

EDITORIAL

The decline of Christianity in Britain is obvious with only about eight per cent of the population ever attending a service regularly. Churches are being converted into restaurants, book shops, public houses and homes. Britain is one of the most secular societies in the western world.

In *The Death of Christian Britain*,¹ Callum G. Brown challenges the generally held view that secularisation has been a long and gradual process beginning with the Industrial Revolution, and instead proposes that it has been a catastrophic short-term phenomenon starting with the 1960s. Brown demonstrates that during the early nineteenth century, evangelical religion flourished and that there was an almost unprecedented growth of institutional religion in Britain between 1945 and 1958.

Brown argues that the decline, when it began in the 1960s, was due to the huge transformation of the role of women. He shows how piety had become feminised during the nineteenth century and that masculinity was regarded as increasingly incompatible with faith. Brown argues that the post-war resurgence of traditional family values created a climate conducive to religious revival. But the liberation of women, along with the sexual emancipation of the 1960s, led women to turn their backs on the Christian religion, with the result that many men 'no longer had to "keep up appearances" in the pews' and this was followed by the 'alienation of the next generation of children'.²

Brown's book has received widespread comment within the secular press. Professor Niall Ferguson in a 'Start the Week' broadcast on Radio 4 spoke of it as 'a tremendously impressive book and wonderful social history'. The *Irish Times* felt that 'Church leaders should not ignore this book.' *The Independent* said that 'This book should be read by anybody who cares about the future of religion. [Brown's] statistics are convincing and disquieting. The personal testimonies he quotes are moving and revealing. He shows clearly that Christianity, as we have known it in this country, is in its death throes.' Antonia Swinson in *Scotland on Sunday* spoke of it as 'A very brave, readable book, and a marvellous social history lesson.... Brown has a wonderful final sentence: "Britain is

¹ Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London, 2001).

² *Ibid.*, p 192.

showing the rest of the world how religion can die.” I hope for all our sakes he is wrong. But this is a powerful wake-up call.’

Brown’s thesis may be inspired less by a passionate concern for Christianity than by a desire to trounce academic rivals, but this book should be read by anybody who cares about the future of religion. His statistics are convincing and disquieting. Brown argues that within a generation Christianity will merely be a minority movement. Organised religion is on the decline in Britain, many denominations are short of recruits to the ministry, and many people continue to believe without belonging. Brown’s conclusion is that although churches will ‘continue to exist in some skeletal form with increasing commitment from decreasing numbers of adherents... the culture of Christianity has gone in the Britain of the new millennium’.³

The challenge that such a book has on the Christian Church will cause some people to bury their heads even deeper in the sand and bemoan the state of society, without asking serious questions about what it means to be church in the twenty-first century and how we can engage with our contemporary culture in mission and evangelism.

We must take account of the impact of economic and cultural change in our personal and corporate lives as Christians, in our homes and families, at work and in the local community, and in the beliefs and values of society at large. Our mission must be engaged with the social realities of Scottish society, and not be culturally wedded to a Scotland now largely gone. We need a careful and considered assessment of the conditions of our society and the way in which we can minister the love of God to a lost world.

The Special Commission on Review and Reform, set up by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1999 to look at the ‘primary purposes of the church and the shape of the church as we enter a new millennium’ will bring ‘proposals for continuing reform’ to the General Assembly in May 2001.

Peter Neilson, author of the new report, commented in an article published by the *Scotsman* newspaper on 14 March 2001 that ‘Change is in the air. Across the country the people of the Church are restless. There is a deep feeling that things are not as they should be.... New styles of churches are being given the space to grow without being pressed into a template of a previous generation... some churches are getting on with the job of being the Church for a new society.’ Sadly ‘there is another side. Youth initiatives are often starved of money and support. Worship

³ Ibid., p. 198.

can be a bore and a chore. Pews are treated with the reverence of ancient idols. There is a massive absence of passion for mission and evangelism. Fear dresses up as caution.... Risk is a stranger.'

Yet as well as contextualising our message, we need to rediscover a fresh confidence in the good news of God's love for humankind and in the power of the Spirit to renew his Church. Although there are several dangers involved in looking to revival as the answer to all our problems, the conviction is spreading that only an experience of revival can touch the needs of the churches of today and of our society. Jim Packer defines it as 'God visiting his people, touching their hearts and deepening his work of grace in their lives'.⁴

As we face the 'Death of Christian Britain' may God give us the courage to change. May he give us the conviction that as churches we have often been more concerned with our survival than catching the missionary heart of our God. May he fill us with a confidence to cry out in prayer for the outpouring of his Spirit on the lives of our congregations.

⁴ Article on Revival in *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester, 1988), p. 588.