fellow citizens.

One fascinating product of evangelical Christian culture, and one sign of its social strength, was the development of the idea of the good Christian woman. A good woman was a pillar of moral rectitude. She would be pious, devoted to churchgoing, prayer and the study of scripture. She would be domestic, keeping a well-ordered and clean house. She would be thrifty and hard working, loving towards her children and caring towards her husband. There would never be any questions asked about the propriety of her behaviour with the opposite sex. The moral woman could be assured of the respect of her peers and the rewards in the next life for her piety.

But the moral woman was also constantly under threat. The threat came from the bad man. This might be the drunkard, gambling husband or the wayward son. Poverty and destitution could be caused by the excesses of betting or drinking. A young woman, prior to marriage, might find herself deceived by the immoral suitor. It was the role and duty of the good woman to battle on in the face of the adversity caused by the bad man. It was also her duty to try and save him and bring him to holiness and right living. If all went well, then the man might be reformed and brought around to a life of piety, thrift, hard work and churchgoing.

These images of the good woman confronted by a man in need of redemption were extremely powerful. They pervaded culture and, according to Brown, were a controlling force in women's lives until the 1960s. How was it that they could be so dominant? Brown attributes the force to the extent to which such images were propagated in magazines and tracts. The stories told of heroic women were those of moral rectitude and courage. Obituaries celebrated the lives of women by recounting their deathbed praises of God. Evangelicalism developed a narrative structure, a formula, which controlled how good women were described. The way in which life itself was

discussed was infiltrated by the morality that evangelical Christianity advocated. What is so impressive is the extent to which, in all areas of Victorian society and culture, this notion of morality was normal.

It was in this climate that exceptionally high numbers of people went to church. In light of the pressure this is hardly surprising. In fact, it is more surprising that so many were able to resist the social and cultural pressure. It was a unique operation that defined the times as one of Christian faith and churchgoing.

The Secular Society

It is interesting to note that a further consequence of this intense campaign of Christianization was the emergence of organized secularism. The contemporary usage of the term 'secular' dates from the mid-nineteenth century. In Britain, the Secular Society was founded in 1866 by Charles Bradlaugh.[10] He published a programme for a secular society, as well as conditions for membership, in the 9 September issue of the 'National Reformer'. Two weeks later the society was formed, with Bradlaugh as its President. However, this was not the first use of the term, nor was Bradlaugh the only architect of the movement.

Edward Royle, in his detailed study of British secularism, argues that the important architect of the movement was George Jacob Holyoake.[11] Bradlaugh is the more famous of the Victorian secularists because he was the first President of the national society and because of his well publicized failed attempts to enter Parliament. In 1880, Bradlaugh was elected Member of Parliament for Northampton, but he refused to take the religious Oath of Allegiance which was necessary if he was to take his seat. His constituency was therefore declared vacant and a by-election set up. Bradlaugh won the re-election contest on four occasions. It was only two years after he had entered Parliament in 1886, having taken the Oath, that the law was changed.

George Jacob Holyoake had done much to establish the society which Bradlaugh was to take over. In many ways, Holyoake was Bradlaugh's intellectual and political inferior. But Holyoake had developed the network of regional groups that made up mid-century secularism. These groups had emerged from the failures of the Owenite and Chartist movements. They were politically radical, and early secularism shared the socialist outlook. The disagreement between Bradlaugh and Holyoake was over the question of relations with Christian groups. Holyoake was more willing to work in cooperation with organizations such as the Christian Socialists. Bradlaugh was the more militant atheist. The two men finally split in 1862. Bradlaugh was the stronger and more organized leader who was to command greater support. Some regional groups did remain loyal to Holyoake.

The secularists were never able to grow into a mass movement attracting widespread support. This is not to deny that there were times of popularity at various points during the nineteenth century. Lectures and public meetings by well-known and engaging public speakers could attract large crowds. There was a market for the variety of publications that emerged from the leading members of the group. One of Holyoake's talents was in writing and editorship. But any hope of secularism developing into a mass working-class movement never materialized. Royle estimates that in the very widest sense there might have been about 100,000 sympathizers. Many of these, however, would have been Chartists who were not interested in secularism. The number of those concerned with secularism per se might have been as few as 20,000, and in the difficult years only half this number. The actual number of committed hardcore secularists who usually belonged and engaged with the movement was probably only about 3,000. At its peak in 1880, the National Secular Society had a membership of 6,000.[12] The contemporary position of secularism remains the same. The National Secular Society is a minority organization unable to attract much public attention or a significant number of members.

Royle concludes that secularism has a paradoxical legacy.[13] It never developed into a mass movement. In fact, it could barely be called a movement at all. Its early close links with Chartism probably account for the large numbers attending some of its meetings. Because those actually committed to the cause of secularism never amounted to more than a few thousand, it should be thought of as a small sect rather than a movement. The Secular Society never began to challenge the Church in terms of membership or power. It could never equal its evangelization efforts in money or personnel.

However, the picture is not entirely one of failure. Whilst the organization is small, nevertheless the subject of secularism and the concerns of secularists have often been at the forefront of public attention. Its issues continue to provoke discussion and debate throughout society. This has been the case with the question of blasphemy laws. Schools are another oft revisited area of dispute. It is also apparent that discussions are widespread if the core topic of whether there is a God or not is considered. Royle concludes that, whilst secularists have not been able to organize into an effective movement, nevertheless their desire to promote secularism as a topic for debate in the public square has been a success.

It is beyond the remit of this study to examine why such a paradox exists. It is only necessary to state that consistently a vast majority of people have affirmed their belief in God. Whilst this is the case and the secular organization is atheist, then we should not expect the movement to grow. It could be argued that this is a very simple explanation. The reasons are likely to be more complex than this. It may be that, as some argue, secularism is too dry and intellectual for most people. It lacks a ritual and emotional appeal that will draw people in and hold them. But even if something like this is the case, or another explanation is advanced, nevertheless secularism as a militant organization has not succeeded. This is one good reason to reassess why people continue to call Western society secular. What the failure of the secular movement demonstrates is that the designation 'secular' when applied to

Western society is not meant to describe people's atheist commitments. In fact, what the history of organized secularism reveals, and it is a point confirmed by contemporary secular groups, is that a meaningful description of secularism, if it is meant to apply to Western society, must entail a new definition of the term.

