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Martyn Percy

Ministering to the English?: Sketching Some Challenges for Mission and Ministry

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This article explores the interface between spirituality, religion and Christianity in England with particular reference to the Church of England. Martyn Percy argues that the secularisation thesis is more nuanced than we are often led to believe and that there never was a Golden Age of church attendance. He claims that religious observance is part of the 'English cultural DNA', that the clerical ministry is enduring and necessary and that religion continues to provide 'enchantment' for our contemporary world.

'He had the gift of being able to talk to the English about God without making them wish they were somewhere else.' 2

How spiritual are the English? The inquest is a timely one during the early years of a new Millennium, for to address it adequately, one really needs to define what was meant by 'spiritual' and what exactly it is that encompasses being 'English'. As nearly everyone knows, the meanings of these words have shifted and expanded considerably in recent years. Clearly, definitions of spirituality abound; as do descriptions and analyses of what constitutes the 'religious' or 'religion'. Equally, there can be no straightforward answer to the question as to what now constitutes 'English'.

'Spiritual', for instance, can no longer simply mean 'church attendance' – even if it ever did. It was Bede Frost who once quipped that English people have often been obsessed with the idea that the spiritual life consists in going to church, which is 'a fond thing vainly invented by the Puritans in seventeenth century'. 3 England has never been an outwardly religious country, if church attendance is anything to go by. Adrian Hastings describes the Church of England in the eighteenth century as being 'profoundly secularised'. 4 When Edward Stanley took up his family living in 1805 (at Alderley, Cheshire), the custom was that the Verger waited on the path leading to the church, the Vicar only being roused from slumber on Sunday if anyone actually turned up. It remains the case that for much of English history, vast numbers of people have stayed away from church. Religious enthusiasm and revivals held some sway in the tenth, thirteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But otherwise, the English have been rather lukewarm about religion – and the Reformation is, arguably, the very settlement of that. 5

Yet although the English may be said to prefer their religion tepid and Laodecian (and like their beer – flat, and without much froth), their spirituality deserves closer attention. Opinion polls and surveys consistently show that anything from two-thirds to over three-quarters of the population believe in God. In recent history, this has comforted many clergy, who have understood the English to be 'believing without belonging', and worked their parish ministry within that paradigm. 6 Of course, it is now no longer as simple as that. Contemporary

cultural commentators talk (excitedly) of 'pastiche spirituality', academics (coldly) of 'religious pluralism', church leaders (critically) of 'syncretism'. Many mainstream Christian denominations no longer enjoy the coherence of a homogeneous culture: movements *within* them are trying to transform them. The 'New Age', growing exposure to other religions, globalisation and privatisation have driven many to interrogate their faith, and then adapt it. In spite of the numbers of people who claim to believe in God, the undeniable reality is that England is shifting from being a 'Christian nation' to a spiritually diverse society. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that individuals are beginning to be more inventive with their spiritual lives, assembling private faiths from religious bits and pieces; what is created has meaning and coherence for its creator. Quite simply, the term 'spiritual' has now become rather spongy: it seems to lack definition, and yet soak up virtually anything and everything. In posing the question 'are the English spiritual?' – the links between church, state and crown notwithstanding – one is in danger of not asking very much at all.

So what of being English? The confidence expressed in the relationship between England and spirituality in T. S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding' – ('Here the intersection of the timeless moment is England and nowhere. Never and always') – is not nearly so recognisable at the commencement of a new Millennium. ⁷ Not because England is that different, but because English identity itself is being transformed. Gone is the 'the English, the English, the English are best' contention of Flanders and Swan (or for that matter the serious irony of Henry Root's forever unpublished spoof, *The English Way of Doing Things*), to be replaced by a kind of cultural perplexity – a people struggling to escape from xenophobia, and redefine themselves after generations of post-imperial ennui. And now highly self-conscious of their pluralism and diversity.

