

REVIEW ARTICLE

Western Religion in the Long 1960s

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Religion und Lebensführung im Umbruch der langen 1960er Jahre. Edited by Claudia Lepp, Harry Oelke and Detlef Pollack. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016. Pp. 370 incl. 13 figs. €80. 9783525557792.

The Yale church historian, Sydney Ahlstrom, had just emerged somewhat dazed from the Sixties when he reviewed the religious trajectory of the United States during that decade. He wrote that by 1966 it was clear that ‘the post-war religious revival had completely frittered out, that the nation was moving towards a *crise de la conscience* of unprecedented depth’. As well as a ‘growing attachment to naturalism and “secularism”’ he mentioned ‘a creeping or galloping awareness of vast contradictions in American life between profession and performance, the ideal and the actual’ and ‘increasing doubt concerning the capacity of present-day ecclesiastical, political, social and educational institutions to rectify these contradictions’.¹ As Ahlstrom made clear in a later essay, he saw the crisis faced both by the Roman Catholic Church and by the ‘mainline’ Protestant Churches as part of a wider loss of ‘confidence or hope’ in American society and a passing away of ‘the certitudes that had always shaped the nation’s well-being and sense of destiny’.²

Ahlstrom was the first of the many historians and sociologists who have tried to describe and interpret religious change during that ‘tumultuous,

¹ S. Ahlstrom, ‘The radical turn in theology and ethics: why it occurred in the 1960s’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science* cclxxxvii (1970), 2–3, 7–8.

² Idem, ‘National trauma and changing religious values’, *Daedalus* cvii (1978), 13–29.

troubled and traumatic' decade.³ Already in the 1980s historians were trying to integrate the 1960s into longer-term narratives of religious change.⁴ It was clear that the Western religious landscape had changed significantly during that period, but as yet no one argued that the decade was uniquely significant.

The first historian to focus on the 1960s as a period of unprecedented religious change was probably David Hilliard.⁵ However, it was 2001 and Callum Brown's *The death of Christian Britain* which marked a turning-point in the study of religion in the Sixties.⁶ Historians and sociologists agree that the major religious changes in most Western countries included a decline in churchgoing and in participation in rites of passage; a weakening of religious socialisation; questioning of official church teaching, especially on sexual ethics; and an increasing tendency to see society as 'pluralist', or even 'secular', rather than 'Christian'. However, scholars continue to disagree about why these changes happened and their longer-term significance. They have tried to answer such questions as: Did these changes mark a sudden and radical break with the past, or were they part of a longer evolutionary process? What were the principal causes of secularisation (or of deChristianisation, the term preferred by some scholars), and which social groups were its main drivers? And was this simply an era of secularisation, or did it also see significant religious change? To follow the terminology of David Hilliard: were the Sixties a 'seedbed' as well as a 'watershed'?⁷

Brown provided unequivocal answers to these questions. For him the Sixties were 'the secularisation decade',⁸ and they did mark a clear break with the past. It is important to his argument that the 1950s were a time of religious growth and indeed that the whole period from 1800 to 1963 was Britain's 'last puritan age':⁹ the continuing strength of religion in the '50s helps to explain the strength of the reaction in the '60s. The principal cause of secularisation in the '60s was a mass revolt by the young, in

³ Ibid. 19.

⁴ A. D. Gilbert, *The making of post-Christian Britain*, London 1980; H. McLeod, *Religion and the people of Western Europe, 1789–1970*, Oxford 1981; A. Hastings, *A history of English Christianity, 1920–1985*, London 1986; G. Cholvy and Y.-M. Hilaire, *Histoire religieuse de la France contemporaine, 1930–1988*, Toulouse 1988.

⁵ D. Hilliard, 'The religious crisis of the 1960s: the experience of the Australian Churches', *Journal of Religious History* xxi (1997), 209–27.

⁶ C. G. Brown, *The death of Christian Britain*, London 2001; a second edition, in which Brown replied to his critics, was published in 2009.

⁷ Hilliard, 'Crisis', 227. For my own answers see H. McLeod, *The religious crisis of the 1960s*, Oxford 2007.

⁸ C. G. Brown, 'The secularisation decade: what the 1960s have done to the study of religious history', in H. McLeod and W. Ustorf (eds), *The decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750–2000*, Cambridge 2003, 29–46.

