

If Romantic Historicism Shaped Modern Fundamentalism, Would that Count as Secularization?

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Abstract

Over the last decade, scholars have been reconsidering the way secularization organizes literary history. This essay suggests that recent advances have depended on a tacit distinction between the institutional and intellectual narratives once fused under the rubric of secularization. It also underlines the value of that distinction through a case study, examining the way dispensational fundamentalism has combined historicism with an anti-secular institutional agenda. Dispensationalism is now best known because of its prominence in the United States, where it spread the doctrine of a pre-tribulational Rapture. But the movement's origins lie in Britain, and its leaders were distinguished by a radically historical approach to the Bible. Edward Irving, for instance, discussed historical criticism with friends S. T. Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, insisted on a contextual interpretation of Scripture, and saw the Gentile church as a provisional institution. Irving's fundamentalist historicism is hard to distinguish from the historicism that critics have identified as a secularizing legacy of Romantic literature. But the social consequences of his views diverged markedly from the consequences associated with historicism in, say, the Broad Church—suggesting that institutional and intellectual aspects of secularization aren't as thoroughly fused as literary historians sometimes assume.

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Critics have often described the figurative and thematic innovations of Romantic-era writers as part of a secularizing process, whereby otherworldly aspirations gradually took on earthly, literary form. M. H. Abrams' well-known account of the internalization of sacred history is only a recent example of a template

This article originally appeared in *European Romantic Review* 21.3 (2010): 327-43.

that was flourishing already in the early nineteenth century. (The phrase “natural supernaturalism” itself, of course, comes from Thomas Carlyle.) Recently, Romanticists have been approaching the rubric of secularization with a new self-consciousness. Efforts to rethink the concept of secularization began in the disciplines of sociology and religious studies several decades ago, and some literary scholars (like Gauri Viswanathan) had already begun to take note of them in the 1990s. But revisionist approaches to secularization have reached British Romantic literature mainly in the last decade, with works like Mark Canuel’s *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing* (2002), William McKelvy’s *English Cult of Literature* (2007), and Colin Jager’s *Book of God* (2007).

In this article I bring new primary sources to bear on the discussion in order to illuminate the Romantic-era origins of dispensational fundamentalism—and especially to highlight the way that movement has depended, from its inception, on a sophisticated form of historicism. My account of fundamentalism also has the ulterior motive of underlining a methodological insight that has been central to literary historians’ recent revisionist work on secularization but hasn’t yet been enthusiastically received by the wider discipline.

The insight that interests me is largely borrowed from the sociology of religion, and especially from José Casanova’s influential book *Public Religion in the Modern World* (1994). Casanova’s central contribution has been to disentangle three different meanings of the word “secularization.” Secularization could mean, first, the hypothesis that religious belief necessarily declines with the advent of modernity. Evidence for secularization in this sense is relatively thin outside of Western Europe. Even there, religious decline seems to be a more recent phenomenon than theorists of secularization have often supposed. In Britain, for instance, church membership seems to have increased during much of the nineteenth century (Brown 145-69).

The second thing secularization might imply is privatization. As Casanova uses the term, “privatization” describes not disestablishment but any change that tends to take belief out of the realm of public debate and make it a personal concern. This is roughly the model of secularization that organizes *Natu-*

ral Supernaturalism: Abrams presents the history of Romanticism as a process that first naturalizes apocalypse as revolutionary aspiration and then internalizes it (after the failure of the French Revolution) as poetic autobiography. In the 1970s, it was easy to see this internalizing process as a microcosm of the broader history of belief in modernity, because religious institutions in industrialized countries appeared to be focusing on the pastoral care of individual believers and renouncing public authority. The history of the last thirty years, however, has shown how risky it can be to extrapolate social trends. The resurgence of the religious right in the U.S. was already plain when Casanova wrote in 1994. Through comparative studies of Latin America, Spain, and Poland, he showed that Evangelical Protestantism was not alone in reasserting its right “to challenge the claims of ... states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative considerations” (5). Events since 1994—in India, for instance, as well as the United States—have only amplified the force of this observation.

Casanova concludes that the changing social role of religion is best described as a process of differentiation—a third meaning of “secularization,” and the one with broadest applicability. Whether faith becomes a private concern or remains central to politics, functions that had previously been combined in the church may be taken up by a range of other institutions—as natural science strives to answer questions once answered by theology, for instance, and the nation-state begins to operate its own nondenominational schools. Instead of organizing the whole social world into “secular” and “sacred” spheres, religion becomes one specialized institution among others. Although a similar concept of differentiation dates back to Max Weber, the concept isn’t clearly distinguished from privatization either in Weber himself or in successors like Talcott Parsons and Thomas Luckmann. Casanova’s contribution has been to disentangle institutional differentiation from a privatization of religious belief. The fact that institutions have specialized needn’t imply that they have quietly accepted a private role serving the spiritual needs of the modern individual. Modern religions have continued to claim a central role in public life, not because the hypothesis of secularization was invalid, but because the best-documented kind of secularization

(institutional differentiation) hasn't been coupled as tightly as historians once assumed with a transformation of belief into private spirituality.