Thus, we have endured a decade or more of internal enquiries. Jeremy Paxman arguing (at a popular level) that the conventions that once defined the English are dead. Norman Davies in *The Isles* arguing that Britain has lost its cohesive power. Roy Strong arguing in *The Spirit of Britain* that all was well, at least until the end of the nineteenth century. Kate Fox that Englishness is definite, yet diverse. And yet sometimes, apart from imperial weights and measures, driving on the wrong side of the road, warm beer and Women's Institutes, it is hard to see what being English means at all. ⁸ It is not unfair to suggest that the English are unique amongst the home nations of the Union, insofar as they have no claim on maintaining their identity.

The sources of this situation are complex. The idea of English nationhood has evolved out of a farrago of assertions that look increasingly frayed at the turn of a new Millennium. Devolution for the home nations clearly does alter the ethos of a United Kingdom. Subsidiarity within individual nation states, and related to a European Union, suggests that political power is more dispersed, inter-dependent and varied than it has been previously. As a nation, the English are being quietly herded away from regarding themselves as 'subjects' to owning the title and status 'citizen'. In the process, history is being re-written: Linda Colley has challenged the notion that English national identity has been a constant feature of our past. She argues that national identity is a necessary ideological framework that serves extant power interests. Colley suggests that this was effected in the eighteenth century by identifying English interests against those of, say, the French, and by re-aligning the 'home nations' into 'Great Britain'. ⁹ It was a defensive strategy, and continues to be expressed in

the Acts of Settlement, Union and the coronation oaths. In short, English nationalism has often been elided through British identity.

It must also be acknowledged that the England of 2012 is markedly different to that of 1952. In 1952, the Church of England baptised almost 70% of all infants: the figure for 2012 hovers at around 12.5%. So, it may be broadly correct to describe the attitude to mainstream middle-English religion as a matter of 'believing without belonging.' But such generalisations ignore burgeoning multi-ethnic inner city districts, where the continuity and practising of faith may form a key component in maintaining ethnic and communal identity. Some recent research in East London shows that, alongside the faiths that have arrived with immigration, fundamentalist proselytising forms of religion and pluralist syncretistic faiths are also to be found, illustrating the continuing importance of religion in daily life. 10

So, how are we to proceed from here? First, I want to suggest that the narrative of secularisation – generally held to be both believable and true – is in fact a form of poor and eclectic history, which fails to adequately capture the dual nature of religion and society. Second, I want to suggest that 'the Pelagian apathy of the average sensual Englishman' 11 waxes and wanes in relation to church attendance. Third, I want to sketch some of the issues for mission and ministry today, by way of a brief conclusion. In using the terms 'spiritual' and 'religion', I shall mainly be referring to examples from Christianity, particularly the Church of England, which I hold is still the primary arena for the expression of the innate spiritual affections of its people.

Secularisation Theories as Defective English History

In Bede's *History of the English Church and People* 12 he tells of how the original mission to England arose out of a misconception in a Roman slave market. Children who look like angels are in fact Angles, and Gregory begs the Pope 'to send preachers of the word to the English people in Britain to convert them to Christ'. 13 The story is interesting on a number of counts. First, and according to Bede, Roman Christianity has already been active in England for centuries: the martyrdom of Saint Alban is dated at AD 301. Second, it is clear from Bede that 'the English', in their genesis, are a multi-racial people, comprising Britons, Celts, Angles, Saxons and others, and that their identity continued to evolve. Third, there is ample evidence of religious syncretism being tolerated and fostered in England from earliest times. A copy of the letter sent by Pope Gregory to Abbot Mellitus on his departure for Britain in AD 601, states that

'...we have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols among that people should on *no account be destroyed*. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there...In this way we hope that the people, seeing their temples are *not* destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God.' 14

This sort of religious pragmatism is commonplace in English history. Queen Elizabeth I may have settled the reformation on the English, but this did not prevent her from consulting a personal wizard for most of her life. (There is nothing particularly new about English royalty

consulting astrologers). Mixtures of folk or 'common spirituality' competing with and complementing 'official' religion are part of the tapestry that makes up English society, and the phenomenon is by no means confined to pre-modern times. As Alan Wilkinson notes, World War One exposed many Church of England clergy for the first time to a full range of implicit religion, innate spirituality amidst the trenches. 15 Reactions to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and church attendance at Christmas, do not surprise us: the English may or may not attend church, but it does not follow that they are not religious.