The Death of God

At a popular level, Victorian society was inundated with propaganda about the moral and pious life. The combined effect of home visits and tract distribution achieved their goal of getting large numbers of people to church. At an intellectual level, however, Christianity faced a number of serious challenges. What is interesting is that these developed at a period when Church allegiance was so high. We shall briefly examine some of these challenges before concentrating on the particular issue of the death of God, as proclaimed by Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's work concerns us because of the link he makes between belief in God and ethics.

What is interesting about the intellectual challenges to Christianity which emerged from the nineteenth century is the extent to which the Church has accepted and adopted many of the arguments made. On many occasions, what should have been atheism's killer blow has merely resulted in renewed and reformed Christianity. This shows that Christians take these challenges seriously. But it also shows the resilience of the process of ongoing inculturation described by Wessels.

I shall look at the ideas of Karl Marx and Charles Darwin below. The most dangerous threat to the Church came not from these thinkers, but from the unlikely source of biblical studies. In particular, the work of German scholars, of which the Tübingen School is the most important. Biblical scholars forced the Church to look again at its foundational texts. Scholars found these texts were not to be treated as though they were accurate historical records of the events described. What scholarship revealed was that when Christians read

the Bible they should not regard it as the literal truth. For example, Moses' authorship of the first books of the Old Testament was called into question by the analysis of diverse genres of writing. These came from separate historical periods and cultural and religious backgrounds. The differences in the accounts of the Gospels came to be attributed to the varying motivations and contexts of the writer and his community. Questions were asked about the historical veracity of the miracle stories. All of which was a serious threat to the Church. If the Bible was not an accurate history, then could it be considered true? And if it was not true, then was not Christianity called in to doubt. What is remarkable is that many Christians were happy to accept the work of historical criticism and adapt their interpretation of the meaning of the Bible accordingly. Much of the mainstream Church, particularly liberal Christianity, was prepared to adopt these academic insights and transform its appreciation of Scripture. Of course, some Christians are determined to insist that the Bible should be treated as literal truth. In these cases, inculturation between historical criticism and Christianity has not occurred. But this does not mean a different inculturation is not at work. The point here is that Christianity had the capacity to respond to a major threat to its faith through a historical dissection of its foundation documents and it has survived. In some instances Christians thrived on the challenge. This is a challenge which is ongoing, as more analysis of biblical history and texts occurs.

The Victorian period is also well known for the conflict between science and religion. I have discussed this in relation to Freud in Chapter Two and have already described how Christians, like others in Western society, have adopted a scientific mentality. However, the point also needs to be made in relation to evolution, which, because of the US debate, is a special case. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution called into question the Christian account of creation as recorded in the book of Genesis. In the nineteenth century, Darwin was much ridiculed and attacked. There was also an intellectual response from the Church. Bishop Wilberforce famously challenged the

theory at the 1860 debate at the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Thomas Huxley made the case for evolution.

The debate about evolution has also taken a contemporary form. Richard Dawkins has utilized genetic science as the basis for his attacks on Christian belief. But we can easily agree with Steve Bruce that for most people the details of the theory, in either Darwin's original masterpiece or Dawkins' updating, have not been examined. Most Christians readily accept the theory of evolution as part of the scientific package whose advantages are technological.

The exception to this are those evangelical groups who argue that the theory of evolution has no more scientific grounding than the Genesis accounts of creation. These groups are mainly in the USA and their impact is insignificant in Western Europe. They advocate the teaching of creationism in schools either alongside evolution or instead of it. It could be argued that these groups reveal that Christians do take the detail of the theory of evolution seriously. This is true for a small number. However, even for the majority who support creationism, this comes as part of a socially conservative and anti-liberal package whose importance is not the detail of the debate, but the symbolic value of the stand. For those who want to promote a conservative agenda in the face of what they see as ever-increasing liberal dominance in the USA, then creationism is one belief amongst others such as anti-abortion legislation and same-sex marriage rights that demonstrates their position. In other words, the details of evolution gets caught up in a political campaign. This is not to denigrate the importance of the beliefs. Rather, it is to show that creationism does not mean these groups of evangelical Christians have resisted a scientific mentality.

The relationship between Marxism and Christianity is a second illustration of how the Church can adopt and transform political ideologies. Marxism is an atheist political ideology. Karl Marx's atheism was heavily influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach understood belief in God to be

a human construction. It was a projection of a human ideal onto a notion of the Divine. Feuerbach wanted to switch this process so that the study of theology became a study of humanity. Marx valued Feuerbach's desire to transform religion into an analysis of the human condition. Marx was critical of religious belief; however, he did not underestimate its social power. He argued that it was the way in which humanity expressed and coped with its state of alienation. The idea of human alienation was central to Marx's critique of capitalism and fundamental to his political philosophy. Alienation was the condition that resulted from people's exploitation under capitalism. For humanity to be able to achieve genuine fulfilment and happiness, they needed to abandon those beliefs and systems which created illusionary contentment. They were also to abandon capitalism, which was at the cause of the alienation.

What is important about Marx's ideas is not whether he is right about either religion or capitalism. What is remarkable is that some Christians could take a system which was fundamentally atheist and adopt it for their own purposes. More than this, a number of Christians have argued that Marxist analysis of the oppressive impact of capitalist society is a lesson the Church needs to learn. The Church has been culpable in colluding with capitalism through its support of conservative social orders. They would suggest the Church needs to repent of this past sin. The examples of Marxist theology include the rise of political theology in Germany in the 1960s and the advent of theologies of liberation in the 1970s. Theologies of liberation have been influential in the formation of a number of Christian movements such as Black Theology, Feminist Theology and Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered Theology. Of course, not all Christians have been happy about these developments nor agreed with their main points. Nor have Christians become atheists. But they have adopted the social, economic and political critique within Marxism and adapted their beliefs in light of its analysis. In this they illustrate an age-old process of inculturation which began with

the Early Church and the shift from a Jewish context to the Hellenistic world. Christianity's capacity for self-reformation in light of new ideas and cultures is exceptional.

There seem to be almost no boundaries to this process of inculturation. It should be that by all normal definitions, Christians would be required to reject certain philosophies if they prove entirely incompatible with its beliefs. The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche might be expected to fall into this category. Nietzsche proclaimed the 'death of God'. Christianity is a theist faith which has a notion of a transcendent personal God at its heart. However, even the idea of the death of God was adopted and utilized by some theologians during the 1960s. This was not a precise adoption of Nietzsche; in particular, his ideas on Christian ethics were not employed, nor was the movement long lasting. There are only a few theologians who continue in this vein today, but the inculturation did occur. That it was not an especially influential or substantial movement is testament to the resilience of belief in God amongst a majority of people. The death-of-God theologies were attractive to intellectuals and some who were disillusioned with the Church in its traditional form.