The Romanticists who have been rethinking secularization over the last eight years have learned a number of things from the sociology of religion—but most importantly, in my view, they have learned to let go of the assumption that the structural transformation of institutions comes coupled with specific changes in the content of belief. There are certainly passages in recent work, for instance in Colin Jager's *Book of God*, where Casanova's account of institutional differentiation is directly invoked as a model for literary history (38-39). But the influence of sociology can be felt more pervasively in a certain methodological agnosticism, which has allowed scholars to explore the literary history of religion's public role without mapping it onto the rise, or disappearance, of specific intellectual premises. In Mark Canuel's work this methodology may owe as much to Foucault as it does to the sociology of religion, but it has in any case permitted advances that parallel Casanova: in particular, it allows Canuel to show that "toleration," as a social practice, didn't necessarily make religious belief itself less central to public life (268). William McKelvy's *English Cult of Literature* makes an even more self-conscious separation between institutional change and the content of belief. McKelvy defines secularization narrowly as "a political and legal process that leads to the state relinquishing opinions on theological subjects," and explicitly separates that process from changes in belief itself, which are less central to his argument (28-29). McKelvy's definition is not identical to Casanova's, since it emphasizes the state more than other institutions, but the crucial innovation, which he shares with several other scholars, is simply a willingness to separate the institutional and intellectual dimensions of religious change.

The potential fragility of this innovation will become clear, I think, as soon as one asks how recent scholarship on religion in Romantic writing should be related to the classic theses of the 1960s and 1970s. Few scholars are arguing that recent work invalidates the older, more belief-centered approach of books like *Natural Supernaturalism*, and I think it's very unlikely that those older works

will be ignored. So some mode of coexistence clearly needs to be defined. The easiest solution would be to understand these bodies of scholarship as describing different (intellectual and social) aspects of a single process. Recent work on legal toleration, for instance, might be understood as fleshing out the political implications of the historical “toleration” (and formal syncretism) that E. S. Shaffer explored in *“Kubla Khan” and the Fall of Jerusalem*.

The problem with that approach is that it betrays Casanova’s insight, by slipping back into the assumption that institutional history and the history of belief are two sides of a single coin. To be sure, intellectual and social history are always entwined, and partly fused. But when a single word like “secularization” is used to describe a transformation at once of beliefs and of institutions, it assumes a stronger sort of fusion, one that posits the same concepts as organizing categories of intellectual and institutional change. The crucial innovation of recent scholarship, in my view, has been its willingness to bracket that assumption, leaving open the possibility that these processes, though connected, might require different kinds of analysis. But I don’t yet perceive widespread enthusiasm for this innovation, and I’m concerned that it could be easy to overlook.

One reason why the theme of secularization has been so central to literary study, after all, is that it permits scholars to coordinate the social and intellectual aspects of their research projects. A work like J. Hillis Miller’s *Disappearance of God* (1963), for instance, organized nineteenth-century literature around the rubric of secularization explicitly to show how, in literature, “the industrialization and urbanization of man” are fused with “other more spiritual transformations”—notably the rise of “historicism” itself (5). Most literary histories of secularization in the 1960s and 1970s implied a similar equation between intellectual and institutional change; the equation naturally appeals to literary historians, since it makes literature a reliable index of social modernity as a whole. More recently, Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007) has used the concept of secularization to accomplish something similar for philosophy. Taylor attends to the social role of religion in thoughtful ways, but the thesis and structure of his book explicitly organize the history of religion’s social role around

changing “conditions of belief” (3). I don’t mean to imply that this project is invalid, or even that it’s necessarily idealist: over the long haul (and Taylor’s book covers millennia), it may be useful to treat institutions and ideas as effectively fused. My point is simply that the concept of secularization has facilitated this sort of fusion for so long that works which resist it may not seem to tell us anything important about secularization.

In what follows, I suggest that the unity of the word “secularization” is more verbal than substantive; different accounts of secularization are often describing different processes, which have only loosely paralleled each other. We needn’t ignore *Natural Supernaturalism*, in other words, but we shouldn’t assume that its organizing concepts can be mapped onto the history of religious institutions. In a sense this is a version of Casanova’s thesis, but in an effort to address literary historians more directly, I’d like to turn his argument upside down. Casanova contended that a demonstrable social change (the differentiation of institutions) hadn’t reliably produced the ideological effect often ascribed to it (the privatization of religious belief). I’d like to emphasize a converse proposition: the habits of thought that literary historians identify as secular haven’t correlated as closely as we suppose with the social changes we call “secularization.” Our impression that these processes dovetail has been based on a selective picture of nineteenth-century religious history.

It’s true, for instance, that historical criticism of Scripture, transmitted through Coleridge and Thomas Arnold, helped to shape a liberal religious movement (sometimes called the Broad Church) that urged the Church of England to accommodate itself to modern social and intellectual conditions. In part because of this connection to the Broad Church, historicism has often been considered (for instance, in the works I have already mentioned by J. Hillis Miller and E. S. Shaffer) the heart of the secularizing legacy of Romantic literature. Familiarity with this nineteenth-century narrative has also led scholars of later periods to assume that secularism and historicism go hand in hand. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, associates the two concepts so closely that he can casually contrast “secularist-historicist” approaches to “nonsecularist and nonhistoricist takes on

the world” (21). But this association can be misleading. To show why, I’d like to supplement the well-known story that passes from Coleridge through Thomas Arnold to the Broad Church with another story that passes from Coleridge through his friend Edward Irving to dispensational fundamentalism. Historicism is the central theme of both stories; in both stories, scholars realize that the Bible has adapted its message to different historical circumstances and conclude that the Gentile church itself may be a way station in an unfinished process rather than a permanent and universal institution. In short, the tradition of dispensational theology that took shape in Britain in the 1820s overlapped with the hermeneutic tradition that produced the Broad Church precisely because it shared the emphasis on historical context that has long seemed to constitute the covertly secularizing impulse of the latter movement.

