

Y e t m i ſ a l t ı n c ı K o n f e r a n s

Is Britain A Secular Society ?

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It is widely believed that Britain is one of the worlds most secular societies. Certainly within the area of western Christianity only the Scandinavian countries are more lax in their regular institutional practice. Furthermore, the figures for British institutional religion are inflated by the contribution of what has been a migrant population of Catholic Irish and by the relative fidelity of the Welsh and Scots*. If one were to take the regular worship of English Protestants alone it might well rival Scandinavian figures.

But of course figures of church attendance are not the only criterion of religion. It is often remarked for example that the flourishing religious institutional life of the U. S. A. is internally subverted by a secular ethos celebrating the American way of life. Hence one must also consider the extent to which 'secular' goals are dominant in Britain : not only the celebration of the British way of life but the weight accorded of the practical and useful as distinct from the sacred, the contemplative and the intrinsically valuable. Beyond this there are a whole series of criteria which one would at least wish to indicate as relevant even if it were not possible to examine in detail. What for example is the extent of Christian belief as apart from practice? This is important since Protestant countries show a surprising capacity to maintain high levels of somewhat amorphous belief in spite of institutional weakness.

Again, what is the extent and variety of belief in general? Are there potent social myths to which the sacred imprimatur of religion is partly attached? Furthermore, in what ways are such myths related to Christianity

*) About 25 % in both countries compared with 10-12 % in England.

This is a point which raises a query concerning how far we have not exchanged one set of modern social myths tinged by a religious aura for older social myths likewise tinged by a religious aura but never fully impregnated by Christian categories. In other words: is the contrast between the present and the past genuinely one between secularity and Christianity, apart, that is, from the simple criterion of regular attendance at church?

However let us begin by considering the criterion of attendance and all the related institutional parameters such as identification, membership, rites of passage and acts of personal devotion. So far as identification is concerned about 90 % of the population consider themselves Christian and acknowledge a specific Christian denomination when asked: C. of E., Roman Catholic or whatever it may be. 60 % or so of adults identify themselves as S. of E., about 12 % as Roman Catholic, 8 % as Presbyterians and further 12 % as nonconformist (mostly Methodist). About 1 % regard themselves as Jewish, and Hindus, Muslims and Orthodox together make up a further 1 %: say, 200,000 each. Those who regard themselves as without religious identity make up 7-10 %, of whom something over half are explicit atheists and agnostics. These facts point to a paradox: that explicit atheism is much rarer even than fully orthodox Christianity.

Membership provides a very different picture to that provided by identification. It is also complicated of course by different criteria as between the various bodies. Roman Catholics and the C. of E. both lay stress on the concept of the religious community defined by baptism. In this sense there are in the United Kingdom some 27 million Anglicans and 7 million Roman Catholics. Other bodies lay emphasis on adult membership, so that on this criteria Methodist, number only 700,000 and Congregationalists and Baptists together under half a million. Beyond these there are a series of small bodies: the Quakers (20,000), the Unitarians (30,000) and the Salvation Army (100,000). There are also numerous sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Pentecostals, the latter expanding, apidly amongst the coloured migrant population.

Of course the concept of the 'religious community' as used by Catholics and Anglicans is in itself misleading: it needs to be taken in relation to actual practice. In this regard one finds the Roman Catholics the most practising, the Anglicans the least and the Nonconformists in between. Thus about 20-25 % of Catholics are effectively outside their churches ministrations, some 30 % of nonconformists and some 40 % of

Anglicans. Between 40 % and 45 % of Catholics are present for Sunday Mass whereas only 8-10 % of Anglicans are present for Sunday service. On the other hand the Anglicans have reserves of strength indicated by the fact that in the course of any six months some 20-25 % of the population will have attended an Anglican Church, rites of passage quite apart. Indeed the overall figures for occasional conformity of all denominations are surprisingly high in the course of a year some 40-45 % of the U. K. population will have attended church. Those who 'never go' are a roughly equivalent number. Thus a poor weekly adult attendance (not less than 10 %, not more than 17 %) is qualified by impressive totals for occasional conformity which make the churches by far the most important voluntary associations in Britain - far more so than trade unions or political parties at least so far as numbers and willingness to participate are concerned. *Power* of course is a different matter.