⁹ Brown, *The death of Christian Britain*, 9.

the name of individual freedom, against the moral teachings of the Churches.¹⁰ Its chief drivers were young women: the decade saw the ‘depictisation of femininity and the defeminisation of piety’.¹¹ And the decade was simply an era of secularisation: yes, there were religious changes but they were of very minor significance by comparison with the big story of secularisation¹² – and, as he would argue in later books, the rise of humanism.

Historians in other countries were also concluding that there was a sudden change of direction around 1960,¹³ though they often remained sceptical of Brown’s other arguments. The claim that young women were the main drivers of secularisation has been especially controversial.¹⁴ His arguments continue to be hotly debated, but there is no doubting the inspiration and stimulus that they have provided. The continuing influence of *The death of Christian Britain* is reflected in the fact that even Brown’s fiercest critics find themselves repeatedly returning to his work. Few critiques have been more radical than that by a group of predominantly Oxford-based scholars whose *Redefining Christian Britain* was clearly intended as a response to Brown. While welcoming his insistence on going beyond statistics to look at the wider interactions between Christianity and culture, they questioned his chronology, his explanations for change in the ’60s, his overriding stress on secularisation, and above all his claim that ‘Christian Britain’ has ‘died’. Most importantly they claimed to have ‘demonstrated the continuance of Christian discourses in literature, the arts, and political protest, and their revival in ethics, economics, and political theory’.¹⁵ However, their book is a collection of suggestive essays rather than a new synthesis.

¹⁰ Ibid. 175–80.

¹¹ Ibid. 192.

¹² Ibid. 190–1.

¹³ O. Blaschke (ed.), *Konfessionen im Konflikt: Deutschland zwischen 1800 und 1970: ein zweites konfessionelles Zeitalter*, Göttingen 2002, 9; P. Pasture, ‘Christendom and the legacy of the Sixties: between the secular city and the age of Aquarius’, *Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique* (2004), 82–117; P. van Rooden, ‘The strange death of Dutch Christendom’, in C. G. Brown and M. Snape (eds), *Secularisation in the Christian world*, Farnham 2010, 175–95.

¹⁴ He did, however, have the support of Pasture: ‘Christendom’, 86, 114–15; L. W. Tentler agrees on the centrality of sex and gender but her argument is essentially different: ‘Sex and subculture: American Catholicism since 1945’, in N. Christie and M. Gauvreau (eds), *The Sixties and beyond: deChristianisation in North America and Western Europe, 1945–2000*, Toronto 2013, 157–85.

¹⁵ J. Garnett, M. Grimley, A. Harris, W. Whyte and S. Williams (eds), *Redefining Christian Britain: post-1945 perspectives*, London 2006, 290. Their emphasis on the continuing vitality of ‘Christian Britain’, albeit mainly after 1980, is shared by the contributors to D. Goodhew (ed.), *Church growth in Britain: 1980 to the present*, Farnham 2012, and to D. Goodhew and A.-P. Cooper (eds), *The desecularisation of the city: London’s Churches, 1980 to the present*, Abingdon 2019.

Three more recent books by Simon Green, Clive Field and Sam Brewitt-Taylor have aimed to provide such a synthesis.¹⁶ Brown's influence is demonstrated again by the frequency with which the authors refer to their disagreements with him. Brewitt-Taylor offers a chronology very similar to Brown's. He stresses that, in spite of falls in church attendance, Britain was emphatically a 'Christian country' in the 1950s: the turning-point came in 1963/4, when a secular national identity began with remarkable speed to become the new orthodoxy. Green, however, offers a completely different chronology: Britain was still a Christian country in 1920, but by 1960 had ceased to be so. He is particularly dismissive of the idea that there was a religious revival in 1950s. Here Field entirely agrees,¹⁷ though he posits a much longer-term process of secularisation, which speeded up somewhat in the 1960s, but was by no means complete at the end of that decade. There is a basic difference in methodology between the three authors, which partly explains the differences between their arguments: Field's books are based on a thorough analysis of the statistical sources, whereas Green and Brewitt-Taylor depend on a wide range of qualitative sources, especially articles in newspapers and periodicals. Both Green and Brewitt-Taylor have a top-down approach to causation, though they differ as to which elites were crucial. Green stresses the role of intellectuals and of politicians. He places special stress on the declining political significance of religion from the 1920s onwards. He also highlights the decline of the puritanism which was an integral part of nineteenth-century Protestantism; but he contends that the 1920s and '30s, rather than the 1960s, were the key years for this decline. Brewitt-Taylor focuses on the role of Christian theologians, most notably John Robinson and his best-selling *Honest to God*, which, he suggests, had a crucial role in redefining Britain as a 'secular society' in the early 1960s. Field places more emphasis on impersonal processes of social change, and especially the declining ability of parents to pass on their religion to their children. The latter is a point which recurs in the literature on many different countries.¹⁸ Green and Field agree that the main theme of the 1960s was religious decline, and that religious change was of relatively minor importance. Brewitt-Taylor, however, refers both to the Evangelical