But the social attitudes and religious practices associated with these two traditions have been diametrically opposed. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dispensational theology provided the intellectual framework for some of the most conservative forms of Christian fundamentalism. Dispensationalists have often taken a dark view of political reform, seeing it as part of “the general shaking and crumbling of social order” that heralds the approaching end of the Gentile dispensation (Seiss 296). It’s largely to them that we owe the doctrine of a pre-tribulational Rapture, the modern creationist movement, and the *Left Behind* novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Very few people would ordinarily consider dispensational theology a secularizing force. And yet, I want to argue, the appeal of dispensational theology has depended, and continues to depend, on historicist assumptions that critics characterize as latently secular when they appear in Romantic-era writers. My point is not that historicism, or fundamentalism, are peculiarly paradoxical concepts—but that the habit of fusing intellectual and institutional change in a single word, “secularization,” reliably produces apparent paradoxes. The advances of recent scholarship have depended on a provisional distinction between secularization (best understood as a process of institutional differentiation) and secularism (an intellectual or political outlook that can be defined in a range of different ways). This can be a frustrating

distinction, because it blocks the implied connection between ideas and institutions that has made “secularization” such a useful word. But it’s a necessary distinction, at least for scholars who are measuring time in years and decades rather than centuries. Setting methodological questions aside, I also hope the case study that follows has some interest in its own right. The emergence of dispensational fundamentalism is a colorful and little-discussed aspect of Romantic literary history that continues to resonate loudly in the United States.

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On the first day of Advent, 1826, twenty-five men met at Albury Park, the Surrey estate of Henry Drummond, M.P, “to deliberate for a full week upon the great prophetic questions which at present do most instantly concern Christendom” (Irving, “Preliminary Discourse” clxxxvii). This meeting was the first of five “Albury Conferences,” which launched a religious movement known as dispensationalism. Because a dispensational interpretation of the Bible continues to flourish in the United States, where it shapes the theological assumptions of most Protestant fundamentalists (including many Baptists and Pentecostals as well as members of nondenominational churches), it is widely perceived as a home-grown American product. But in fact dispensational theology assumed something close to its present form in Britain, in the 1820s and 1830s. The Irish minister John Nelson Darby probably deserves most credit for disseminating dispensationalist ideas in America. In the 1830s he formulated the doctrine of a pre-tribulational Rapture, which may be the most celebrated feature of dispensational belief (Sandeen 3-41). The central innovation of dispensational theology was not the Rapture, however, but its new view of the Christian church as a limited and temporary “dispensation” in the broader history of salvation (Bass). This view of church history took shape before Darby developed his doctrine of the Rapture. It can be traced back to the Albury Conferences in the latter half of the 1820s. The people in attendance at Albury included clergy of the Church of England, as well as Dissenting and Presbyterian ministers, and Joseph Wolff,

a German Jew who later traveled the world in search of the ten lost tribes, hoping to convert them to Christianity (Miller 1: 40-41). But to Romanticists, the most interesting of the people in attendance at this meeting may be Edward Irving. Irving had known Thomas Carlyle since the two men were schoolmasters in the same small Scottish town. By the middle of the 1820s, Irving was both a famously eloquent minister of the Church of Scotland (meriting a chapter in Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age*) and one of S. T. Coleridge's frequent dinner companions (Drummond 24-57). Irving would eventually be expelled from the Church of Scotland, founding the Catholic Apostolic Church, a dispensationalist sect that spread to Canada and the U.S., surviving into the early twentieth century, and retaining fascinating vestiges of Coleridge's theory of the imagination as a central part of its ministry. In 1827, Irving summarized the conclusions of the first Albury Conference in a text that is at once a characteristic example of Coleridge's influence on young thinkers in the 1820s and a seminal document in the history of modern fundamentalism.

This text might have received more attention from literary historians if it weren't hidden away as a long "preliminary discourse" to Irving's translation of *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, a text written in the 1790s by the Spanish Jesuit Manuel de Lacunza. Lacunza's significance for Irving seems to have sprung specifically from his novel views about the Jewish character of the millennial kingdom. As I'll explain in a moment, new ideas about the destiny of the Jewish people had been germinating for several decades in England. Lacunza was less an influence on Irving than a piece of evidence allowing him to claim that candid minds from every nation and mode of Christian communion were converging on these new ideas. In his 191-page introduction to Lacunza's work, he reinforces the point by describing the recent Albury conference as a providential meeting of minds, where representatives "of different churches and of different countries" found surprising agreement on a few grand principles:

We believed in common that the present form of the dispensation of the gospel was for a time commensurate with the times of the

Gentiles and of the Jews' dispersion; that the restoration of the Jews would introduce altogether a new era into the church and the world, which might be called the universal dispensation of the benefits of Christ's death, while this is the dispensation to the church only, which is few compared with the whole. (clxxxix)

This sentence sums up the reversal that centrally distinguishes dispensational theology from the Christian traditions that had preceded it. Dispensational theology derives its name from its insistence on dividing history into many distinct “dispensations”—discrete periods of time “during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God” (Scofield 5). But the general idea of distinguishing between dispensations was not, in itself, an innovation. Similarly fine-grained distinctions between “Noachial,” “Abrahamic,” “Mosaic,” and “Christian” dispensations can be found as early, for instance, as John Edwards’ *Polpoikilos Sophia* (1699). What distinguishes nineteenth-century dispensational theology from these earlier traditions is its assertion that the present form of Christianity is neither the last, nor the most universal, of the dispensations. Preachers like Irving and Darby taught their followers instead to expect that a Jewish kingdom, established in the millennium, would supersede the Gentile church. By comparison to this Jewish kingdom, the church was a narrow and provisional institution, serving, in Irving’s words, “few compared with the whole.”