The strategy of opening up a critique of secularisation through history is intentionally simple. As Diarmaid MacCulloch quips, 'every academic is convinced that [his] own discipline forms the straightest road to enlightenment'. 16 Sociology is frequently guilty of obscuring its own production as only one arrangement of reality. Sociologists *are* constructionists; not naturalists, simply observing life. As Catherine Bell remarks: "That we construct "religion" and "science" is not the main problem: that we forget we have constructed them in our own image – that is a problem.' 17 Raymond Aron goes further, and argues that:

'At the risk of shocking sociologists, I should be inclined to say that it is their job to render sociological or historical content more intelligible than it was in the experience of those who lived it. All sociology is a reconstruction that aspires to confer intelligibility on human existence, which, like all human existences, are confused and obscure.' 18

One of the biggest complaints about proponents of secularisation theories is that they imagine a world – a Christendom – in which roughly all knew and believed the same things; decline comes with Enlightenment and industrialisation. But such narratives frequently ignore important historical data. The point is that social theorists who measure and judge 'secularity' against the success or failure of 'official' religion have failed to read the plot. 19 There have been very few periods in English history when everyone went to Church or Sunday School, knew right from wrong, and absolutely believed everything their parish priest said. As Keith Thomas notes: '...what is clear is that the hold of organised religion upon the people [of England] was never so complete as to leave no room for rival systems of belief...'. 20 He notes how members of the population jostled for pews, nudged their neighbours, hawked and spat, knitted, made coarse remarks, told jokes, fell asleep and even let off guns', with other behaviour including 'loathsome farting, striking, and scoffing speeches', which resulted in 'the great offence of the good and the great rejoicing of the bad'. 21 As further evidence, Thomas cites an extract from one of Oliver Heywood's *Diaries*:

'One Nov 4 1681 as I travl'd towards Wakefield about Hardger moor I met with a boy who would needs be talking. I begun to ask him some questions about the principles of religion: he could not tell me how many gods there be, nor persons in the godhead, nor who made the world nor anything about Jesus Christ, nor heaven nor hell, or eternity after this life, nor for what ends he came into the world, nor for what condition he was born in – I ask't him whether he was a sinner; he told me he hop't not; yet this was a witty boy and could talk of any worldly things skilfully enough...he is 10 years of age, cannot reade and scarce ever goes to churche...'. 22

Granted, the Yorkshire region could be argued for as a special case. Ever since records began for the area, church attendance figures have been consistently poor, and always below any

national average. ²³ That said, close readings of parochial records from almost any age can illustrate the pragmatic, amateurish nature of 'official' English religion:

Clophill We present William Spellinge the 23 of Marche beinge then called Palme Sondaye in the church & tyme of eveninge prayer, before suche maydes as then had received the communion, dyd in theyre seate lye upon his backe verye unreverentlye till the ende of the fyrste lesson, and also other tymes dothe seem to forgette to yeilde dewe reverence in the tyme of dyvnye service.

Langford Our chancell is owte of repayre in tymber & wyndowes, at the parsons defaute. Our church wyndowes are in decaye by reason of fowle that cometh in at the chancell wyndowes which hath broken them.

Bedford Sancti Petri [sic] There is no pulpitte in the littel church. The x commandments are not on the walles. The chancell & church are not paved in some places.

Colmworth We have had no service on the weeke dayes not from Maye daye last tyll September & no service on Sancte Peters Eve nor Sancte Bartholemewe Eve nor Michaelmas daye at nyghte & they had iiij children christened iiij wayes, & he woold not let the parishe see his licence & one syr Brian Hayward dyd in the like case. Umphrey Austyne church warden last yere woold not present the lead that was missing oute of the steeple. Item Nicholas Dicons, Thomas Jud, William Quarrell & his wyfe have not received this xij monthes. Item the Quenes Iniunctions or the bisshoppes were not made thes iij yeres nor the catechisme taughte.

