

The role of Christianity today

DESPITE A DECLINE, CHRISTIAN CULTURE IS STILL STRONG

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WHILE THE IDEA that 'religion declines in modern societies' has lost much of its plausibility, certain kinds of religion have suffered a diminution in influence. It is the historic churches of Europe, both Protestant and Catholic, which have taken the hit. Elsewhere in the world Christianity is flourishing – even in the United States. So why is Europe different, and does it mean that Christianity is increasingly marginal in a society like ours?

In Scotland, England and Wales, the level of regular churchgoing has more than halved. It fell from roughly one in ten in the late 1970s to one in 20 in 2005. No wonder, then, that in September 2009 the Church of England launched what was believed to be its first radio advertising campaign. The ad promoted church attendance through a variety of voices reading a rap-style poem, which told listeners: "Don't look to make no airs and graces, faked up smiles and masked up faces. No need to make no innovation, please accept this as your invitation."

But the poor churchgoing figures obscure the fact that some forms of Christianity have been doing much better than others. By 2005 more than a third of regular churchgoers belonged to a range of New, Independent, Baptist and Charismatic churches. These churches do not have national horizons and hierarchies like the historic Presbyterian, Anglican and Catholic churches. They cater to the individual, and to like-minded Christian brethren. They are more concerned with winning souls for Christ, than with ministering to society as a whole.

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It is the link to nation and state that makes the traditional European churches so distinctive. Since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, they have been bound up with national identity. Each nation in the United Kingdom is associated with its own church (though the Church in Wales was disestablished in 1920, as the chapels became a more important expression of Welsh identity). Even the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches sought national influence once they were granted toleration, situating their main buildings and offices in Westminster, alongside the Church of England.

This leads to an unusual situation in British Christianity today. On the one hand you have energetic forms of newer Christianity (including new African and Caribbean churches) that seek to save souls. On the other, you have the national churches which still see their vocation in much broader terms. They provide

spiritual services for all comers; they try to inform the moral conscience of the nation; they provide the setting and symbols for national celebrations and memorials. But the split between the two camps is intensifying; in the case of Anglicanism, it threatens to tear the Church asunder.

At the same time, two other factors are weighing on Christianity. One is the campaigning strength of a secularism that seeks to confine religion to a purely private sphere where it can have no social or political influence. The National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association are strong lobbying organisations. Recent political and legislative changes also impact on religious freedom, while the 'culture wars' in Europe between secular liberals and Muslims provides a new impetus.

The other factor is the growth of religions brought to Britain by post-war immigration. Their effect has been to break the religious monopoly that Christianity enjoyed for well over a thousand years, and to call into question forms of national religion, which are not representative of 'multiculturalism'. The struggles of Sikhs, Muslims and others to gain representation, and accommodation for their religious practices, has diverted public and political attention from the churches.

Together, these developments mean that Christianity in Britain, and particularly the historically-established churches, are increasingly marginalised in British society. The Church of England is beleaguered on every side. Not only is it divided internally, it faces pressure from those who want a fully secular state, and its cultural monopoly has been lost.

On the other hand, 72 per cent of Britons identified themselves as Christian in the 2001 Census, and there is no serious political will for disestablishment, or for the abolition of institutions like faith schools. The Church, meanwhile, gets on with its parish and pastoral work, and continues its campaigns against poverty and for the protection of asylum seekers. It tends its international links, and maintains its national obligations.

An explanation of these ambiguous indicators is that while Christianity is increasingly marginal to many peoples' day-to-day lives, the churches' moral, ritual and symbolic roles in Britain have not yet been supplanted by an effective competitor. Most people still want the churches to deal with key events in the life cycle (particularly death), and many still affirm Christian values and want their children educated in a context that confirms them. Similarly, the state wants to take advantage of many of the services that the churches provide, while establishing its secular credentials.

So Britain remains a social scientist's nightmare: neither religious nor secular, but a bit of both. ■

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