Ever since the Reformation, English Protestants had possessed a robust tradition of projection onto the Jewish people. Early-seventeenth-century Englishmen like Thomas Brightman gave the Jews a newly positive role in Christian eschatology, predicting that the apocalypse would begin with their conversion and return to the Holy Land. The widely-shared assumption that God’s promises to “Israel” had been inherited by the Christian Church was often interpreted by radical Protestants as an equation between Israel and the Church. During the Civil War, for instance, some Puritans adopted circumcision, and Fifth Monarchists called for the restoration of Mosaic law (Endelman 50-67). Dispensational

theology inherits this tradition of “English philosemitism” (in Todd Endelman’s phrase) but reverses its central premise by insisting that God’s promises to Israel cannot be superseded by, or subsumed in, the Gentile Church. The covenants originally established with a Jewish nation must be fulfilled for a Jewish nation. Nor will the restoration of Jews to the Holy Land merely trigger a Gentile millennium; rather, the millennium will consist of a restoration of the Jewish kingdom originally promised to the descendants of Abraham. Christ will “sit on the throne of David as King of Israel,” and “the restored Jewish nation shall have national pre-eminence in the earth” (Way 50; M’Neile 2: 114). I don’t mean to interpret these new ideas about the Jews as signs of a new humility or tolerance; the Christian habit of framing the Church as heavenly spirit to Israel’s earthly body is still alive and well in dispensational theology. Indeed, Darby’s doctrine of the Rapture—which takes the Christian church directly to heaven before the Jewish dispensation begins on earth—is best understood as an attempt to reconcile Christian claims to spiritual superiority with an earthly history of salvation recentered on the Jews. My point isn’t that Darby’s theology is humble, but that its claims to superiority have become oddly dependent on a claim about Christianity’s provisional, limited, and contingent character. Darby regarded the Christian church as an “instructive parenthesis [which] forms no part of the regular order of God’s earthly plans”—a sublime, Gentile “interruption” in a fundamentally Jewish story, made necessary only because the Jewish people initially rejected Christ’s offer of kingship (Darby 1: 146).

I don’t think many observers have appreciated the peculiarly modern character of these beliefs. It serves no one’s polemical purposes, after all, to call them modern. People who belong to a dispensational church seek to identify their beliefs with primitive Christianity. Meanwhile, critics train their fire on the belief in literal prophetic accuracy that makes dispensationalism appear “primitive” in a less flattering sense of the word. But dispensationalism is not primitive in either of those senses. It departs from pre-nineteenth-century Christian tradition in a number of striking ways, but especially by teaching that the Gentile church itself is a provisional and limited institution, destined to be superseded

by something more universal. This is an odd prediction for fundamentalists to celebrate. After all, one of the basic functions of religion—if we believe Emile Durkheim—is to dramatize “the continuity of collective life” (272). Though the scandal of historical change has always been difficult to avoid in a religion whose scriptures are divided into “Old” and “New” Testaments, early-modern Christian theology had tried to minimize the appearance of disunity in the canon by arguing that Christianity incorporated all earlier dispensations, and left no room for a new one. *Polpoikilos Sophia*, for instance, is careful to observe that “Christianity comprehends all the other Dispensations, and is the Upshot of them all” (307). Christian belief that represents itself as a sublime digression in a longer, unfinished story is an early-nineteenth-century innovation—and an innovation, I’d like to suggest, that could only appeal to an era already saturated with historicism.

Since “historicism” is a word with two or three different senses, I should stress that I’m talking specifically about the insight that even basic concepts and apparently universal standards change from one era to the next. This insight can be traced back at least to the seventeenth century; what’s new in the early nineteenth century is less the proposition itself than a widely shared level of comfort with its entailed paradoxes. Coleridge, for instance, was not breaking new ground when he acknowledged that “in every age the speculative Philosophy in general acceptance, the metaphysical opinions that happen to be predominant, will influence the Theology of that age.” But he responds to the problem in a manner characteristic of his era when he embraces “the translucence of the Eternal in and through the Temporal,” instead of attempting to locate the eternal by factoring out all transitory influences (*Lay Sermons* 103, 30).