Tylsworth We have had but one sermone since Michaelmas, which was the Sondaye after New yers daye.

Farandiche The chancell & parsonage are in decaye by the parson's default. They have but one sermon this year.

Bidham We doe present that we had no Communion but once this yere, and that our last churchwardens dyd not make there accompt for the yere.

Patnum [Pavenham] Our chansell is in decaye and redye to faule dwone, at the defaute of Trynitye College in Cambridge. ²⁴

The picture painted of religion in sixteenth century Bedfordshire is probably enough to raise Bunyan from his grave. Entry after entry from the churchwardens asks only two things of the Archdeacon. First, what are you going to do about the state of the church? And second, when are you going to send us some clergy? Not so very different today, then.

Yet this haphazard, semi-secular, quiet English Christianity, continues well into successive centuries. ²⁵ James Woodforde's *Diary of a Country Parson* provides an invaluable window into the life of the clergy and the state of English Christianity in the eighteenth century. Again, a close reading of the text suggests that whatever secularisation is, it is not obviously a product of the Industrial Revolution. Woodforde is writing just before the social and economic changes; his parish is ten miles from Norwich Cathedral, yet he clearly thinks it is

reasonably good to have 'two rails' (or thirty communicants) at Christmas or Easter, from 360 parishioners. His church is only ever full when there is either a war on, or a member of the royal family is gravely ill. Again, not so different from today, except the Royal Family are in better health, and England doesn't go to war as much as it used to. He carries out many services (especially christenings) in the warmth of his parlour and not in church, and we learn more from his *Diaries* about the food he eats and the company he keeps than we ever do about the Christian year. 26

Even in epochs of revival and religious fervour, such as the Reformation period, it is not possible to show that church-attendance was high. Historians agree that there is a 'general lack of statistically reliable evidence'. 27 Part of the burden of Keith Thomas' work is to show that 'a substantial proportion' of the population remained hostile to organised religion, resulting in paltry church attendance. On the other hand, Eamon Duffy asserts that certain Masses were *very* well attended. Scarisbrick, on the other hand, argues that most late medieval people seldom went to church, and when they did, probably only arrived for the elevation of the host. 28

Thomas' work, parish records, and Parson Woodforde, as any good historian knows, show that English situation is neither a wholly sacred or secular one. It is one in which official religion waxes and wanes against a background of innate spirituality. This may be crudely formed, but opinion polls and surveys consistently affirm that most choose to describe themselves as believers in God, even though they may not belong. There is ample enough evidence. Princess Diana's death, Hillsborough, Heysel, Zbrugge: a litany of 'disasters' that prompt an outpouring of 'common spirituality'. Each of these tragic ruptures in mundane reality (or rather the rejoinder to them) are suggestive of an innate disposition – a kind of hazy theism – which occasionally bursts upon the public domain, and in turn demands a 'response' from 'official' religion. This may only be opening the church for candles and silence, but the offering does help give some articulation, shape and focus for common spirituality. None of this disproves 'the decline of official religion' theory, but it does suggest that 'classic' secularisation theories are questionable. The English, like many other peoples in Western Europe, are anterior in their semi-secular spiritual identity; any ulterior values may have little impact on this.

Whilst it is true that the post-modernity may have some impact on this in the near future, there is no real case for describing religion in England in terms of a trajectory of descent, namely 'from cathedrals to cults'. The evidence marshalled on attitudes to church attendance – taken from previous centuries – suggests that any talk of 'decline' from the proponents of secularisation theory is a particular production of the sociological *imagination* rather than one of *reason*, which has failed to test itself in sustained historical research.