¹⁶ S. J. D. Green, *The passing of Protestant England: secularisation and social change*, Cambridge 2011; C. Field, *Secularization in the long 1960s*, Oxford 2017; S. Brewitt-Taylor, *Christian radicalism in the Church of England and the invention of the British Sixties: the hope of a world transformed*, Oxford 2018.

¹⁷ See especially C. Field, *Britain's last religious revival? Quantifying belonging, behaving and believing in the long 1950s*, Basingstoke 2015.

¹⁸ For example, J.-L. Ormières, *L'Europe désenchantée: la fin de l'Europe chrétienne: France, Belgique, Espagne, Italie, Portugal*, Paris 2005, 7–16, and R. Sykes, 'Popular religion in decline: a study from the Black Country', this JOURNAL lvi (2002), 287–307. See also K. Tenfelde (ed.), *Religiöse Sozialisierungen im 20. Jahrhundert*, Essen 2010.

resurgence and to the continuing legacies of the Christian radicals of the Sixties. But these are not the main concerns of his book. Meanwhile Brown has been far from idle. His two more recent books, intended as sequels to *The death of Christian Britain*, move on from the mainly negative story of secularisation to look at the positive story of the rise of the people of no religion, and more especially of humanism, as the hegemonic world-view. His emphasis on the 1960s as the decisive period of change and on the key role of gender remains the same.¹⁹

While certain themes are common to the literature on different parts of the Western world, there are also national differences, whether because of different histories or because of different historiographical traditions. For example, historians of France and of West Germany have paid far more attention than their British counterparts to the politics of the 1950s and '60s, and especially the events of 1968.²⁰ The most striking example of a different history is Ireland. Louise Fuller offers an Irish variation on the theme of gradual changes preparing the ground for later more rapid changes. While levels of Catholic practice remained very high in the 1960s, the dominant position of the Catholic Church was being slowly eroded. Fuller stresses the role of the media, and especially television, in providing a forum for critics of the Church. She also notes the impact of Vatican II, opposition to *Humanae vitae*, the increasing role of the state in education, and declining religious practice by the under thirties – especially young working-class men.²¹

The biggest differences have been between the literature on Europe and on the United States. There is indeed a considerable American literature on secularisation and grass-roots religious change more generally in the '60s and after, but it is mainly written by sociologists,²² and depends heavily on statistical data, drawn especially from questionnaires, or on interviews, rather than the contemporary sources favoured by historians. Historians have preferred to focus on movements and the interactions between religion and politics. In particular there is a large literature on

¹⁹ C. G. Brown, *Religion and the demographic revolution: women and secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since the 1960s*, Woodbridge 2012, and *Becoming atheist*, London 2016.

²⁰ For example, Ormières, *L'Europe*, and T. Grossböling, *Der verlorene Himmel: Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945*, Göttingen 2013.

²¹ L. Fuller, 'Catholicism in twentieth-century Ireland: from "an atmosphere steeped in the faith" to à la carte Catholicism', *Journal of Religion in Europe* v (2012), 484–513.