A further aspect of occasional conformity is found in rites of passage. Here the hold of the churches has proved more tenacious and moreover this hold has been maintained in all social groups. There has, of course, been an increase in non - religious wedding ceremonies, but 70 % of these still occur in church, and the decline seems to have been halted. Some 80 % of the population continues to have children baptised. Funerals overwhelmingly take place with religious rites.

These changes with respect to rites of passage legitimately introduce the whole issue of *declines*, both in such the Anglican *proportion* of baptisms and weddings have to be seen in relation to impact of non - Anglican migrant populations, particularly Catholic Irish, Poles, Hungarians, etc. Thus the Catholic proportion of baptisms has steadily risen since 1912, and especially since the middle years of this century. It is now about 16 %, indicating the youthfulness of the Catholic community. But the real impact of the forces eroding institutional religion (the most important of which are social and geographical mobility) is not felt with respect to rites of passage but on membership and attendance. It is difficult to know how far fewer numbers go at all to church as distinct from how far those who go do so less frequently or else only at particular periods in the life cycle e.g. adolescence and the post child - bearing years of marriage. But at any rate it is clear that there has been a decline in weekly attendance as compared with 1851 when some 36 % of the total population was counted as in church on a given Sunday. With respect to membership the nonconformists have not only suffered losses

of over 1/3 since 1906 (during a period of considerable population increase), but have also largely lost a substantial fringe of regular 'adherents' who were not actually members. If confirmation at 12-20 years is accounted membership of the C. of E., that again has dropped from 4208 to 8402, per 1000 per year in that age group although recent sharp decreases are almost entirely due to declines in the birth rate 1947-51. It is almost impossible to state the Catholic position, though obviously there is a drop among the migrants down from the near uniform weekly attendance in the Irish Republic.

It might also be mentioned that there have been certain difficulties in the recruitment for priesthood and ministry of very recent years. This has even affected the Roman Catholic Church though of course the total number of Catholic religious functionaries has increased in accordance with the expansion of their community. So far as the C. of E., is concerned there was no crisis in actual numbers until about three years ago, although increasing proportion of candidates for ordination had been coming from older age groups. Moreover there has been a certain diminution in the number coming from upper class schools as well as in the number with high educational qualifications. Perhaps this is some indication of a fall in clerical status, though opinion polls suggest that clergy are usually thought of as persons with moral and social prestige. The most recent crisis has involved questions of role and many Christians have evidently considered the clerical role likely to restrict rather than expand their personal commitment. So far as the Methodists are concerned it must be remembered that two out of three services are taken by laymen, and it is interesting that these also are diminishing in number and experiencing difficulties in recruitment.

Belief in Britain is very curious in so far as it involves substantial uncertainty in the churches (Catholics apart) and substantial belief among non-church goers. This substantial belief among non-church goers is perhaps indicated by the prevalence of private prayer. For example, only one person in four fails to teach prayers to children. The uncertainty of church-goers is not merely over questions like the virgin-birth but over life after death. Indeed only 50% of Britons at large definitely believe in life after death, whereas 65% believe Jesus Christ was 'more than a man' and 85-90% believe in God: God is variously defined as personal (50%) or as life force or spirit. Broadly it can be said that belief runs along a continuum, with belief in God and in Jesus Christ at one end and belief in hell and in the literal truth of the whole Bible at the

other. It is also interesting that what is regarded as 'Christian' morality is widely applauded by the vast majority, although this amounts largely to the second half of the Decalogue (especially stealing and murder) and to an emphasis on 'decency' which hardly rises to the heroic morality demanded in the Christian Semptures.

This equation of Christianity with decency or civilised behaviour partly explains the overwhelming support given to religious education in schools and to the whole concept of an established religion. Only one person in 15 definitely objects to religious teaching in schools. The numbers supporting the Anglican Establishment (*including* Catholics and nonconformists) indicate very substantial majorities for almost all its aspects. This includes for example the Coronation, which through television became for the first time a national Eucharist with a profound impact in terms of religious symbolism, mystery and splendour, even (and perhaps especially) amongst those whose contact with the restrained beauty of Anglican rituals was slight.