The paradoxes of Romantic historicism are more often acknowledged in passing than formulated as explicit doctrine. In the tongue-in-cheek Dedication to *Peter Bell the Third*, for instance, P. B. Shelley flatters his dedicatee, Tom Moore, by imagining that

when St. Paul’s and Westminster Abbey shall stand, shapeless and

nameless ruins, in the midst of an unpeopled marsh; when the piers of Waterloo Bridge shall become the nuclei of islets and reeds and osiers, and cast the jagged shadows of their broken arches on the solitary stream, some transatlantic commentator will be weighing in the scales of some new and now unimagined system of criticism, the respective merits of the Bells and the Fudges, and their historians. (325)

Overtly, Shelley is contrasting the permanence of language to the mortality of physical monuments, since Moore's *Fudge Family in Paris* will live on when St. Paul's stands a "nameless ruin." But by the end of the sentence, literary immortality turns out to depend on a "transatlantic commentator" whose "new and now unimagined system of criticism" reminds the reader that historical change can render literary monuments as dated as the broken piers of Waterloo Bridge, or magnify trivial Bells and Fudges to epic stature. Shelley's irony nicely dramatizes the force of historicism in the early nineteenth century: it did not compel writers to become systematic relativists who abstained from judging other modes of life, but it did frequently tempt them to contemplate the dizzying prospect of a perspective that would render their own assumptions dated (Chandler 483-98).

Against this backdrop, I think it's possible to see dispensational theology as a characteristic Romantic-era innovation. Irving and Darby were grappling with the same consciousness of historical change that afflicted other Romantic-era writers. They addressed that challenge, rather as Coleridge did, by embracing historical change as one of the glories of revelation—as a feature, so to speak, rather than a bug. Instead of inventing the Coleridgean symbol, dispensationalists dramatized "the translucence of the Eternal in and through the Temporal" by predicting that the Gentile church itself would turn out to be a passing phase of a longer story. In doing this, they fused time-honored millenarian arguments with a more recent historicist emphasis on observers' inescapable blindness to the provisional character of their own perspective. Irving writes, for instance,

that “our present spiritual dispensation, which is wont to be interpreted as complete in itself, without any bud or promise of another, is as much preparatory to another, as was the Mosaic, which the Jews also thought perfect in itself...” (“Preliminary Discourse” xciv-xcv). A hundred years earlier this concession to skeptical relativism might have seemed to undermine the Christian faith, but for Irving the provisional character of revelation implies the dynamism of something evermore about to be: “all that hath yet been revealed in the Providence of God to his church, is the least half of what is promised in the word of God...” (xcviii).

For the sake of dramatic condensation, I’ve described dispensational doctrine up to this point as if the challenge of historicism had confronted Irving and Darby personally and all at once. In reality, they were participating in a historicist revision of Biblical hermeneutics that had taken shape over many decades, beginning before they were born. One central change had already begun to emerge early in the eighteenth century: the weakening of interpretive practices that had previously unified Old and New Testaments by turning people and events in the Jewish scriptures into figures of Christ’s life. Figural reading has never completely disappeared, but in the course of the eighteenth century it ceased to play a load-bearing role in arguments about the unity of the Biblical canon. Instead of postulating unity at the outset as a condition of acceptable interpretation, later-eighteenth-century critics tended to assume—as Hans Frei has shown—that reading should begin with “grammatical and lexical exactness in estimating what the original sense of a text was to its original audience” (7). Any unity the canon possessed would have to be deduced afterward, through a separate reasoning process. One of the consequences of this approach was to permit Christian readers to acknowledge more fully the specifically Jewish character of the Hebrew scriptures.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, British writers began to use this contextual approach to Scripture to draw a pointed distinction between Israel’s destiny and the Gentile church. In the process of resisting millenarian claims about revolutionary France, conservative Anglicans like Samuel Horsley and G. S. Faber

found themselves arguing that Jewish prophecy should be interpreted in the context of geographical knowledge the Jews could have possessed at the time, and should therefore apply primarily to the Jews themselves (and not, say, to Napoleon, who had been setting himself up as a champion of Jewish claims to the Holy Land) (Horsley 27-33; McCalman 329-31). In *A General and Connected View of the Prophecies Relative to... Judah and Israel* (1808), Faber pursues this contextual approach to Jewish prophecy without drawing dispensational conclusions: although the Jews are to have a special role in the Apocalypse—a role that belongs to “the proper house of Israel, not the Gentile Church of Christ”—the point of their role is still to dramatize the perfection of a Christian dispensation (xv-xvi). But it seems to have been difficult to proceed this far without going farther. A reader who concludes that the promises made to Israel have not been negated by, or inherited by, the Christian church, is soon confronted with a problem. The restoration of a Jewish kingdom is a theme of prophetic hope not just in the Old Testament but in the Gospels (e.g., in Luke 21.24, “Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled”). If “Jerusalem” and “Israel” mean something distinct from the Christian church, then texts like these seem to envision a specifically Jewish future. By the early 1820s, writers like Lewis Way were drawing the radical conclusion that the millennium would inaugurate a Jewish dispensation distinct from the present Gentile one.

In short, the central innovation of dispensationalist theology is best understood as an effort to assimilate historical interpretation of Scripture. Other movements, such as German “Biblical theology,” or the English Tractarian Movement, responded to the same challenge by stressing historical continuity, and reaffirming the unity of the Biblical canon (Frei 165-82; Harding 96). But dispensational theology genuinely assimilated historicism instead of reacting against it; in fact, dispensational preachers embraced the fragmentation of the canon as a fundamental exegetical principle. For Irving and Darby, it was by no means sufficient to distinguish Old and New Testaments; one had to go through the Bible book by book, and even line by line, in order to separate the strictures and

prophecies that belonged to different past (and future) dispensations—“rightly dividing the word of truth,” in a phrase that remains a dispensationalist watchword (Scofield, *Rightly Dividing*).