This, however, is not the only reason Nietzsche is important for us. He also illustrates the connection between belief in God and ethics. In the next chapter we shall see how this connection is an ongoing feature of Western society. Nietzsche argued that the death of God entailed the destruction of social values and ethics. He did so through his famous and important parable of the madman. Despite its length, this parable is worth recalling. The parable appeared in *Gay Science*, published in 1882:

> *The Madman.* Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, 'I seek God! I seek God!' As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way

like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? or emigrated? This they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped in their midst and pierced them with his eyes. 'Whither is God?' he cried. 'I shall tell you. We *have killed him* – you and I. All of us are murderers? But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?...What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood of us?...'

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and broke it and went out. 'I come too early,' he said then; 'my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way... – it has not yet reached the ears of man. Lightning and thunder require time, the light of the stars requires time, deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – *and yet they have done it themselves.*' It has been related further that on that same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said to have replied every time, 'What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?'[14]

The parable is an extraordinarily rich tapestry of ideas. Kaufmann has argued that to assume Nietzsche was an atheist because of this parable is to miss its central point. Nietzsche was clearly anti-Christian and the Christian conception of God. But an attack on the Christian God is not the aim of the parable. Nietzsche proclaimed a pessimistic philosophy of nihilism in an age which celebrated the great achievements of humanity. Nietzsche is the madman of the parable and he has come too soon. Humanity is not worried by the death of God, it is a joke. Humanity feels itself equipped to rearrange the cosmos. So the torrent of questions is greeted with stunned silence. All that is left is to appeal to the Christians who must surely be worried that their God has died.

Before the madman realizes that he has come too soon he bombards the traders and shoppers with questions. This is the heart of the parable. What will they do now they no longer have God to support an ethical and moral framework? What values can survive the removal of God? Nietzsche wanted to know how humanity could be ethical if the only end of humanity was itself. The death of God meant that the value of humanity has been diminished. In Kaufmann's words, 'the death of God threatened human life with a complete loss of all significance'.[15]

I have consistently argued that we are not at Nietzsche's nightmare point yet; nor of course will we inevitably go there. In the meantime, what we can see is that just as belief in God remains, so does ethics. The ongoing life of God results in a continuation of a concern with values and morals. Following Nietzsche's analysis, whilst God lives on so will our ability to debate and discuss what constitutes the good life. In other words, the West is an ethics society, a concept we will go on to explore in the next chapter.

The main purpose of this chapter has been to show how the Victorian period was a time of exceptionally high church attendance and support. The nineteenth century was a major peak in the wave-like history of Christianity. The reason for this was the enormous effort at evangelization undertaken by

the Church. I have focused on two prominent tools of evangelization, the home visit and the tract. These were part of a wider culture which brought people into church in great numbers. Alongside the dominance of evangelical Christian culture, we have seen that organized secularism failed to gain a significant foothold in Western culture. The secular societies were a minor part of social life, as they remain to this day. Intellectual ideas have had a more substantial impact on society. But what they reveal is the remarkable ability of Christianity to adopt and transform almost any set of ideas or beliefs. Finally, we have looked at Nietzsche's premature announcement of the death of God. I have argued that Nietzsche was correct in one respect, namely that belief in God runs in conjunction with a concern for ethics. A society that believes in God has ethical questions at its centre. This is the condition of Western secular society, as explored in the final chapter.

Chapter Nine

The Ethics Society

The purpose of this book is to describe the religious identity of Western society. Through my survey of certain points in Christian history, I am reinterpreting what it means to call the West secular. The aim of this chapter is to pull together the analysis and discussion of the previous chapters, so that we end up with a coherent description of Western secular society. The first stage is to summarize my conclusions so far. This will entail revisiting the four key ideas which were outlined in Chapter One. I shall then examine two issues in detail. The first is to ask what it means to talk about liberalism as a Christian way of undertaking ethics. Are we saying merely that liberalism has its origins in Christianity or are we saying that liberal ethics in some way illustrates an ongoing Christian reality? It will be my contention that we need to think of liberalism as a contemporary Christian expression of ethical life. I shall then go on to look at an important criticism of the idea that liberalism and Christianity should be so closely integrated. There are significant and influential theologians who argue that the Church is a corrective to Western liberal society. Liberalism amounts to a self-interested and alienated individualism which fails to offer people a solid notion of what

constitutes the common good. By contrast, the Church is a community which nurtures people in the skills and virtues needed to live the moral life. If this criticism is accurate then the integration of Christianity and liberalism I am exploring would not be possible. So these arguments must be examined carefully. Then in the final section of the chapter I shall bring together the discussion by offering a summary of the religious identity of Western secular society. The title offered for my description of the West is the ethics society.

I began the book with four propositions. It is worth recapping on these propositions to remind ourselves of the point we have so far reached. The first was that Christianity has a history of adopting and transforming indigenous religious cultures. This is especially true when these cultures are so strongly imbedded within local populations that they resist being swept away by the Church. This process of adoption and transformation Anton Wessels calls ongoing inculturation. The consequence of inculturation is that Christianity has a fluid identity. Christianity is in a state of regular change and renewal. An important illustration of the process is the celebration of Easter. In some Northern European countries this has obvious parallels with the festival of the goddess Ostara. The festival celebrations were during springtime and focused on rebirth, fertility and new life. We can assume that as Christianity spread to these countries it was unable to remove the strong local attachment to the goddess. So it adopted the beliefs linked with the goddess' cult and turned them into Christian beliefs. This process will have had the reciprocal effect of altering Christian beliefs. As the process of inculturation is a permanent feature of Christianity, so its identity is constantly in a state of change. One resulting question for the Church is where and how does this inculturation occur today? My answer is that one place to look is the development of liberal ideology in the West.