This may seem surprising but it needs to be emphasised how the image of the Church not only involves the feeling that ritual is 'mumbo jumbo', that church-going is effeminate and that the parson has a marginal occupation but also a deep identification with tradition. This may be partly nostalgia: a love for a rural past, Merry England and for all the symbols of national continuity of which the church is undeniably the most impressive. Church buildings themselves attract this veneration: the ancient tower over the market town. Beyond this there is a deep feeling for the associations of Easter with spring, or the harvest festival (even in towns) and for the whole panoply of Christmas. Some of this is doubtless a near-pantheism allied to a national awareness sublimated in music and literature expressing love of England. But of its power and its association with the church there need be no doubt. Nor need one doubt its influence in schools, especially since primary school-teachers are amongst the most religiously minded of all professions.

The whole group of attitudes just described has some connection with the Anglo-Catholic movement in the C. of E., even though the popular appeal of that movement simply as a party within the church itself is not great. There is also an alternative focus of popular sentiment in the evocative power of the Protestant hymn. Probably this however, is not so grate as in the nineteenth century but it is still the case that the Cup Final at Wembley Stadium begins with 'Abide with Me', while the Promenade Concerts end with 'And did those Feet in Ancient Time'. The

influence of the hymn is indicated by the fact that of all religious broadcasts on T. V., the one consisting entirely of hymns draws the largest weekly audiences, 10 to 18 % of the population. To some extent within the church of England itself hymn and liturgy are in rivalry, but among the great mass of marginal Christians the hymn is much more important than liturgy - apart that is from national occasions like Churchill's funeral and royal weddings.

Hymn singing on television introduces a whole dimension of passive participation which affects not only the churches but most forms of communal activity. The almost universal existence of television provides religion, entertainment and politics in the home, affecting political parties, churches and cinemas alike. In the immediate post-war years studies showed that most people at least occasionally listened to religious broadcasts on the radio. Nowadays the same is true of television. As to the quality of this listening we have very little evidence.

The voluntary associations associated to this or that extent with the church also deserve mention, because they at least require active participation even if this hardly rises to worship in the proper sense. The associations cater in particular for the children, the adolescent, the female and the old. So far as children are concerned there has been a considerable drop in the attendance at Sunday Schools: perhaps even by as much as half. Thus sixty years ago there were 3 million children in Nonconformist Sunday Schools alone, a number which today shrinks to some 900,000. This is no doubt in part due to the alternative avenues open for the use of Sunday, particularly in a population where there is a car for every six persons i.e. most households. Associations for the young are largely youth clubs and scouts and guides. These have never been so widespread in appeal as the Sunday Schools and have not experienced the same diminution. Scouts (and cubs) have maintained themselves at about 400,000 over the past decade and nearly half of these have a church connection. Indeed the whole Scout movement involves an area of diffuse Stoic Christianity: (social service, helpfulness, etc.), highly characteristic of the English religious style.

Indeed something requires to be said about diffuse Stoic Christianity since it provides a proper introduction to comments on the complex relation of religion to class. Both the older traditional upper class and the working class share a 'tight lipped' attitude to religion: a masculine ethos which envisages Christianity as decent behaviour and as a belief

in God the Creator without too much sympathy for the salvationist 'enthusiasm' of evangelicals or the liturgical frippery of Anglo - Catholics. Stoicism also includes a dislike of discussing one's religion because it is 'a personal affair' and a refusal to engage in dogmatic elaboration. Indeed dogma in religion as in politics is seen as the major vice. The logical pursuit of a belief suggests an intellectual or emotional enthusiasm not appropriate to the English male. Moreover the actual business of attending church and bringing up the children in the way they should go can be left to the women. Doubtless this is changing as women increasingly take on more and more occupational roles.