Admittedly, this enterprise was motivated by a belief in the literal accuracy of prophecy that literary historians don't ordinarily associate with historicist interpretation. The more familiar model of a historicist approach to the Bible is something like Benjamin Jowett's contribution to *Essays and Reviews* (1860). For Jowett, the earlier books of the Bible bear patent marks of historical inaccuracy and moral imperfection: “the mixed good and evil of the characters of the Old Testament,” for instance, “does not exclude them from the favour of God” (347). Since it is impossible to accept the “maxims of a half-civilized world” as words dictated by God himself, Jowett adopts a model of inspiration that locates sanctity more in a “principle of progressive revelation” than in the textual details of Scripture (348). This is certainly different from Irving's approach to the Bible. But it is also very different from the historicism currently practiced in literary studies—which is in some respects closer to Irving's fundamentalist hermeneutic than to Jowett's progressive one. Literary historians don't usually discount textual details in Greek drama by observing, like Jowett, that it would be a mistake to take “the letter for the spirit” in early literature since “what is progressive is necessarily imperfect in its earlier stages” (347-48). On the contrary, like Irving, we try to give equal weight to textual detail in every period of literary history because we assume that the historically-specific aspects of a text are also part of its meaning. To be sure, critics don't believe that Greek drama predicts the future. But the premise of prophetic accuracy needs to be distinguished from the question of historicism, understood as a willingness to let different periods define basic concepts in radically different ways. Where that aspect of historicism is concerned, contemporary literary critics and dispensationalists have more in common than either group imagines.

If the parallel between dispensationalist preachers and literary critics now seems more like a perverse curiosity than a genuine connection, it's because the two groups have had, since the Victorian period, very little positive interaction.

But in the Romantic era the state of affairs was different. In the 1820s, as dispensational theology was becoming an organized movement, its leaders were still exchanging ideas about history with celebrated literary critics and historians. The bond between these men was cemented by a shared interest in historical change, and they hadn't yet realized how much they would eventually come to differ on questions of verbal inspiration and prophetic accuracy. The best examples of this connection come from Edward Irving's friendships with Carlyle and Coleridge. Irving's general enthusiasm for history is amply documented in Carlyle's *Reminiscences*. Carlyle first encountered Gibbon (of all people) by borrowing him from Irving's extensive library, and many years later, when the men had become estranged by religious disagreement, the olive branch that Irving extended was to praise Carlyle's plan of writing about the French Revolution: "[S]tudy of history, he seemed to intimate, was the study of things real, practical, and actual, and would bring me closer upon all reality whatever" (Carlyle 1: 53, 165).

But the logic of Irving's historicism is actually more closely connected to Coleridge. Irving met Coleridge in 1823 and became a regular dinner companion for several years—including, for instance, a dinner in June 1825 that Crabb Robinson describes as centering on the historical theories of Giambattista Vico (Robinson 21-22). In the same year, Irving prefaced one of his works with a fulsome two-page dedication crediting Coleridge for shaping his own understanding of Scripture (*Collected Writings* 1: 427). The flattery was not empty. I wouldn't go as far as some of Irving's clerical biographers, who, seeing Coleridge mainly as a Unitarian drug addict, tend to blame him for all of Irving's departures from orthodoxy (Dallimore 61). But the tone and substance of Irving's thought do echo Coleridge's later works in several ways. Most crucially for my argument, Irving credited Coleridge for his conception of religious history. In his preface to *The Coming of the Messiah*, Irving notes that it was Coleridge "from whom... I received the first idea of the prophetic growth of God's word" (lxxv). In this passage, Irving is using "prophetic growth" to describe the central innovation of dispensational theology: its model of revelation as an unfin-

ished process of historical transformation, whose various phases prophetically foreshadow each other, but also differ in profound ways. This isn't an idea that Irving could have found fully developed in Coleridge, but it's easy to see why he felt that it was a logical outgrowth of Coleridge's thought. Certainly, in justifying this idea, Irving reasons in a very Coleridgean way:

Now if any one ask me, why the Lord hath adopted this prophetic method in the revelation of his Word, and not the logical, or the dogmatical, or the predicative? I answer that it is the only one proper to a spirit, which, like man's, is subjected to the conditions of place and time, by being placed in a sentient body, and having a sensible world to rule. (lxxv)

Though Irving acknowledges Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* on this page, there may be an even stronger connection to *The Statesman's Manual*, which locates the authority of sacred history in its ability to dramatize the intersection of timeless and universal truth with a temporal world of particulars. In the well-known passage that distinguishes Scriptural symbolism from allegory, for instance, Coleridge argues that Scripture's emphasis on the history of individuals, which might seem less philosophic than modern histories "of Things and Quantities," actually permits it to reveal "the translucence of the Eternal in and through the Temporal." Prophecy is for Coleridge one of the modes of this translucence, since it allows "Facts and Persons [to] have a two-fold significance, a past and a future, a temporary and a perpetual, a particular and a universal application" (28, 30). Irving similarly argues that revelation has a changeable character because change is the only way to embody truth in a world "subjected to the conditions of place and time." In extrapolating this premise to suggest that the Gentile church itself is a temporary institution, consecrated only for a particular place and time, he probably pushes the argument further than Coleridge intended. But this dispensational extrapolation of Coleridge parallels a similar extrapolation carried out later by Coleridge's more academically-celebrated followers. Writers like J. C. Hare and F. D. Maurice, who gave shape to the Broad

Church movement, revered Coleridge because he “enabled them to do justice to the changeable without losing their faith in the permanent” (Maurice 179). But in many cases they, like Irving, pressed their enthusiasm for the changeable further than Coleridge himself would have endorsed.

