

Square; and minutes 1828-83, membership lists 1822-84, accounts 1858-84, and Sunday School minutes 1848-85, of Shacklewell Baptist Church, Stoke Newington, which joined the Devonshire Square meeting in 1884.

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## REVIEW

*The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth 1870 - 1930*  
by Jeffrey Cox. O.U.P. 1982. pp.xii, 322. £22-50.

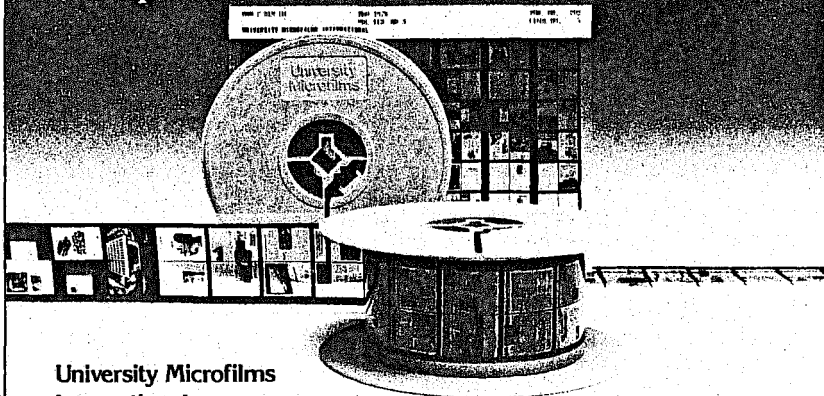
"The churches of England are now almost empty on an ordinary Sunday morning". That opening sentence does not inspire confidence in the powers of observation of an American scholar who must have spent several years in London pursuing his research. Potential readers should, however, be assured that Cox is more reliable as an historian than he is as an observer of contemporary religious practice. His book is, in fact, the most thorough and illuminating study of church life in late Victorian and Edwardian London that has yet appeared. The strength of the work lies in its reluctance to invoke generalized theories of secularization as an historiographical *deus ex machina* to explain the rapid disintegration of Victorian religiosity and in its wealth of detail on the particular experience of South London churches. The mood of Edwardian nonconformity is particularly well captured, and Baptist readers will be interested to find illuminating sketches of such figures as Archibald Brown, Walter Hobbs and S. A. Tipple. Excellent historical material is unfortunately marred by a tendency to impose categories of generalization which will not fit: nonconformist churches are divided into "plebeian" and "liberal" categories, the former being equated with theological conservatism and the latter with middle-class respectability. F. B. Meyer thus emerges as a "liberal" who preached conversion to the working classes in the afternoons but held to safer liturgical ground with his middle-class congregation in the mornings.

Cox wishes to discard theories of secularization as too easy and too "inevitable", and in their place advances an argument in terms of the varying abilities of different churches to compete in the free market of ideas encouraged by the secular state. It is plausibly suggested that the most successful churches in such an environment will be those with a strong emphasis on recruitment and without direct dependence on the state, whereas established churches will be the least successful. The problem about this argument is that the experience of early twentieth-century England was almost precisely the opposite: nonconformity declined drastically, whereas most Anglican indices do not begin to fall sharply until the late 1950s. Cox places most emphasis in attempting to explain the decline of institutional Christianity on the fact that secular agencies progressively displaced the philanthropic functions of the churches, with the result that by

the 1920s the churches had "nothing to say" to the public. Cox thus tends to imply that the motives for Victorian church-going were more utilitarian than religious, though he is reluctant to present the issues so starkly. The possibility that the later failure of the churches to have anything to say may have more to do with theology than with social welfare is almost grasped, but not quite. There is room for debate about the theories advanced in this book, but for any London minister who wishes to understand more clearly the historical soil in which his church is planted, it is strongly recommended.

BRIAN STANLEY

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