All this indicates why there is so little opposition to 'Christianity' and so much sympathy towards its institutions. The only opposition is found amongst those sections of the working class who might characterise an over zealous attender as 'hypocritical' or that segment of the 'educated upper middle class which constantly trumpets its dislike of religious education in schools, of the establishment and so on, and which is constantly dismayed and surprised by the support these institutions retain. This section of the upper middle class includes the religious radicals, a small minority declaiming somewhat unrealistically against the institutional aspect of Christianity, sometimes on semi - existentialist grounds. The journalistic noise these make is entirely disproportionate to their size. An interesting aspect of the middle class situation is that both regular attendance at church and explicit rejection of Christianity are characteristic of university students.

It is now appropriate to come to class or perhaps more properly to status since the notable feature of British social structure has been a massive proliferation of status group partly overlaying the dichotomies of class. Religious attendance increases with each move up the scale of status and of education just as it decreases with each movement up in the scale of city size : and this in spite of a concentration of Catholics in the working class and in the larger towns. As between the other denominations Anglican identification is more or less evenly spread whereas practice increases with status, while nonconformist bodies are often lower middle class in their active composition. There is a variation in status levels amongst the nonconformist bodies : Quakers and Unitarians at the higher status levels, followed by Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptist and Salvation Army in descending order. This descending order is largely identical with an increasing concern with literature and evangelical enthusiasm indicating that those of the 'working class'

who do go to church are more inclined to literalism, at least when they are attached to nonconformist bodies. The small adventist sects are very largely drawn from the working class. Partial exceptions to this are long standing groups like the Bretheren and Christadelphians (not more than 100,000 between them) amongst whom Puritan virtues have had their usual effect on social mobility. There are other cult - like formations in the middle class (Christian Science, Theosophy, etc.) responding to very different needs than the classic sect: notably psychological stress and psychosomatic illness.

One of the great difficulties of the churches has been a middle class atmosphere in which the working classes (the plural is correct) do not feel at home. Communication is rendered more difficult in the Anglican case by the fact that the actual content as distinct from the atmosphere involves a seventeenth century gentry culture of considerable aesthetic sensitivity. Hence there is a cultural gap between the churches and the working classes (especially those in large urban areas like E. London). Yet this is not really a gap based on a vigorous perception of different class aims. The churches are not widely perceived as representing a given class they are just unfamiliar institutions. Moreover, so far as attitudes are concerned (as distinct from class identification) the churches are often more liberal minded than the working classes: more keen on assimilation of migrants, more anxious for action against the colonialist régime on Rhodesia, more concerned about Vietnam. This progressiveness is particularly characteristic of specialist reports, and there has been a notable shift to moderate 'progressive' attitudes among church leaders.

Something of the political stance and comparative social mobility of British denominations can be gained from a consideration of the way the various groups are represented in parliament. Jews are over-represented, Nonconformists proportionately represented, Catholics under-represented. Each of these are *very* much more to be found on the Labour than the Conservative side. It might be added that this political under-representation of Catholics is partly compensated by the important group of Catholics in trade union leadership the most notable example being the general secretary of the T.U.C. Of the religious communities only the Catholic gives its largest vote to the Labour Party.

There is one last area of interest, and that concerns a whole segment of non-Christian 'belief' which exists in partial relation and partial distinction from religion. This involves belief in ghosts, (one

person in six), in spiritistic phenomena, in astrology, even in reincarnation. Thus it seems that some four million persons have some sort of belief in reincarnation: Acceptance of concepts like luck and fate, and of astrological prediction is also widespread. These concepts are more or less uniformly distributed in all ages and status groups, and very difficult to pin down to precise numerical quantities. Perhaps Geoffrey Gorer's book 'Exploring English Character' provides the best introduction to this aspect of English life. At any rate from this evidence it seems that rejection of institutional Christianity is not a function of the 'age of science', or of education, or of 'human maturity, but rests basically on unfamiliarity of social atmosphere and an uncertainty as to relevance. As the widespread opinion has it 'you can be a good Christian without going to church'.

This last opinion is very much a key to the situation. There exists in English culture a pervasive individualism derived from Protestantism and liberalism which distrusts *all* institutions (political, religious and bureaucratic) while respecting ideals. If we add to this the stress on morality, the masculine ethos which mistrusts both religious enthusiasm and the aesthetics of liturgy, and the power of a pervasive Stoicism tinged by supersition and by utilitarianism then one has the major key to the English style in religion.

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