The early nineteenth century gave rise to two religious movements, then, which extended the premises of Romantic historicism in parallel ways. Both movements began by embracing the mutable and context-dependent character of religious doctrine in order to suggest that historical change is part of the cunning of revelation rather than a problem to be explained away. Both movements took historical change seriously enough to predict that their own mode of worship would give way to something else. One movement—led largely by university dons, and the occasional schoolmaster—predicted that that Christianity would gradually become more inclusive, as different modes of Christian communion learned to recognize their brotherhood in a larger universal Church. The other—led largely by popular preachers—incorporated historical change in Christianity by identifying it with the Apocalypse, which they reinterpreted as the advent of a new Jewish dispensation destined to displace existing forms of Christian communion. These are, of course, different traditions, which attracted different kinds of followers, and produced different social effects. But it’s not clear to me that they stand in a radically different relation to Romantic historicism. And I don’t think critics and historians have been justified in selecting one of them (the Broad Church tradition) as an emblem of the social transformation produced by new ideas about history, while treating the other as an atavism (insofar as it gets discussed at all). I would argue, in short, that dispensational fundamentalism has as strong a claim as the Broad Church does to illustrate what happens when nineteenth-century historicism shapes a religious movement.

Twenty-first-century literary historians are likely to feel that dispensational preachers missed the most significant lessons of historicism. Though dispensationalists recognize that history is riven with discontinuities, they do recuperate those discontinuities by making them turning points in a divinely-guided plan.

And, of course, they postulate supernatural intervention in history. But much of this could also be said about S. T. Coleridge and Thomas Arnold. In fact, Arnold, who did as much as anyone to popularize B. G. Niebuhr's historical methods in Britain, also made prophetic claims that sound a great deal like Irving. In 1831, when Arnold was asked in a letter about Irving—and especially about his followers' practice of speaking in tongues—he replied,

If the thing be real I should take it merely as a sign of the coming of the day of the Lord.... However, whether this be a real sign or no, I believe that "the day of the Lord" is coming, i.e., the termination of one of the great *aiones* of the human race; whether the final one of all or not, that I believe no created being knows or can know. The termination of the Jewish *aion* in the first century, and of the Roman *aion* in the fifth and sixth, were each marked by the same concurrence of calamities, wars, tumults, pestilences, earthquakes, &c., all marking the time of one of God's peculiar seasons of visitation. And society in Europe seems going on fast for a similar revolution, out of which Christ's Church will emerge in a new position, purified, I trust, and strengthened by the destruction of various earthly and evil mixtures that have corrupted it. (as qtd. in Stanley 266)

Like Irving, Arnold fuses historicist assumptions about social discontinuity with the religious concept of a divine "dispensation"—so much so that he expects periods of rapid social change to be marked by pestilences and earthquakes, calls them "the day of the Lord," and links them with Christian renewal. It's also telling that he labels the distinct eras of world history in Greek, as *aiones*. This choice reflects a philological distinction that Irving's friend Lewis Way had recently used to argue that the Bible represents the Second Coming not as the end of the world (*kosmos*), but only as the end of one age (*aion*) and beginning of another (Way 35-37). This is the central premise of dispensationalist theology, and it's fascinating to hear it echoed in Arnold's letters.

By this point I hope to have convinced some readers that the central ideas of dispensational theology took shape as part of an effort to assimilate historical criticism by embracing the challenge it posed to the unity of the Bible. I've also tried to show that in the 1820s, the people who are usually credited with initiating the liberal Broad Church tradition—Coleridge and Arnold—shared many ideas about history with people like Irving, who attended the Albury conferences and defined the premises of dispensational fundamentalism. But why does this all matter? What do the historicist ideas shared by dispensationalists and Broad Church philosophers actually prove about the social consequences of the two movements?

My point is exactly that shared ideas, in this case, tell us very little. But the negative evidence is significant. When literary critics and intellectual historians think about secularization, we've tended to define it by attaching it to some distinctly modern idea. Historicism itself has been a leading candidate for this role. In *The Disappearance of God*, for instance, Hillis Miller argues that "Historicism, like perspectivism, transforms God into a human creation": "Man in a time of historicism knows too much to believe that his selfhood can be limited without loss to the categories of a single culture or a single system of thought... The attitude of historicism accompanies the failure of tradition, the failure of symbolic language, the failure of all the intermediaries between man and God" (12, 9-10). It's clear that dispensationalist doctrine poses an exception to these statements: dispensationalists have been able to embrace the fragmentation of tradition, and the historical contingency of present-day worship, as signs of divine providence. One might sweep this exception under the rug by interpreting it as false consciousness: dispensational historicism, in other words, might be a symptom of a secularizing trend in spite of its adherents' protests to the contrary. But that interpretation becomes difficult to sustain when one compares the social agenda of dispensationalism to the agenda of the Broad Church. If one defines secularization, with Casanova, as a differentiation and diffusion of the

authority formerly vested in religious institutions, then Broad Church intellectuals have supported it while dispensational fundamentalists resisted it. Writers like Thomas Arnold and F. D. Maurice saw religion as one aspect of a broader social project in which other institutions (natural science, history, and the state, for instance) also had important roles to play. While both men opposed efforts to create a purely secular system of education, they equally opposed efforts to separate the church from the world. To a former student who had taken orders, Arnold wrote to advise “that he should not read exclusively or principally what is called Divinity” (Stanley 520). For his part, F. D. Maurice “was never tired of quoting the spirit of Mr. Darwin’s investigations as a lesson for Churchmen” (Sanders 231). One doesn’t have to deny the sincerity of their faith to say that these Broad Church intellectuals were advancing secularization in Casanova’s sense of the word: they acknowledged that religion could no longer subsume the authority of other forms of learning and tried to shape a religious culture that could adapt with dignity to a more differentiated society.

