

GOD'S UNWELCOME RECOVERY

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*To my ever supportive family: nuclear,
extended and church.
And to this imperfect yet wonderful country
in which we can discuss our disagreements
with openness and candour.*

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Preface

When I remarked to one my friends at church that I was writing this book, he quipped that it would likely be short.

Of course he was right in one respect: this is a comparatively short book; but his remark only spurred me on, because it highlighted the sense of hopelessness and cynicism that has settled in some parts of the church in the UK (as well as other parts of the Western world). It spoke of a grim fatalism about the way so many believe the church is going. A kind of “gallows humour” from the condemned.

Moreover it worried me, because it highlighted the fact that the narrative of decline that is the focus of this book had obviously infected the church as well.

For enemies of the church this will be welcome news of course, but they too need to read on; for the book concerns itself not simply with errors in this picture of church decline, but with full appreciation for the valuable work the church is doing quietly in every corner of the country. It is written in the hope that, in redressing the severely lop-sided image we have of the church, we will be able to take a more informed view of what is really happening and of the value it brings to the life of the nation.

Nobody knows what is going to happen to the church in the UK: lots of people try to make projections and

predictions – as they do about any subject – but this book is written in the belief that we need to rethink some of our current assumptions. Maybe then we shall re-evaluate what we think about the place of the church in modern, changing Britain. If this book achieves even that much, then it will have achieved its purpose.

INTRODUCTION

Who Says the Church is Dying?

This book argues that elements of the “new establishment” have been seeking to present a picture of Christianity in terminal decline in Britain, and that they do this for three specific purposes.¹

First, it allows this “new establishment” an excuse to avoid discussing religion as much as possible, other than in negative terms (like abuse by priests and Islamic terrorism). The ultimate goal of this negativity is to encourage religion towards a quiet death. We shall consider the motives for this in Chapter 4, where we analyse the impact that the historical struggle between church and state has had on the mindset of the modern political class.

Secondly, in encouraging the death of religion they are being philanthropic for society at large. There is a belief among the “new establishment” that religion has been the principle cause of conflict throughout history, and so in aiding “the death of religion” they believe they are actually benefitting humanity.

Thirdly, and I believe this is the main motivation: the continued survival of religion is anathema to the Marxist narrative of history that we all seem to have swallowed whole. It is a narrative which tells us that humanity has been in continual progression throughout its existence; religion, which is equated with superstition, is eroded as “enlightened thought” (science) breaks the hold of religion over a fearful and ignorant populous. This worldview is the essence of the original Star Trek vision of humanity, in which religion is rejected as another superstition.

In politics this movement of enlightenment is frequently expressed as “progress”. This aids the classification of those who might have an objection to change for change’s sake as “dinosaurs” – the term used by the British Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg to describe those who had qualms about the redefinition of marriage in the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013.²

So in this book I shall try to correct misconceptions about the decline of Christianity and expose the agenda which drives those misconceptions. I hope not only to expose a myth which seems to have become a fact, but also to encourage Christians in Britain to take heart and to keep going.

It’s a church that could certainly do with the encouragement of a positive message about both its vitality and its contribution to society, for one of the most tragic aspects of the impact of the “decline narrative” is that the church itself seems to have bought into it. The Right Reverend Tim Thornton, Bishop of Truro, was recently

quoted as saying that the Church of England will struggle to exist in ten years’ time.³

Census data

In 2001 the optional question of religious belief was added to the census for the first time since 1851. It reported that 37.2 million people had chosen to call themselves Christians – a figure that equates to about 71% of the population. When the same question was included in the 2011 census, the number had dropped to 33.2 million and 59.3% of the total population.⁴

This was a substantial drop, but it was pointed out by the Christian think tank Theos at the time of the 2011 census that the question was voluntary. And it was right at the end of the survey among the identity questions. Furthermore, the option to tick “Christianity” was below that of “No Religion”. It is therefore not surprising that 7.2 million people chose not to answer the question: a number that is significant enough to have made quite a difference to the results.

But whatever the quibbles about the style or wording of the questions, the figures from the censuses seem clear enough: fewer people were self-identifying as Christians. What’s more, the findings were in line with a Parliamentary report on social indicators on religion in general, concluded that there were around 570,000 fewer Christians year on year between 2004 and 2010.⁵ These findings confirmed one element of the report on Christian decline in the West that

was published by Pew, the highly respected Washington-based think tank in 2013.⁶ The report highlighted that in 1900 some 80% of the world's Christians lived in Europe, but by 2005 that had fallen to 40% and was projected to fall to just 30% by 2050.

Religious polls

These findings are given further weight by the data collected in various polls on attitudes to religion and spirituality conducted in the UK over a number of years.

For example, the Conservative party peer, Lord Ashcroft, conducts regular polling on lots of different social attitudes across the UK, and his large sample (8,000) was asked in November 2013 about their membership of religious groups or bodies. Over a third (38%) said they had no religion. Lord Ashcroft's findings (Populus did the actual polling) matched the findings of two YouGov polls that were taken in December 2013 in preparation for the ongoing Westminster Faith Debates. These numbers suggested a growing atheist trend, especially when we see that those citing "no religion" were actually in the majority (51%) for the 18-24 year-olds in Ashcroft's survey, and nearly a half (44%) of the 25-34 year-olds, suggesting a continuing journey of secularization along successive generations.⁷

These recent surveys are backed up by academic research over a number of years, which has also tracked a downward trend in religious affiliation (of any kind). For example, the