I then argued that an investigation of the Middle Ages revealed similarities in Christian belief and practice between the medieval period and our own age. The focus of the study

was on popular belief. I found that ordinary people were capable of constructing a set of beliefs which functioned effectively in their lives. In particular, Christianity had a technological function which afforded the hope of medical cures as well as protection from dangerous natural phenomena. So previously blessed candles were lit and placed in windows during thunderstorms; sailors bent coins when caught in storms; and the sick travelled some distance for cures at the shrines of saints. Alongside this, another feature of medieval religion was that many exercised their faith vicariously. They desired other people to be active, engaged Christians on their behalf. They wanted to see a pure, holy Church, but they did not expect or wish to be involved themselves. Saints were the most important group of Christians to whom ordinary people could turn for support. Their good works were the key to divine protection and approval and so their favour needed to be courted. The indulgences system was founded on the excessive holiness of the saints. But this was not the only way in which religion worked vicariously. Some might also pay others to make pilgrimages on their behalf. This was often requested in wills as it was important prior to the moment of divine judgment to have fulfilled all one's holy obligations. I also noted that medieval people were committed to Christian ethics. The 'Seven Works of Mercy' illustrate the importance of ethics. There was a general and significant concern for the poorest people in society. This again could have been functional in that it was seen as a necessary aspect of the requirements of salvation. Or it could have been motivated by a genuine feeling for the suffering of poor people.

My third proposition looked at the events of the Enlightenment. What emerged at the Enlightenment was a scientific mentality. This became the new technology of Western society, replacing Christianity. This scientific mentality remains to the present day. Newton is credited with making the major contribution to this new way of understanding the world. It is an empirical methodology based on mathematics, observation and experiment. It overthrew the Cartesian system

which had previously dominated science. Voltaire was instrumental in promoting Newton's fame through the popularizing of his work. The development of a scientific mentality did not lead to the end of belief in God. Despite the attacks on the Church by Voltaire and others, belief in God did not and has not disappeared. This means most people have a dual mentality. The scientific mentality coexists with an ongoing belief in God. Newton himself led the way. What we have after the Enlightenment, despite strong anti-clericalism, especially in countries such as France, is a dual mentality which is both scientific and also professes some form of theism.

I then examined some conclusions from political theorists who have investigated the historical origins of liberal theory. It was argued that liberalism stems from and is an expression of Christianity. The individualism at the heart of liberalism developed from the Christian idea that we are all children of God. A question remains as to whether this Christian analysis of liberalism is just an historic legacy or whether it has an ongoing contemporary reality. I shall discuss this later in the chapter. The conclusion reached now is that the liberal tradition only makes sense because of its Christian identity.

The fourth and final proposition is that the Victorian era was a time of exceptionally high levels of Christian belief and practice. This was the result of an enormous effort at evangelization by nineteenth-century voluntary societies. They employed a systematic programme of home visiting. This entailed dividing up streets, knocking on doors and recording what was found, be it Christian welcome or heathen rejection. The scheme of home visiting was combined with a major effort to publish Christian literature. A vast number of short tracts were distributed. They contained exhortations to moral living and biblical extracts. Magazines were also published with stories of how the immoral suffered bad ends, whilst the good were rewarded. Obituaries fulfilled the same purpose as the praises of a good woman were sung. The effect of both the visiting and the publication and distribution of so much literature was the Christianization of the nation. It

resulted in large numbers of people attending church. It also led to a dominant Christian culture. This had a particular focus on the religious and cultural identity of women. The image of the good woman was one of cleanliness, thrift, sober living and piety. With the collapse of this image in the 1960s, churchgoing levels declined rapidly.

Any period of Christian history which followed such a comprehensive effort at Christianization was bound to appear to be in decline. However, in fact what we are witnessing today may just be a reversion to more normal levels of Church allegiance and support. Christian belief and practice is now at a level comparable with the medieval period if we allow for local factors. These local factors could include the important social and community role played by some churches in the Middle Ages. This would have led to higher levels of attendance. Or it might have meant an absentee priest or a community without a local church building, and therefore lower levels of attendance than a contemporary church with an active minister. The 'culture wars' in the USA are another example of local factors affecting the prominence of Christian culture and, at the very least, reported numbers of churchgoers. But given the exceptions which take into account these local circumstances, our religious life is similar to the medieval period and considerably different from the Victorian age.

This has led me to describe Christian history as a succession of peaks and troughs. It is something akin to a wave-like history rather than a linear rise or decline. Professor David Martin writes in similar terms in his recent book on secularization.[1] He argues that secularization is not a once and for all 'unilateral process'. Instead, it is better to think 'in terms of successive Christianizations followed or accompanied by recoils'. There were four key moments in Christian history. Martin argues as follows:

> I identify, first, a Catholic Christianization in two versions: the conversion of monarchs (and so of peoples), and the conversion of the urban masses by

> the friars. I then identify a Protestant Christianization in two versions: one seeking to extend the monasticism to all Christian people but effectively corralling them in the nation, and the other realized in the creation of evangelical and Pietist subcultures. This last collapsed quite recently so we are immediately in its wake.[2]

The rite of baptism illustrates the point. At the key points in Christian history, baptism was an initiation into membership of different groupings. So there might be baptism as a right for all and into membership of Christendom, or there might be baptism into the nation or baptism into a denominational subculture. Martin's history of peaks and troughs highlights alternate historical points from our own analysis. This is because of our focus on popular belief and our concentration on the situation in the West, illustrated by religious belief and practice in the UK. But the principle of analysing the historic movement of Christianity in terms of peaks and troughs is the same.

I noted that Friedrich Nietzsche had drawn an explicit link between belief in God and ethical values. The parable of the madman proclaiming the death of God was used by Nietzsche to make his point. If we remove belief in God then we lose the capacity to make ethical judgments. Belief in God sustains the principles and values which underpin society.

Nietzsche's point agrees with my analysis so far. Together with the conclusions from other chapters, it leads us to describe Western society as the ethics society. In this chapter I shall go on to describe what I mean by an ethics society in more detail. In summary, and quite straightforwardly, what I am arguing is that Western society is an ethics society because it is fundamentally preoccupied with ethical questions. The particular manifestation of this preoccupation at the moment is the concern that liberal theory, and its manifestation in Western polity, has led to relativism. That is, liberalism has lost, or never had, an anchoring in a sense of what constitutes good behaviour and now gives permission for individuals to do

whatever they think best. Some Christians condemn liberal society for its lack of moral direction and want to call it back to a notion of the common good. They wish to define an idea of what constitutes good living, which should then shape contemporary society through the example of the Church. This is an attempt to correct the anti-Christian direction taken by important liberals. But if liberalism itself is a manifestation of Christianity then this becomes an internal debate about the process of inculturation with liberalism. It is a theological dispute, albeit one from which doctrinal concerns are absent.