Re-Visiting English Church-going

One of the difficulties faced by sociologists in addressing the issue and nature of innate spirituality is deciding upon what to measure and assess. A common problem with 'classic' secularisation theories is their tendency to elide the boundaries between 'Church' and 'Christianity', and treat these areas both similarly and quite indifferently. To be sure, the two are connected. However, as we noted earlier, 'religion' is part of the wider sociology of

knowledge in England, which in turn is mainly (but not wholly) formed by a type of indigenous Christianity. Semi-independent of the influence of the actual Church, 'Christian memory' lives on in society, albeit with a shallow and haphazard pulse – but this has always been so. This in turn renders the classic secularisation theories to be a kind of permanent 'false memory syndrome', replete with Grand Symphonies, Golden Ages and Master Trends, *necessarily* leading to a vector and verdict of decline in the present. ²⁹ Circumstantial evidence, a farrago of statistics, the feeling of the *experience* of living in a secular age, combines to confirm this thesis. Yet closer attention to detail may suggest otherwise.

One commentator suggests that English 'religion' may have recovered from its apparently terminal illness, and that 'it is [now] difficult to support the secularisation hypothesis as an irreducible process in modern society'. ³⁰ This assertion is supported through the matrix of Alan Gilbert's observation that in England, commentators and social theorists have often been bewildered by the persistence of religion, coupled to an inability to distinguish between the apparent secularisation of society and its de-Christianisation. ³¹ A number of recent surveys support this, and suggest that England is moving away from being a Christian nation towards becoming a spiritually diverse society. In spite of that, church-going and Christian belief remains an important feature of English life. However, three cautionary notes should be sounded.

First, the apparent decline of English (or British) Christian beliefs – measured in surveys and statistics – has been carefully analysed by Robin Gill, amongst others. Lest there be any complacency about the inadequacies of the secularisation thesis, it would seem that 'general' beliefs in God have declined markedly in recent times: from four-fifths of the population to two-thirds. Under one half of the population now think Jesus was the 'Son of God'. Belief in life after death is held by about half the population, but the number of people actively not believing in life after death has risen significantly. Somewhat bizarrely, belief in the devil has climbed back to the levels of the 1960s, after polling rather poorly in the 1970s. ³² Gill's observations are consistent with patterns that can be traced in Europe, which point towards the gradual erosion of belief, and the rise of what he terms 'disbelief'. ³³

Second, and allied to this picture of crumbling Christian belief, there also seems to be mixed news on church attendance. According to Peter Brierley, 10% of the English population were in Church on a 'normal' Sunday in at the end of the twentieth century – about 3.7 million people. Merseyside had the highest percentage of churchgoers (14%), and South Yorkshire the lowest (6%). ³⁴ However, these figures represent a decline on the data gathered from 1979, which in turn, led to various media headlines reporting that the churches were 'losing 1,000 members per week'. ³⁵ Today, in 2012, London is widely recognised as being spiritually effervescent, with much church growth. However, the underlying trend may still be said to be worrying, and has possibly accelerated in the twenty-first century: fewer and fewer young people seem to be from religious backgrounds, suggesting that the reservoir of religious knowledge is leaking. Weekly (or frequent) church-going is in decline, although this does not mean that actual *regular* church-going is suffering. The only positive gloss on this is offered by Davie, who suggests that religious 'belonging' remains very popular, provided one now distinguishes between organisation and denomination or institution. Various Christian associations, activities and other forms of voluntary (religious) organisations continue to provide important outlets for many. ³⁶

Third, the persistence in 'non-traditional types' of belief also presents the observer with a somewhat cloudy picture. Beliefs in reincarnation, horoscopes and ghosts have remained virtually constant for the last thirty years, as has the percentage of people expressing disbelief in them. Whilst such beliefs are often carelessly disregarded as 'superstition', their prevalence indicates that a 'religion in decline' thesis is too general. Gill and Davie also suggest that the resurgence of fundamentalism and the rise of New Religious Movements also points towards diversification. Paul Heelas goes further, and suggests that the success of capitalism itself may provide religion with an opportunity; he partly explains the rise of some more recent New Age movements by linking their particularity to the commodification of religion in a consumerist world. 37

There are at least three ways of interpreting these indices. Classic secularisation theorists seize on the vectors of decline, and point towards an increasingly marginal status for religion in the lives of individuals and national affairs. In such thinking, the persistence of non-traditional religion is seen as evidence of the rise of individualism, and symptomatic of the erosion of religious values and beliefs. Others such as Davie continue to emphasise the persistence of religion. Finally, others see the picture as one of *accelerating* (post-war) pluralism and change, rather than decline or persistence. Each of these interpretations acknowledges some degree of secularisation, whilst at the same time affirming the continuing powers and adaptability of religion.

