Response to Fuller, Kennedy, Maccarini, and Brown

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As with many who have written about the 1960s my interest in the history of that decade arises in the first instance from having lived through those years. And like all those who remember that time, my interpretation has to some extent been influenced by my memories. For example my sharp distinction between the ‘early,’ ‘mid,’ and ‘late’ 1960s reflects my memory of the rapidly changing atmosphere—both in religion and in, for example, politics or sexual mores. In particular I remember the early and mid-1960s as a time of strong religious interest, at least among students, the group to which most of my friends and acquaintances belonged. So I find it hard to see the whole decade simply as a time of on-going secularisation, still less as one in which secularisation was already complete.¹

My first relatively brief venture into the religious history of the 1960s came in a book published in 1981, where I distinguished between the ‘religious ferment’ of the early 1960s and the ‘crisis’ of 1967 and the years following.² After a long break, my interest in this history was revived by hearing Callum Brown speak at a conference in Paris in 1997 and then by reading his seminal Death of Christian Britain (2001). But my ideas only took firmer shape when I was invited to give the Vonhoff Lectures at the University of Groningen in 2004. These lectures provided the basis for my book.

My research agenda was partly set by Brown’s book and by other pioneering ventures such as Alan D. Gilbert’s The Making of Post-Christian

¹) As in S. J. D. Green, The Passing of Protestant England (Cambridge: University Press, 2010), which focuses on the years 1920–1960, arguing that by the latter date Britain was ‘a secular society.’
Britain (1980). Brown and Gilbert agreed in their maximalist view of the extent of secularisation in Britain since the 1960s, but differed radically in their account of how we got there. Gilbert saw the ‘decline’ of religion as a protracted process, extending over centuries,\(^3\) while Brown described the sudden ‘death’ of a previously healthy patient in or about the year 1963.\(^4\) I offered a third approach, distinguishing between long-term ‘preconditions,’ shorter-term ‘triggers,’ and the impact of specific events. Similarly Gilbert’s multi-factorial approach contrasted with Brown’s overriding stress on one central factor, namely “the de-pietisation of femininity and the de-feminisation of piety.”\(^5\) Here I was closer to Gilbert—while not always agreeing with him as to which factors were determinative. One of my most important contentions was that there was no ‘master-factor,’ but that the 1960s were religiously explosive precisely because of the interaction of so many different processes of social, cultural, political, and religious change. In particular, I stressed that changes in each of these areas contributed to the ‘religious crisis.’ I rejected the one-sidedness of those approaches that privilege developments within the church or that see the churches as passive victims of external forces. Thus I gave special attention to the changing social context brought about by unprecedented ‘affluence.’ But I also devoted chapters to ‘Aggiornamento’ within the Catholic and Protestant churches, to the ‘sexual revolution,’ to religious experimentation in the counter-culture, and to the political radicalisation associated especially with the year 1968. Two other points were central to my argument. First, I emphasised the importance both of liberal and of conservative Christians in terms both of what they achieved and also of the unintended negative consequences of the choices they made. Second, I argued that the crisis faced by the churches, rather than being seen simply as an aspect of secularisation, also needs to be seen in the context of a more general weakening of collective identities reflected, for example, in the declining membership of political parties and the organisations associated with them.

I do not think that any of these three papers is incompatible with these broad lines of interpretation. They do however offer precision in some areas where my account was vague or tentative and they answer some questions that I failed to ask. For example, Louise Fuller’s subtle analysis of


\(^5\) Ibid., 192.