By contrast, the dispensational tradition remained profoundly distrustful of compromise with worldly institutions well into the twentieth century. The sect that took shape around Irving, the Catholic Apostolic Church, pronounced anathema on large swaths of what we would call “civil society.” In 1836, for instance, an “Irvingite” missionary in Canada gave a speech in which, according to a newspaper account, he “reprobated in most severe language those blessed institutions, founded and reared by men whom we have ignorantly thought wise and holy. Missionary, Bible, Tract, Peace, Temperance Societies, and all the other parts of the machinery employed by the world’s improvers, had not one word of God’s truth that pronounced a blessing on them” (Shaw 113, 56). Though denunciations of civil society were not always quite this sweeping, dispensationalist writers on both sides of the Atlantic continued to remind their readers throughout the century that “all present forms of government” and “all present church organizations” were doomed to destruction (Seiss 170-71). Indeed, because of this vivid sense that all church organization was transitory, American dispensationalists generally declined to establish new, independent

denominations, but organized instead (at least until the 1920s) through ad hoc prophecy conferences and Bible institutes that cut across denominational lines (Sandeen 70-71, 239-43). If they saw even denominational organization as excessively worldly, it perhaps goes without saying that dispensationalists did not go around “quoting the spirit of Mr. Darwin’s investigations as a lesson for Churchmen.” The consequences of their fierce rejection of scientific authority continue to shape public life in the United States.

In short, it’s fair to conclude that one of these religious movements was much more closely allied to secularization—in Casanova’s sense of the word—than the other. Where I think we make a mistake is in attempting to trace this difference back to a preference for distinctively secular and distinctively modern ideas. Different followers of Coleridge took different paths in part for professional reasons. Dispensationalists like Irving made their living as preachers, whereas many of the writers associated with the Broad Church were schoolmasters or dons, professionally committed to the integration of Christian doctrine with secular learning. Intellectual differences did also play a role in shaping the different paths of these two movements. But the intellectual differences between Edward Irving and, say, Arnold were not quite the differences our stories of secularization might lead us to expect. The most salient difference, by far, involves the question of progress. Every dispensationalist leader attacked the notion “that the world, in general, will be developed into a perfect state” (Lord 29). Though he emphasized that different facets of God’s word were revealed to different ages, Edward Irving was unwilling to agree with Coleridge that those changes amounted to improvement—that “we may have clearer views of Christianity than some of the Apostles had.” By contrast, Coleridge (and later Jowett) were so confident about the superiority of a modern perspective that they sometimes felt justified in ignoring or discounting aspects of Scripture that were difficult to harmonize with it.

But the concept of progress is difficult to present as a specifically secular or specifically modern idea. Confidence in progress depends too obviously on a kind of faith, and has been too notoriously compatible with a range of reli-

gious doctrines stretching from Augustine to (some would argue) Marx. Our definitions of secularism tend to focus instead on concepts that seem easier to defend and more specifically modern—especially on concepts that coincide with our own methodological premises, such as historicism. However, as I’ve tried to show, the connections between historicism and secularization appear persuasive largely because we haven’t thought carefully enough about modern fundamentalists. Broad Church intellectuals did use historical criticism to justify an accommodation with secular institutions, but an equally influential fundamentalist tradition used the same premises to produce opposite results. In short, ideas that are central to our own model of secular critique did not reliably advance social processes of secularization in nineteenth-century society. And ideas (like faith in progress) that aren’t uniquely secular may nevertheless have correlated strongly with social movements that had secularizing effects. Admittedly, a single case study doesn’t decide a question. But I don’t pretend to be starting from scratch, or inventing a new concept, in this essay: I take myself merely to be underlining a premise that has facilitated innovation in several recently-published works. I think revisionist accounts of secularization are likely to have their fullest impact if we read them not as attempts to replace one model of secularization with another but as efforts to clarify the relationship between distinct processes of change. Literary history is shaped on the one hand by a process of social differentiation that reorganizes the confessional state (as McKelvy has shown) around new institutions, including new forms of print culture. On the other hand, it’s shaped by a loose collection of thematic and formal changes: the naturalization of apocalyptic narrative (Abrams), or the application of historical criticism to Scripture (Shaffer). I don’t think we’re forced to choose between these accounts of secularization, but I have also come to doubt that they can be mapped onto each other. On the contrary, there is reason to think that they are best explored separately. To understand the social history of secularization, we may need to let go of the assumption that it produces, or was produced by, a set of specifically secular ideas. And in order to understand the implications of ideas like historicism, we may need to let go of the assumption

that they are closely bound to the social history of secularization. Only then will we properly understand a historically sophisticated but anti-secular movement like dispensational fundamentalism.

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