The discussion here has been contesting the 'classic' secularisation, and arguing for a synthesis of the interpretations of 'persistence' and 'pluralism and change'; the earlier historical excursion, to some extent, confirmed this as 'normative' for English religion. But where exactly does this leave the Church of England in relation to its own people? If innate spirituality continues to endure, independent of the churches, what are its priests really for? Equally, if pluralism becomes an ever-more powerful driver in a post-war, post-modern age, will there be any future coherence for the idea of 'English', 'religion' and 'spiritual'?

Unsurprisingly, the answers will lie with the English themselves, and here there are three tentative observations to make. First, the recent proposals to reform the House of Lords contained within the more recent work of the Conservative-Liberal coalition government, suggest that a binding between religion and politics remains almost puzzlingly axiomatic to English identity and its constitution: religion is part of the 'hidden wiring' within the State. The nature of religious representation is undoubtedly broadening out to reflect increasing pluralism and change, but there appears to be no appetite for removing religion from the heart of the nation.

Second, clergy (particularly within an established church) continue to be in demand, offering a ministry that is public, performative and pastoral. The phenomenon of 'vicarious' religion has long been acknowledged, the mechanism whereby an institution and its representatives are needed to believe in things that others are not quite so certain of. At times of death, birth, love and loss, the church is often there to provide focus, articulation, meaning and interpretation. It remains the case that few leave church because of intellectual doubts; and few join out of conviction. *Relating* to the church remains a very English thing.

Third, religion continues to provide enchantment within the modern world; people know there is more to life than the explainable and visible. Small wonder that churches – even

apparently empty ones – continue to say something to the English, and something about England; that faith is not dead, and is woven into our history, fabric, and identity. ³⁸ The future of the nation lies in a deepening of its appreciation of this past, in all its plurality, tolerance, semi-sacred and semi-secular eccentric Englishness.

Conclusion

That said, we need to be very clear about the challenges we face in mission and ministry today, and in respect of English culture particularly. A colleague and friend of mine, the (late) sociologist of religion Peter Clarke, recounted the following tale only recently. He had come to Cuddesdon for lunch, and he was recalling an overheard conversation between two female postgraduates shortly before he began to lecture. One turned to the other, and said,

‘You know, I think you really should try Roman Catholicism’.

‘Really? Why? I mean, why do you say that?’

‘I don’t know, really. I mean, I just think it’s so totally *you*. I think you might find something in that, I guess. I think it would add something to your life – enhance, it maybe?’.

‘Gosh, really? I had never thought of it that way. It can’t do any harm to try it, right? You know, I might give it a go...’.

This is zeitgeist; and in a single exchange between two women before a lecture begins. Neither one of them was especially religious. But both saw religion as something that might add a dimension to their lives: an enhancement. Religion here is a commodity: a resource that can add value and meaning in much the way that other consumable gifts might. And here, the exhortation is try before you buy.

We already know, I think, that secularisation – whatever that contestable process is – does not produce secularity. Rather, it squeezes and compacts religion into new margins and zones. Faith still flourishes, but as private and personal spirituality. Religion moves from the mainstream to the orbit of leisure time. Consumerism enables individuals to choose their faith, and once chosen, to choose the terms on which they consume it. The customer is king (or queen). Even for those who adopt conservative Christian values and belong to more fundamentalistically-orientated churches, there is plenty of evidence to show that the terms of believing and belonging are now defined more by the members than by the managers and owners.

