Religion and Change in Modern Britain

Edited by Linda Woodhead and Rebecca Catto
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Religion and Change in Modern Britain flows from the Religion and Society Programme – of which Linda Woodhead has been Director – funded jointly by the Arts and Humanities and the Economic and Social Research Councils. Its purpose is to offer a comprehensive guide to religious developments since 1945 and, in doing so, it ranges across a very wide field: relations between religious and secular beliefs and institutions, the evolving role and status of the Churches, the growth of non-Christian religious communities, the spread and diversification of alternative spiritualties, religion in welfare and education, the media, politics and the law, and theoretical, cultural and social perspectives on religious change. In addition, it also includes a series of short case studies on topics as various as the formation of the United Reformed Church and the religiosity of young people growing up in poverty. The editors are at pains to stress that it is not merely a summary of the conclusions of the Religion and Society Programme; though many of the (extremely distinguished) contributors are involved in the Programme, several are not.

Possibly the most fundamental issue underlying any such study is that of increasing secularisation. Peter Brierly's ten-yearly censuses of Sunday church attendance in England from 1979 onwards revealed a decline from 11.7 per cent of the population in that year to 6.3 per cent in 2005; nor is there any sign of a reversal of that downward trend. While Professor Woodhead notes in her Introduction (p 6) that the decline has not been uniform across the United Kingdom, citing Northern Ireland in particular, the 2011 England and Wales census data released in December 2012 – *after* the book's publication – showed that, while Christians were the largest religious group, with 33.2 million people (a decrease since 2001 from 71.7 per cent of the population to 59.3 per cent), and Muslims the second largest, the number of respondents stating that they had no religion at all had increased dramatically since 2001, from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent.[1]

Chapter 3 summarises the main features of the major non-Christian religions represented in the UK. This is particularly helpful for non-specialists because even as the numbers professing Christianity have declined the Muslim and Hindu communities in England and Wales have increased:

1 Office for National Statistics: 'Religion in England and Wales 2011', 11 December 2012, available at <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html>, accessed 12 December 2012.

Muslims from 3 per cent of the population in 2001 to 4.8 per cent in 2011 and Hindus from 1.1 per cent to 1.5 per cent. Moreover, even though the UK is a multi-faith society as never before, misunderstanding about non-Christian religions is rife. For example, Gurharpal Singh explains that 'Sikhism welcomes converts but is not a proselytizing religion' (p 101). Nevertheless, the Charity Commission's current guidance on *The Advancement of Religion for the Public Benefit*, last revised in January 2012, still declares that 'In the case of some religions (such as Sikhism) ... people who are not born into the religion are not able to convert to it'[2] and that in spite of the fact that the Commission has been told on more than one occasion that that statement is simply wrong.

But, to return to the wider picture, is 'religion' expressed merely by attendance at church, mosque or synagogue? Chapter 4 looks at alternative spiritualties and Chapter 5 at what the authors[3] label 'God-change'. Belief in God as some kind of 'higher power', in paranormal experiences and in some kind of after-life appears to have persisted, with little decline in numbers of adherents despite the waning of formal religious practice (p 173). At the same time, however, belief in a 'personal' God has been to some extent supplanted by belief in God as a 'spirit' or 'life-force' (p 174). More specifically, the authors suggest that the rather distant, transcendent God of the immediate post-war era has given way to God as the interventionist: either the communitarian God of liberal social action (p 178) or the personal God of Evangelical Christianity (p 179). Which leads one to wonder whether those who choose to follow alternative spiritual paths such as Wicca or Druidism do so because they see their God (or Goddess) in entirely personal terms but feel most comfortable relating to their deity in a context that has been stripped of any systematic, articulated theology.

Like your reviewer, most readers of this *Journal* will probably turn first to Chapter 9 on religion, politics and the law. Much of the story will be familiar but the material on Northern Ireland probably rather less so – and well worth careful reading on that count alone. At least outside the confines of West Central Scotland there is a tendency among people in Great Britain to assume, for example, that Evangelical Christianity in Northern Ireland is a monolithic construct. A moment's thought should make one realise that that cannot be the case: to take but three examples, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Methodist Church and the Free Presbyterian Church are all very different both in their theology and their practice, even if,

2 Charity Commission for England and Wales, *The Advancement of Religion for the Public Benefit* (London, 2012), p 8: available at <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/media/95013/pbreligiontext.pdf>, accessed 14 June 2013.