The central question is about the process of inculturation between Christianity and liberalism. Historical analysis of how Christianity moves between different societies and cultures leads to the argument that both these positions are expressions of different types of inculturation. One group is heavily inculturated with liberalism. The other rejects liberal ideology, sometimes despite its protestations to the contrary. The latter group inculturates with anti-liberal theory and polity, most commonly ideas found within pre-modern forms of Christianity. In other words, the choice within the ethics society is what value should be placed on liberal values and norms. I shall argue that a defining characteristic of Western secular society is the popular support for liberal ethics. This is related to belief in God and an expression of Christian identity.

In order to examine the identity of the ethics society, I shall explore two issues. First, I will investigate the already highlighted question of whether Western society's liberalism is a product of an historic Christian legacy or a contemporary expression of Christianity. This is necessary if I am to argue that Christianity has a modern, and inculturated, identity as liberal ethics. Second, I discuss the arguments of those who disagree with my analysis. In particular, I look at those who believe there is an important distinction to be made between Christianity and liberal society.

Liberalism and Christian Ethics

What do I mean when I argue that liberal theory is Christian? Is it simply saying that the early liberal theorists were Christians and therefore liberalism grew out of a Christian context? Or is it an attempt to say more than this? Should we think of liberalism as a form or expression of Christianity? I shall argue that liberalism is the ethical guidance by which most people in the West give substance to their belief in God. People believe in God and seek to be good. Liberalism is the way they achieve the second of these aims.

To begin with, it should be noted that there is a danger that a discussion of the relationship between liberalism and Christianity could get bogged down in ever more detailed definitions. Such a path would not serve the purposes of the book, namely understanding the religious and cultural identity of the West. It is better to proceed by removing any possible confusions and then seeing what can be added to the analysis. The first point to be made is that I am not suggesting that all advocates of liberal theory are recognizably Christian. You do not have to be a Church member, profess a belief in God or be implicitly Christian to be a liberal. It is possible to be liberal and an atheist. If a liberal theorist were atheist then this does not detract from my argument.

Second, not all Christians are liberal. It is possible to be a Christian and committed to authoritarian forms of government and the removal of individual human rights. The Church of England has important exemptions from UK employment legislation as an acknowledgement that its position in regard to a liberal polity is exceptional. The examples from history of an anti-liberal and Christian combination are legion. More than this, the question of whether all Christians are liberals or all liberals are Christians is not one I am trying to address. It does not pertain directly to my argument.

The reasons such qualifications are necessary is that it is very easy to cause offence by appropriating individuals for an identity they wish to reject. However, my aim is not to reach

conclusions about the thought of a few individuals, mainly in the academy. Their work is important and has helped in developing my analysis; but it is not the purpose of the book to highlight some mistake made by those who do not describe themselves as Christian or liberal. What I am seeking to do is to describe the culture which shapes the perspective of the majority. It is the religious identity of the 70 per cent or so who believe in God, but are not formally attached to a church, that I seek to understand and describe. The argument is that the culture which shapes the views of these people can be called Christian. What this entails is changing the definition of what constitutes Christian belief and practice.

The attempt to redefine the boundaries of Christian belief by lowering the threshold goes against recent Church practice. There has been a trend towards setting the standard of Christian identity ever higher. David Martin notes that after the end of Christendom: 'Christians have raised the bar about what it means to be Christian, and so inhibited the take-up.'[3] People have been placed into the secular category because they do not attain the 'virtuoso performance' of the elite. The apathetic middle ground, between committed Christian devotion and militant atheism, has been excluded from the Church. These people are thought of as secular. Evangelicals have done this by stressing the need for genuine experience and a change of life. Catholics have done it by emphasizing the importance of personal devotion and commitment to the Eucharist. This inevitably makes any attempt at re-Christianization all the more difficult. But we could set about shifting the bar. If the qualification for Christian identity was a commitment to the contemporary expression of Christian ethics through liberalism, then many more people would belong. The question is whether we have grounds for describing liberal ethics as Christian and as prevalent in Western society?

One of the difficulties with analysing the prevalence of liberal Christian ethics is that it so pervades our culture that we hardly notice its presence. Liberalism has a taken-for-granted status which means we can miss the enormous influence it has

on our ethical thinking. It is only when we make statements which are not informed by these principles and values that their prevalence becomes apparent.[4] Fortunately, the previously mentioned work by John Gray, *Straw Dogs*, undertakes such a task.[5] If we examine his ideas we get a sense of how influential liberal ethics are.

Gray argues that as a result of Darwin's theory of evolution, we should think of human beings as animals like any other. Darwin has argued, successfully for Gray, that what controls and directs human life is the desire for evolutionary success. In this, humans are just like other animals. The notion that humanity has any sort of special status is a pre-Darwinian myth. The special status of human beings is a Christian doctrine which has been undone by Darwinism.[6] This has a whole series of implications. It is when we examine the implications that we see what a non-liberal society might look like. Gray presents a form of evolutionary nihilism as an alternative to liberalism.

A major tenet of evolutionary nihilism is the idea that the search for truth is a luxury. It serves to protect humanity from the despair that comes from nihilism. It is a strategy which shields human beings from knowing there is no purpose to life beyond the survival of the species for as long as that fits the workings of the Earth. Human beings will abandon such luxuries in times of crisis. Then human aims are to protect their offspring, revenge themselves on their enemies and 'give vent' to their feelings. These are not flaws in humanity. They cannot be changed or improved by science or reason. They are characteristics. They are no more than the logical consequence of recognizing that humans are survival machines.[7]

A second key notion is that morality is a human myth derived from the superstitions of Judaism and Christianity. Again in times of crisis, human beings will not be moral; they will seek to survive. Gray tells the story of Roman Frister to illustrate the point.[8] Frister was raped by a German guard in a Nazi concentration camp. The guard then stole Frister's cap because he knew that if a prisoner appeared on parade without

a cap then they would be shot. This would ensure the crime went unreported. To survive, Frister stole another prisoner's cap. The second prisoner was shot on morning parade. Frister reports his feelings at the moment of execution as not being remorse, shame or guilt. It was delight at being alive, to have survived. Gray's point is that what we think of as morality is suspended in times of crisis. At such times, human nature reveals itself as lawless in the interests of survival.