But lest this sound a tad too complacent, it is important to remember that there is *something* in secularisation. True, whatever that process is supposed to describe, it can probably never do justice to the intrinsically inchoate nature of religious belief that characterised the Western European landscape and its peoples long before the Enlightenment, let alone the industrial revolution of the 19th century and the cultural revolutions of the 20th century. ‘Standard’ secularisation theories are weak and unconvincing because they tend to depend on exaggerating the extent and depth of Christendom. They assume a previous world of monochrome religious allegiance, which is now (of course) in tatters. But in truth, the religious world was much more plural and contested before the 20th century ever dawned.

So what, exactly, has changed? As Woodhead and Catto ³⁹ have shown in their recent book – and despite an understandable reticence to accede too much ground to proponents of secularisation theses – it can still be readily acknowledged that the post-war period in Britain has been one of the most seminal and challenging period for the churches and other faiths in all of time. Leaving aside its own struggles with pluralism, post-colonialism, modernity, postmodernity, and wave after wave of cultural change and challenge, the biggest issue the churches have had to face up to is, ironically, a simple one: choice. Increased mobility, globalisation and consumerism have infected and affected the churches, just as they have touched every other aspect of social life. Duty is dead: the customer is king. It is no surprise, therefore, to discover churches adopting a consumerist mentality, and competing with one another for souls, members, or entering the marketplace itself, and trying to convert tired consumers into revitalised Christians.

Thus, fewer regular or frequent church-goers now attend church twice on a Sunday, which was once normal practice. For most, once is enough. Many who do attend on a regular basis now attend less frequently. Even allowing for holidays and other absences, even the most dedicated church-goer may only be present in church for 70% of the Sundays in any given year. Many clergy now remark on the decline in attendance at Days of Obligation (e.g., saints' days or Ascension-tide). The committed, it seems, are also the busy. The response to this from amongst the more liturgical churches has been to subtly and quietly adapt their practice, whilst preserving the core tradition. For example, the celebration of Epiphany may now take place on the Sunday nearest to January 6th, and not on the day itself. A number of Roman Catholic churches now offer Sunday Mass on Saturday evenings, in order for Sunday to be left as a family day, or for whatever other commitments or consumerist choices that might now fall on the once hallowed day of rest.

Added to this, we also note the rising number of 'new' spiritualities, their range and volume having increased significantly in the post-war era. Again, choice (rather than upbringing, location, etc.) is now a major factor in determining the spiritual allegiances that individuals may develop. Moreover, it is not easy to discern where the boundaries now lie between leisure, exercise and spirituality. As the consumerist-individual asserts their autonomy and right-to-choose, clear divisions between religion and spirituality, sacred and secular, and church and society are more problematic to define. Thus, consumerism and choice simultaneously threatens but also nourishes religion and spirituality. Spiritual self-help books and other products, various kinds of yoga and meditative therapies, plus an ample range of courses and vacations, all suggest that religious affections and allegiances are being transformed in contemporary society rather than being eroded. 'Secular' society seems to be powerless in the face of a curiously stubborn (and growing) social appetite for inchoate religion and nascent spirituality, in all its various forms.

Whilst it is true that many in Western Europe are turning from being religious assumers to religious consumers, and are moving from a culture of religious assumption to religious consumption, in which choice and competition in the spiritual marketplace thrive, there may be little cause for alarm. Faith is just as vibrant in the twenty-first century as it was for the Victorians. It is just that today, in Britain, the landscape of belief really has changed, and that is what the editors so skilfully narrate.

Statistics for English church attendance, if read crudely, retell one of the great lies of the modern age, namely that secularisation is 'real'. It is, rather, an older sociological and interpretative construct that is placed upon select data, and continually reapplied. Thus, secularisation theories tend not to take 'implicit' or 'folk' religion that seriously; and neither do the proponents of the 'classic' theory pay much attention to the rising interest in spirituality. Similarly, the appeal of fundamentalism and new religious movements in the west, to say nothing of the explosive growth in Christianity and Islam in the developing world, are also dismissed. But as Woodhead and Catto explain, and as earlier scholars such as David Martin and Grace Davie confirm, such phenomena cannot be ignored. Religion and faith are diversifying, not dying. This presents new challenges to faith groups, of course. But it indicates a slightly out of control liveliness, not an imminent death.