3 Mark Chapman, Shuruq Naguib and Linda Woodhead.

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politically, their members tend to vote for one of the Unionist parties or the Alliance. But what I, for one, was not aware of was the interesting critique of Protestant identity and civil religion from within Protestantism itself, when Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland suggested that the 'For God and Ulster' mentality of many traditionalist Unionists was outmoded, preferring instead 'Anabaptist ideas about the separation of church and state, the celebration of religious pluralism and a conception of church as a model community' (p 314).

Finally, I wonder whether the judgement of the Chapter 9 authors[4] that 'in recent decades calls for disestablishment have been more muted and infrequent than they were during the nineteenth century' might not have been overtaken by recent events. Quite apart from the occasional extreme denunciation of establishment from within the Church of England itself from the likes of Colin Buchanan[5] and milder, less radical criticisms from such as John Packer and Jonathan Gledhill[6] and, most recently, Peter Selby,[7] recent events surrounding the failed General Synod vote on the consecration of women to the episcopate seem to have thrown the issue into much sharper focus than hitherto. Nor is the call for disestablishment limited any longer to the usual political suspects. In January 2008 the fortuitously numbered Commons Early Day Motion 666 on disestablishment attracted only 20 MPs, none of whom was a Conservative. Recently, however, the Conservative MP Douglas Carswell has been arguing that establishment has run its course and that breaking the formal link between Church and state would be a way of halting the spread of aggressive secularism.[8] Perhaps the disestablishment debate is about to be rehearsed all over again – but this time in the context of a society that is both increasingly secular and increasingly multi-faith.

'Part of the challenge of a book on religion in post-war Britain' writes Professor Woodhead in her Introduction (p 3) 'is that the changes it seeks to illuminate are so recent and so extensive that it is difficult to gain a proper perspective on them.' That must almost inevitably be the case, but *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* is a valiant attempt to meet that challenge and a salutary

4 Gladys Ganiel and Peter Jones.
5 See C Buchanan, *Cut the Connection: disestablishment and the Church of England* (London, 1994).
6 See J Wynne-Jones, 'Disestablishment of Church of England would be welcome, say leading bishops', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 December 2008, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/3966193/Disestablishment-of-Church-of-England-would-be-welcome-say-leading-bishops.html>, accessed 14 June 2013.
7 See P Selby, 'Mis-establishment: locating, and re-locating, the Church of England', Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture, Westminster Abbey, 10 May 2012 – especially the conclusion. Available at <http://static.westminster-abbey.org/assets/pdf_file/0004/57532/ESA-lecture-2012-ii.pdf>, accessed 14 June 2013.
8 'The time is now right to split Church and State', *London Evening Standard*, 13 June 2012, available at <http://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/the-time-is-now-right-to-split-church-and-state-7848161.html>, accessed 14 June 2013.

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reminder that there is more to the study of 'law and religion' than simply reading cases.

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The Established Church: Past, Present and Future

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The Established Church comes at an appropriate time in the national debate on the relationship between Church and state. With a change of incumbency at Lambeth Palace, thoughts turn to how the new archbishop will lead the Anglican Communion forward through one of the most divisive periods in its history. The topical political issue of same-sex marriage, in particular, goes straight to the heart of where the boundaries between Church, state and our national culture lie.

Although the book is divided into a collection of essays, each addressing a different aspect of the relationship between Church and state, there are themes that run through all of them, giving what could be a rather disjointed collection a thematically consistent feel. One of the key issues addressed is whether the Church of England should be an evangelical or an institutional church and the first chapter, by Nigel Biggar, explores the limitations of establishment for the Church of England by balancing the Church's duty to the entire community against a call to express views that will run contrary to the those of many of its constituency. Matthew Grimley discusses how minority faith groups broadly favour establishment as a way of recognising the spiritual factor in public life; but at what cost to the theology of the Church?

A very useful comparison is drawn between the establishment of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, in terms of the latter's independence to appoint clergy and adopt liturgy. This is increasingly relevant with regard to the devolution and localism that have seen the Coalition Government cede decision-making powers to local authorities and third-sector organisations. Why should this not equally apply to the Church of England? Can an organisation be subject to those not necessarily sharing its values, such as Parliament?

The final chapter concludes by noting Tony Blair's answer to Richard Younger-Ross in the House of Commons on the question of disestablishment: that the Prime Minister '(wasn't) bothered by that one'. The question of