Gray describes humans as natural killers. He states that 'Genocide is as human as prayer or art'. Humans are not uniquely murderous. Monkeys are violent. If they were equipped with human technology then they may well kill each other in as large a number as humans do. Gray states: 'Humans are weapon-making animals with an unquenchable fondness for killing'.[9] There is of course a lot of evidence of human murder and Gray lists this to support his point. It ranges from the Nazis to Stalin and Rwanda.

The last illustration we shall offer is Gray's discussion of the will. Starting with the philosopher Schopenhauer, Gray argues that there is no such thing as reason.[10] There is only human will, a will to exercise power and to dominate. We employ reason in the service of this will. The notion of reason helps us in our struggles to survive and prosper. But it is not autonomous and it does not lead to the truth. Our will is employed to ensure our evolutionary survival.

The point of listing these examples is not to begin a discussion about evolutionary nihilism. There are of course many philosophers and theologians who would want to argue that Gray misses much that is morally excellent about humanity. They would want to cite illustrations of human generosity and selflessness from throughout history, including of course from the Holocaust. There are also many people who would find Gray's analysis appalling. But our purpose is not to decide whether Gray is correct; rather, it is to show the extent to which liberal values underpin the norms of Western social life. In contemporary Western society, most people believe there is an ethical code which shapes human behaviour. Moral

values are real and important, not a myth or superstition to be dismissed in the interests of survival. They believe society can progress and that such progression is achieved through education and science. The idea of personal and social progression gives meaning to life. They believe human beings are individuals who should take responsibility for their actions. Human actions should be weighed against a moral code. People are not just another species of animal. This moral code allows people to live together in society. And society is itself an illustration of the social nature of humanity. We do not choose to live alone, engaged only in self-interested action. We choose to live together and to help one another. Western society is proud of its compassion and generosity to its own members and people in other countries. This is not a textbook definition of liberalism. But the rejection of Gray, or his description as nihilist, shows how liberal ethics underpin the social and cultural values of Western society.

The significant point in our argument is that this cultural influence is contemporary. To describe humanity in the nihilist way Gray does is to invite widespread criticism. And this refusal to agree with Gray reveals the extent to which most people in the West are informed by the values and principles he wants to reject. What this means is that Christian ethics, as expressed in the values of liberal society, is more than an historical legacy. It is a real and active presence in Western society. The West has its contemporary life shaped by what are identifiably Christian ethical values.

There is one final point of clarification to be made in our discussion about the relationship between Christianity and the ethics of liberal society. It will have been noticed that I am talking about complex areas with a wide range of definitions and long histories. My discussions have been couched in very broad terms. This means a lot of the details of how liberalism evolved and is distinct from humanism have been ignored. There is a question about whether this is legitimate. It may not be sufficiently accurate or detailed enough to talk about liberalism and humanism and Western secular society in the

way I have. In one sense this is a valid criticism. I have not provided evidence to suggest that the notion of freedom of speech or parliamentary democracy is a product of Christian theological thought. There is no direct link made, for example, between the right of association and a doctrine of human sinfulness. It is also true that I have conflated humanism with liberalism. Furthermore, I have talked about Western society as liberal when some argue that it has rejected some of the core features of a fully and properly functioning liberalism.

What I have done instead is write in very general terms about liberal society and liberal values and principles. Likewise, I have done the same for humanism and Christianity. The reason for this is that I am seeking to analyse and discuss the West's popular and general culture. This is not an examination of liberal theory in any of its specific forms. It is instead a narrative about a society which on the whole calls itself liberal. So my broad use of the terms reflect the concern to discuss society as a whole, reflected in what might be thought of as cultural norms. This is a dangerous business in that it will lead to very general impressions. However, its value is that it enables us to think in new and productive ways about Western society. The contention is that generalizations help this discussion.

In the first part of this chapter I have outlined the argument made so far in the book. I have then argued that Western society is influenced by Christian ethics through its acceptance of liberal norms and values. I illustrated the point negatively. That is, I looked at a philosophy which rejected dominant liberal values and principles. This philosophy was so far from what influences and dominates Western society's public discussions that it shows the ongoing importance of Christian liberal values. This point will be disputed by those who argue there is a major distinction between liberal society and the Church. In the next section of the chapter, I shall explore those contrasting views.

Let the Church be the Church

A major criticism of the integrated relationship between Christianity and liberalism that I am proposing comes from those who argue that there is a fundamental clash between the two sets of beliefs. They argue that the role of the Church, and this is its political role, is to stand as an alternative to the dominant liberal political order of Western society. What I am suggesting would prevent this oppositional role because of the way we have merged Christianity and liberal thought. The most influential example of this critical position is the US theologian Professor Stanley Hauerwas. I shall begin by exploring his critique of the Western liberal political order.[11]

The fundamental difference between liberal theory and Christianity, according to Hauerwas, is that Christianity has a notion of what constitutes the good in the moral or ethical life. Liberalism is seen as lacking a substantial description of primary ethical values. In fact, liberalism was developed as an ideology to cope with the plurality of different conceptions of political and religious truth. Liberalism is a method by which this diversity is managed in a society that wants to coexist without overt violent conflict. So liberalism is a set of procedures by which people in society can deal with the problem that they do not have a shared history.[12] It has no philosophical or ethical content beyond the resolution of conflict between self-interested groups and individuals. All that is required is that the individuals or groups consent to be subject to the rules by which the disagreements are resolved.

This puts the individual at the heart of liberal theory. This individual is a self-centred and self-interested being. This does not matter to liberalism as long as the individual will prioritize living alongside other equally self-interested individuals without violence. When interests clash, the self-centred individual must put conflict–resolution procedures above their own selfish concerns. This is what democracy achieves. It is a set of mechanisms for allowing the resolution of conflict without physical violence. Those who condemn democratic politics

would argue that there is verbal and emotional violence in the discussions between opposing groups and that electoral triumph can be akin to victory in war. But the absence of bloodshed is a significant improvement on what went before. This of course does not mean liberal democracies cannot be violent to others; but their internal disputes are resolved in this type of peaceable manner.