²² For example, R. D. Putnam and D. E. Campbell, *American grace: how religion divides and unites us*, New York 2010.

the rise of the Religious Right²³ and on conflicts between secularists and Christians, or between liberal and conservative Christians.²⁴

The new books by Guillaume Cuchet and by Claudia Lepp and her colleagues thus enter a crowded field. Cuchet's title leaves no doubt as to the decisive nature of change at this time. However, he sees the 1960s as one (very important) stage in a longer-term decline of French Catholicism, going back to the Revolution of 1789. Historians of French Catholicism benefit from a uniquely rich body of statistical sources, extending from the early nineteenth century to the 1970s, which Cuchet has intensively exploited. We owe this knowledge especially to the researches of the priest-sociologist, Canon Boulard, to whom the book is dedicated. The distinctive feature of France during this period was extreme regional variation, including areas where Catholic practice was already low in the early nineteenth century and others where it was still very high in the early 1960s. While all regions saw decline in the 1960s and '70s, the biggest changes were in the more devout areas, such as the Vendée. Decline in these places began with young men and adolescent boys, especially those belonging to the working class. Cuchet sees the causes as being both internal and external. The originality of his argument lies in his emphasis on long-term changes, both in church teaching and in the social environment, which removed the requirement to attend church. The Revolution had removed the legal requirement. Then, much more gradually, there was a weakening of the conformist pressure exercised by church teaching, first because of the change from a 'Terrible God' to a 'God of Love' and the declining role of hell in Catholic preaching, which was already happening in the nineteenth century; and second, following Vatican II, the increasing stress on the individual conscience, the diminishing frequency of confession and the tendency to emphasise a practical Christianity rather than formal observances. Meanwhile, less authoritarian styles of parenting gave teenagers more freedom to decide for themselves, and increasing mobility together with the homogenising effect of television undermined distinctive regional and rural cultures. 'May 1968' and *Humanae vitae* 'amplified' rather than causing a crisis which was already underway by 1965. This crisis was most acute in rural areas, and by the 1980s it was clear that the future of French religion lay in the cities.

The three great strengths of Cuchet's history lie in his long historical perspective, his precise attention to statistical detail, and his sensitivity to changes in religious teaching and their possible implications for behaviour.

²³ For example, D. Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: plain folk religion, grassroots politics and the rise of Evangelical conservatism*, New York 2011.

²⁴ For example, A. Hartman, *A war for the soul of America: a history of the culture wars*, Chicago 2015.

The social changes and political events which other historians have highlighted are perhaps taken as read and are analysed much more briefly. He sees changes in the Church as among the factors contributing to the decline in religious practice, rather than as responses to this decline.

Historians writing on different countries are broadly agreed as to the direction of religious change in the 1960s – even if their explanations for the changes differ radically. But there is no such agreement about the 1970s. In the British literature it remains a neglected period, seen variously as the tail-end of the '60s or as preparing the ground for the '80s, but without a clear profile of its own. Among historians of the United States on the other hand it has a very clear profile as the time when both the political and the religious worlds began to move to the Right.²⁵ And in the German literature the '60s and the '70s tend to be treated as a single period, and it is the continuities between the two decades which tend to be emphasised.²⁶ Lepp, Oelke and Pollack's collection of essays on West Germany in the 1960s and '70s is by a team of historians, sociologists and theologians, many of them members of the Protestant Church's Workshop for Contemporary Church History. It focuses partly on the nature of social change in this period, but more especially on changes within the Churches – especially, though not exclusively, the Protestant *Landeskirchen*. In emphasising changes in Christian ethics and social practice, the authors draw on the concept of *Lebensführung*, which they define as self-orientation in the light of religious, moral or philosophical principles. The volume begins with two very different overviews by Detlef Pollack and Pascal Eitler. Pollack discusses the literature and provides an overview of the connections between social and religious change in the '60s. Like Brown, he provides very clear answers to the questions listed earlier. The 'long 1960s' mark a decisive stage in a long-term process of modernisation, of which secularisation was an integral part; the process is rooted in economic and social change, and in the 1960s the principal source of change was the dramatic improvement in the standard of living; the leaders were 'the better educated, the better paid, the cities, and men' (p. 56). He concludes with a vigorous defence of the 'secularisation thesis' and a critique of those historians who have questioned its explanatory value. He does not consider whether the '60s were also a religious 'seedbed'. Eitler, however, switches attention to the 'long 1970s' from about 1967 to about 1983. He sees the purported 'liberalisation' as

²⁵ B. J. Schulman and J. E. Zelizer (eds), *Rightward bound: making America conservative in the 1970s*, Cambridge, MA 2008. See also H. McLeod, "Religious America, secular Europe": are they really so different?, in D. Hempton and H. McLeod (eds), *Secularization and religious innovation in the North Atlantic world*, Oxford 2017, 345–8.