Ultimately, crude readings of church attendance or plotting declining membership figures for faith groups say very little about the faith of a nation; believing and belonging should not be confused. In contemporary western society, very few people choose not to relate at all to the church, or to mainstream religion. In any secular age, there is space and demand for religion, faith and spirituality. This is important, for it reminds us that religion provides enchantment within modernity, and that in Britain, at least, churches are still often the only bodies that provide public and open places within a community for tears, grief, remembrance, laughter and celebration. Religion in England – Christian and otherwise – is alive and well. But some of the challenges faced in England by churches and other faith groups actually are quite new, and will require some tenacious and imaginative engagement for the mission and ministry of Christian denominations. Anyway, enough prose for now; the poetry of T S Eliot can sum up:

'...the communication
of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living...
...A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England...' [40](#)



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Endnotes

- 1 This paper was originally given as the Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture in 2000, at Westminster Abbey. It has been revised and updated for this edition of *Anvil*
- 2 Paul Vallely, writing of Cardinal Basil Hume, *The Independent*, 31/12/99, Review, p.3
- 3 Moorman 1955: 222
- 4 Hastings 1986: 669ff. Cf. Chadwick, 1975:265
- 5 See Marsh 1998
- 6 Cf. Davie1994
- 7 Eliot 1963
- 8 Paxman 1999; Davies 1999; Strong 1999. Fox 2005
- 9 Colley 1995
- 10 Smith 1998:333ff
- 11 To coin a phrase from David Martin. See A. Walker & M. Percy (Eds.), 2000
- 12 Bede1968
- 13 Bede 1968: 100
- 14 Bede 1968:86-7. [italics mine]
- 15 Wilkinson 1978
- 16 MacCulloch1996: 46
- 17 Bell 1996:197-190
- 18 Aron 1970:207
- 19 Noted exceptions such as David Martin should be explored in more detail. See Martin 1997; cf, 'Sociology and the Church of England' in *Sociologie et Religions: Des Relations Ambigues*, Kadoc, Leuven University Press, No. 23, 1999:131-138
- 20 Thomas 1971:178. This quotation is resonant with David Edwards' observation (echoing Ted Wickham) that the Church of England 'have not lost the inner cities – they never had them'
- 21 Thomas 1971:161-162

22 Thomas 1971:206; Cf. Oliver Heywood, *Diaries*, iv, p.24, (Ed. J. H. Turner, 1885)

23 See Gay 1971

24 *Archdiaconal Visitations in 1578*, [Bedfordshire Historical Records Society, no.69. Bedford, 1990]

25 E.g., (Ed) M. Spurrell, *The Brightwell Parish Diaries*, Oxford Record Society, Vol. 62, 1998

26 Woodforde 1999. See the Introduction by Ronald Blythe, p. vii

27 Marsh 1998: 41

28 Marsh 1998: 41-42. See also Duffy 1992:465; Scarisbrick, 1984 :163; Thomas 1978:190,204

29 For an alternative and more self-conscious view of sociology, see A. Giddens, 1976:159-62

30 A. Russell, *Ibid.*, 1998, p.19. Cf. Bailey 1999

31 R. Currie, A. Gilbert & L. Horsley 1970

32 See Gill, C. Kirk Hadaway & P. Long Mather 1998:509

33 Gill et al 1998:510-514

34 See Brierley & Longley 1991

35 The weekly figure may now only be 7.5%, but critics of Brierley's data have asked what 'member' means here, given that the Church of England has no real concept of membership. Electoral Roll figures are notoriously ambiguous

36 Davie 1994:71.

37 See Heelas, 'in N. Abercrombie and A. Warde (Eds.) 1992:139-166

38 Witness the discussion on the importance of church buildings in rural communities in *Faith in the Countryside, The Report of the Archbishops Commission on Rural Areas*, London, Church House Publishing, 1990. Cf. Jenkins 1999

39 L. Woodhead and R. Catto (Eds.) 2012

40 Eliot 1963: 215&222