Theologians who argue this point critique liberal theorists who attempt to build substantial concepts of what is ethical through procedural mechanisms. For example, Stanley Hauerwas is critical of John Rawls' attempt to construct a concept of justice through the employment of political procedures. What is missing is a full definition of what is good and moral. Rawls offers a sophisticated tool for discerning the nature of justice, known as the 'original position'. There is only space to describe this much discussed and developed mechanism very briefly. In essence, Rawls says that the way to decide what is just is to argue from the perspective that society should be organized so that all individuals and groups are treated fairly. The effects of economic and social advantage should be eliminated. Rawls asks us to imagine that we have to develop the principles by which society is justly ordered without any knowledge of our own social position. This is the original position. The expectation is that the political order developed in this way will not favour any individual or social group. What Hauerwas argues is that this demonstrates the flaws of liberal theory. It reveals how liberalism has a notion of the individual as self-interested and free-floating. That is an individual shorn of any historical location. If we are in Rawls' original position without knowledge of our social status, then we have no individuality. Such a non-historical individual cannot exist of course. It is a cipher. Furthermore, such an individual lacks the self-interested perspective that makes him or her different from other self-interested individuals. This means, and this is the paradox of the procedure according to Hauerwas, that the original position functions by eradicating the individual differences which first made it necessary. Hauerwas expresses the point well himself:

> The recent emphasis on 'justice' in the elegant ethical and political theory elaborated by John Rawls might be taken to indicate that liberalism is capable of a profounder sense of justice than I have described. Without going into the detailed argument necessary to criticize Rawls, his books stands as a testimony to the moral limits of the liberal tradition. For the 'original position' is a stark metaphor for the ahistorical approach of liberal theory, as the self is alienated from its history and simply left with its individual preferences and prejudices. The 'justice' that results from the bargaining game is but the guarantee that my liberty to consume will be fairly limited within the overall distributive shares. To be sure, some concern for the 'most disadvantaged' is built into the system, but not in a manner that qualifies my appropriate concern for self-interest. Missing entirely from Rawls' position is any suggestion that a theory of justice is ultimately dependent on a view of the good; or that justice is as much a category for individuals as for societies. The question is not only how should the shares of any society be distributed equitably, but what bounds should individuals set for themselves if they are to be just.[13]

Hauerwas goes on to state that Rawls has been forced, in the interests of abolishing envy, into ensuring all desires are equal if society is to be just. The irony is that to achieve social justice between competing individuals, the very substance of individuality must be abolished. The point being that without such differences individuals merge into a form of blank collective. Hauerwas argues that not all desires should be treated equally. Those individuals skilled in virtuous living may well have far more just desires than those not so formed.

What is being discussed here is the nature of individualism in liberal society. The question is whether the individual is allowed to believe what they like and do what they want, as

long as it is within the confines of the liberal political order. The alternative to the ahistorical liberal individual is the community which knows what is true and thereby sets limits to what the individual may believe. A liberal individual may construct their own story. A community-based individual is shaped by the community's story.

What Hauerwas has in mind is the Church. The Church so educates and one might say indoctrinates people, if this can be a good thing, that their first instinct is to live ethically. Through the business of community living, prayer, worship, study, involvement in social projects and political campaigns, the outlook of people is fundamentally shaped. They naturally choose the moral path which is an expression of the Christianity which pervades their life. This means the Church's primary role in society is not to join in political campaigns and elections. Rather, the primary role of the Church is to be itself. It means the Church standing as an alternative community to, but within, the liberal political order. Only then can people be formed to live ethically in liberal society. At the heart of the Church's alternative identity is the knowledge that it has a true story about humanity. The Church has a saviour who limits the sovereignty of political and social movements. The Church embodies a notion of what constitutes moral good. This does not mean the Church should reject all social orders or withdraw from engagement with politics. Hauerwas is clear it should not. But it does mean that the Church's first duty is to be faithful to itself. This entails exhibiting a type of community life which is possible when it is trust and not fear which governs individual lives.[14]

There is much in Hauerwas' work that has been subject to intense discussion and criticism. It is not necessary for us to investigate all of these discussions.[15] But we can focus on one alternative to Hauerwas' story of liberalism. By looking at this alternative view, we shall get closer to the heart of the argument. The major proponent of the alternative view is Professor Jeffrey Stout.[16] He argues that there is more to democracy than a mere set of procedures by which otherwise

self-interested individuals seek to coexist. There is a democratic tradition and a set of virtues which shape the democrat's life. What is interesting about Stout's analysis of the democratic tradition is that he gives the procedural convenience of liberalism an ethical substance. It is to this I now turn.

Stout recognizes that some people in liberal societies will hold religious views which will influence significantly the contribution they wish to make to public debates.[17] This is especially true of the US political context from which he writes. But these religious people in liberal society recognize quite pragmatically that their religious motivations and justifications are not shared by everyone else. If they are very pragmatic, they may calculate that their religious views are not shared by a sufficient majority of other people to win whatever discussion is underway. So they present their views in ways which can be agreed with by people who do not share their religious perspective. Thereby, they can achieve a working political alliance. What this means is that the absence of religious language from Western liberal democratic discussion is a practical means of coping with pluralism.

At this point, Stout might seem to be being procedural in his explanation of liberal democracy. But the next point refutes such an analysis. Stout argues that liberal democracy in the USA has a history and a tradition. The value of the tradition is that it can equip citizens with the skills and resources needed to protect and enhance liberal democracy. There are skills to be utilized when living in a democratic society. They are: 'certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain types of actions, events, or persons with admiration, pity, or horror.'[18] What threatens liberal democracy is not an empty individualism, that is an individualism concerned only with people's selfish interests, but the demise of the habits and practices needed to be democratic. Stout's criticism against those who attack liberalism is that, if they are influential like Hauerwas, then they undermine the resilience of the democratic tradition.

What this means is that the individual of the liberal tradition is not a cipher. The liberal individual, who lives in democratic society, is part of a tradition. Furthermore, they are offered certain habits and skills. Hence the liberal individual can be judged as living well or badly under a democratic order and a society may do more or less to be democratic. In this sense, democracy is a liberal moral good.

At the heart of the discussion is the question of a forming tradition. This is the issue which Stout's analysis raises. For Hauerwas, liberalism creates people who have to deny their individuality to be able to have a notion of justice. For Stout, liberalism can lead to skilled democratic practitioners. I have argued that the liberal tradition is an ongoing expression of Christianity, so people influenced by liberalism are in some current form behaving in a Christian manner. Liberalism has substance because it is a contemporary expression of Christianity. Those formed in a liberal political order can be skilled Christian practitioners. The issue is who has a correct understanding of the relationship between Christianity and liberalism.