²⁶ For example, S. Hermle, C. Lepp and H. Oelke (eds), *Umbrüche: der deutsche Protestantismus und die sozialen Bewegungen in den 1960er und 70er Jahren*, Göttingen 2007.

a moral judgement rather than an analytical category and he also questions the extent of 'individualisation', suggesting that older forms of 'standardisation' were simply being replaced by new ones. His chosen themes for defining the period are therapeuticisation, somatisation, Orientalisation and politicisation of the personal. The latter involved a reorientation of political concern from 'society' to 'personal relationships'.

Eitler suggests that the Churches, rather than being seen as victims whose only role was to oppose what was happening, should be seen as active participants in the history of the time. This is the theme of many of the subsequent chapters. The topics covered include church thinking about the 'consumer society' and about sexual ethics; church counselling agencies and youth work; changes in the family, including increasing numbers of inter-confessional marriages; and the role of religious arguments in parliamentary debates on the laws relating to homosexuality and abortion. Many note that the extent of the Churches' influence on society was shrinking, whether because of declining church membership, or because of the increasing readiness of church members to think for themselves rather than simply following an official line. For example, as Katharina Ebner shows, in the parliamentary debates of the 1950s it was common to refer to the stance of the two 'big' Churches, the implication being that this was of obvious concern to legislators, whereas by the later 1960s it was becoming common to suggest that West Germany was a 'pluralist society', where no one system of ethics could be regarded as normative. Similarly, many contributors note that, in spite of the huge apparatus of church-based social and medical care in Germany, professionalisation was limiting the distinctiveness of these institutions. At the same time, many contributors note that the increasing readiness of church members to think for themselves was often encouraged by their Churches – especially the Protestant Churches, though Vatican II encouraged Catholics to move in the same directions. So, as Eberhard Hauschildt shows, the journal read by Protestant family counsellors underwent a revolution between 1959 and 1964, summed up as a shift from 'proclamation' to 'dialogue'. Ulrich Schwab shows that the journal read by Protestant youth workers changed as radically between 1956–8 and 1966–8 with the introduction of a much wider range of themes, including especially a big emphasis on radical politics. Here the shift was from training future church members to training responsible conscience-guided citizens. Thomas Grossbölting traces similar processes in Catholic youth work, assisted by '58ers' (younger Catholic priests who claimed John xxiii as their inspiration). Dimitrij Owetschkin presents a new phenomenon of the later '60s, the couples who tried to live and to bring up their children as Christians rather than as Catholics or Protestants. In the light of his own arguments, Cuchet might suggest that more liberal pastoral approaches contributed to the decline in churchgoing – to which Lepp and her team

might reply that society was changing anyway, and that older methods no longer worked. Whereas the British debates have sometimes pitted those who prioritise changes in theology against those who prioritise changes in society, these chapters suggest a complex interaction, whereby new theologies arise both out of and in reaction to older theologies, but also in response to perceived changes in society; and the new theologies also in their turn go on to influence the changes in society.

While many of these developments were well underway by the early '60s, Harry Oelke highlights developments in the 1970s which would have lasting importance, including the growing prominence in Christian thinking both of the environment and of the 'Global Church' and 'Third World'. Frank Bösch concludes the volume with two thought-provoking suggestions: first that, for all the talk of crisis, the Churches adapted reasonably successfully to the challenges of the 1960s; and second, that they were less successful in responding to the social changes of the 1990s.

In view of the widely different personal beliefs and approaches to history²⁷ of those writing on religion in 'the long 1960s', it is unlikely that there will ever be a consensus. But there are issues which need to be more fully explored. For example, while there are many studies of individual countries there is a need for more comparative studies. Another neglected issue is the relationship between the '60s and the '70s. And there is also a paradox which has seldom been explicitly discussed: while the decline in Christian belief and practice is generally recognised, the Churches continue to have a major role in the education and welfare systems of many countries, and, as the welfare state has contracted, Christian inspiration is often crucial in voluntary efforts to assist such groups as asylum-seekers or those who are homeless.²⁸ Secularisation in the Sixties needs to be seen in a nuanced way, recognising both what has disappeared and what remains, or has even grown.

²⁷ Brown, *The death of Christian Britain*, 11–14, and Brewitt-Taylor, *Radicalism*, 5–17, both start with an exposition of the author's approach to historical explanation and a critique of other more familiar approaches.

²⁸ J. Beaumont and P. Cloke (eds), *Faith-based organisations and exclusion in European cities*, Bristol 2012.