It might be supposed that the way to address this question is to examine in detail the history of liberalism. This is pos-sible; however, the problem with such an approach is one of perspective. There is such a vast amount of evidence, of differing types, that historians and political theorists could reach competing conclusions. A case either for or against the close connection of liberalism and Christianity could be made from the sources available. There are examples of liberal theorists who seem fully indebted to Christianity, and then there are those who seem to reject fully any Christian influence. Locke and Kant are examples of the first perspective, whilst Mill would be a good illustration of the second. What this means is that it is more profitable to note that how we analyse the relationship stems from our view of Western liberal society. It depends on whether we think contemporary Western society, dominated as it is by liberal ideals, is also Christian. There are those, like Hauerwas, who have clearly rejected the Christian

basis of liberalism. By contrast, I have maintained that Western society displays signs of being significantly shaped by Christian values. My final task is to give some reasons for this view.

The Good Liberal Society

My main contention has been that Western secular society should be thought of as the ethics society. As such, it is a society primarily concerned with ethical issues, and the concern for ethics is discernibly Christian, but I want to argue more than this. Many of the conclusions reached by Western liberal and secular society are recognizably Christian. By this I mean that the situation of marginalized and excluded people cannot be ignored by social and political leaders. This is not an easy case to argue. There is a dilemma of how to speak well of a society which knows itself to be failing. It would in many ways be better not to have to make the case. But the strength of the criticisms made by those who regard liberal society as anti-Christian mean the attempt is necessary. So it is necessary to take the risk of praising that which could be far better. This is the dilemma of the ethics society. It is not meant to lead to political complacency; quite the opposite. The Western liberal political order is capable of good, as well as bad, and so deserves our serious attention.

What we see in Western society is the prominence of an ethical concern in virtually all areas of life. Science produces ethical problems. These arise in medical science, such as the high-profile issues of abortion, stem cell research, human cloning and euthanasia. Western society has not found a shared means of agreeing its stance on these issues, beyond the legal minimums. But it does regard them as of central importance. Science has also identified an ethical problem with regard to the environment. Scientists have analysed the problems of global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer. They have also suggested the means by which humans might change their behaviour to reduce these problems. Again ,we are not

suggesting that these problems have been resolved. What we are saying is that it is a feature of Western society that these issues are of shared public ethical concern.

We can also see in social and political policy a recognition that people shaped by Western culture will not allow the poorest and the oppressed to be deliberately excluded. For example, the question of the most appropriate form of social welfare is a permanent political topic. There are of course differences in priorities. Western Europe is well known for spending greater proportions of public money on state welfare systems than the USA. Many argue that more should be spent and that taxes should be higher. But in no country in the West is it publicly agreed that the plight of the poorest or the sick should not be a concern. Elections cannot be won this way. Often the language of rights will apply as equally to those who are oppressed in society as it will to those who are powerful and wealthy. When relationships break up, the fate of children is seen as paramount.

The West is also prepared to undertake major social reforms because of its ethical commitment to individual rights. So women have an economic, social and political status in contemporary society rarely enjoyed previously in Western social history. The same can be said of Black and Asian people and those in same-sex relationships. The rights language extends to those outside of Western society. There is a real sense that a shared human bond means that when people die of curable diseases or starvation or acts of genocide, then Western citizens expect action from their political leaders. Furthermore, such action is frequently forthcoming because the political leaders know the pressure is real.

At this point it is necessary to stop before my argument is dismissed as naive nonsense. It is rare to celebrate the achievements of Western society. The norm is to criticize the ordering of the West because of its many faults. Racism is still endemic in society. Women are often excluded from the higher echelons of the workplace. Those in same-sex relationships, as well as women and Black and Asian people, experience brutal,

unprovoked violence. The functioning of the democratic polity is hugely dependent on wealth, power and media influence. The West is all too willing to engage in war. I am not denying these painful truths. The argument is not that the West is an ideal, far from it. Nor at this stage can the position of the author be ignored. It is all too easy to celebrate a society in which a high level of contentment has been achieved. Furthermore, it is true that a radical re-ordering of society will benefit many of those who are excluded now. So I do not believe this is the best of all possible worlds. I am not suggesting we all become Leibniz's disciples. But if we decide to end the liberal polity or replace liberalism with an anti-liberal ideology, or theology, then we must be aware of what we will lose. The end of liberal society will only come with a major social cost.

The difficulty experienced here comes from recognizing the tension at the heart of the ethics society. What we are trying to say is that our society is ethical, it has an essential concern for the nature of what constitutes moral good, but it equally has the capacity radically to exclude people from that good. It is a society that can construct itself so that it both exists in a manner preoccupied with being generous to those who are oppressed, whilst also oppressing these people. Does this make it Christian? Of course, it by no means matches the Christian ideal. But if we compare it with the evolutionary nihilism of Gray then it does. Western society does not believe or celebrate the description of humans as killing machines. It does not regard genetic survival as its greatest achievement. It does not act as though morality is a myth or superstition. It may be deceiving itself in these matters, but that is not its culture. The West's ethical discussions and achievements mean it is accurate to describe it as a culture living with a Christian conception of the moral good.

Conclusion

We are now in a position to summarize the religious and cultural identity of Western secular society. The people who

live in contemporary Western secular society have a dual mentality. They are convinced of the functional superiority of the scientific method for resolving technological problems. This forms their commitment to science. But people realize that the scientific methodology cannot address ethical issues. What science allows for is unlimited technological advance. But it has no inbuilt means of deciding that some advances are good and some are wrong. So they fall back on their traditional means of making ethical decisions, namely Christianity.

One of the odd features of secular society is that a majority within it believe in God. What we have been arguing is that this expression of belief is a serious proposition. Christian culture has changed since the Victorian era. It is less dominant and fewer people now attend church in almost all parts of the West. But the Victorian period was exceptional for its high levels of Church allegiance. What has happened is that this fall-off has been described as a decline in Christianity. Against this, I have argued that it is more properly seen as a reversion to more normal levels of religious belief and practice. What is more likely is that Christianity is adapting and changing to the new conditions of post-Victorian Christianity. This new Christian shape has certain distinctive features. People tend to be vicarious in the exercise of their faith. The extent of their Christian knowledge depends on what their particular needs are. And people continue to rely on belief in God and a Christian presence to motivate and inspire their pervasive concern for ethics. These features combine to make up what we have called the ethics society. This is the dominant religious and cultural identity of Western secular society.