Labour Force Survey asked questions about beliefs in both 2004 and 2010. In 2004, 15.7% of respondents selected "no religion"; in 2010 that figure had risen to 22.4%. The numbers in the British Social Attitudes Surveys of 2001 and 2009 were even more clear in the picture they presented: 41.2% of those surveyed chose "no religion" in 2001, rising to 50.7% in 2009.⁸

We recognize, of course, that surveys are not identical in their approach, and one of the reasons for the difference between the findings could lie in the different questions that were asked. So the Labour Force Survey asked, "What is your religion, even if you are not currently practising?", whereas the British Social Attitudes Survey asked, "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?" Of course, the questions drive at the same outcome, but whereas the Labour Force Survey question allowed people to think about their spirituality in a more open-ended way, the British Social Attitudes Survey directed them towards institutional religion. It is therefore likely that the British Social Attitudes Survey was, at least partly, a comment on the lack of attachment to institutional faith, rather than an express rejection of the notion of God. And that is important.

Even so, both these surveys, and the 2006 ICM poll for the *Guardian* newspaper (which showed 26% of respondents having "no religion"), certainly continued the narrative of decline which we have seen in the other polls.⁹

Church surveys

It's not just polls from non-religious organizations that would have us believe that the church is in terminal decline in the UK and Europe.

Just look at the Tearfund survey on churchgoing published in 2007.¹⁰ That report, which was based on a 7,000-strong survey pool, put the number of Christians in the UK far lower than the census in 2011 did, claiming that 53% of the total population were Christians.

Leaving aside the figures for a moment, the observations of the analysts bear some reporting because, as already mentioned, they speak into a sense of relative hopelessness that has infected some parts of the church in the UK (indeed, the minority world more broadly). For in her introduction to the report Revd Lynda Barley, Head of Research & Statistics for the Church of England, declares gloomily that "we do not see people worshipping in our churches to any significant extent and growing numbers have lost touch with church in any shape or form". She added:

This Tearfund research helps us to understand that the further people are from the church (in terms of churchgoing), the less likely they are to attend in the future. Alongside this is the growing realisation that most people today see themselves as 'spiritual' rather than in any sense 'religious'.

It is a vision of de-institutionalization and globalizing syncretic beliefs which point towards a decline of any kind of single believing identity.

Nor is the sense of doom confined to the Protestant part of the church. David Barrett of the *Catholic Herald* dolefully proclaimed that baptisms, ordinations, and marriages were all in decline according the Catholic church's new figures.¹¹ His article focused on the fact that the 1960s had been a high point for Catholic church attendance, but that things had been rather downhill since then.

Adding to the sense of inevitable death for Christianity in the UK, Peter Brierley, former head of Christian Research, addressed a conference of Pentecostal believers in May 2010 and quoted number after number that pointed in the same downward direction.¹² According to the conference report he "painted a harrowing picture of the decline in attendance across English counties in the last 12 years". Particularly significant were the attendance numbers Brierley quoted for those under 20 years old, and for those approaching middle age, both of whom seemed to be drifting away. He ended with a stark warning:

While Christianity is likely to continue declining, other religions in Britain will see growth, particularly Islam, with the number of Muslims expected to grow to 3 million by 2020... The problem is that the ministerial age matches the congregation but not the people they need to reach.

Brierley's words are sobering for anyone who is interested in Christian participation in the life of Britain. And yet, around the same time as his and Tearfund's report was published, Micklethwait and Wooldridge were publishing their *God is Back* (a book whose findings are discussed in the next chapter) which gives a different vision of the future. So a Catholic and an atheist were making predictions of a future that were somewhat less dark than the Protestant evangelicals.

Nevertheless, the truth of Brierley's dire predictions seemed to have been confirmed in March 2014 when the *Daily Mail* pushed a story citing new estimates that put the total number of Church of England attendees at about 800,00. The story also highlighted that the number was less than half of what it was in the 1960s and that, furthermore, it was part of a broader decline in Christian faith generally.¹³

So in this book I hope not just to highlight the barely noticed changes in church attendance which are creating a groundswell across the country, but also to stop the juggernaut of "decline narrative" from flattening the morale of a church that is doing vital work, in all kinds of ways, across that country.

In order to do that the next few chapters will explore and refute the claims of decline by analysing the numbers for and against the "decline narrative". The second part of the book will turn from the numbers to the motivations behind the decline narrative that has taken root. This will bring us to the final chapters which will discuss the outworkings of a more informed view about Christianity in Britain.

Of course, this is not the only book to wade into these stormy waters. Over the last few years, particularly since the advent of the 9/11 and 7/7 atrocities, religion has rarely been out of the news. But while many books have looked at Islam in relation to the changing face of Europe, far fewer have sought to evaluate the place of Christianity in Britain, or to challenge current received wisdom about the decline of Christianity.

Recent literature

The book which is perhaps closest to this one in terms of subject matter is *Church Growth in Britain* (2012) edited by the Durham University scholar David Goodhew. It is a series of essays that explore the truth behind the facts and figures we see concerning the health of the church. Not surprisingly it has been a very useful source, as I have sought to find out the reasons behind why church growth is not being reported. The work of David Goodhew and his co-authors has made my task much easier.

Another important book I acknowledge a debt to is John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge's *God is Back*, subtitled "How the Rise of Faith is Changing the World" (2007). This is a book whose rigorous research, sharp analysis, valuable insights and fearlessness in speaking up for what could be seen as unpopular opinions have been immensely encouraging to me. *God is Back* was global in scope and had relatively little on Britain (or continental Europe), as its

primary focus was the impact of Christian growth in Africa and Asia, but their citation of the little glimmers of growth that they spotted back in the mid-noughties became the foundation (along with *Church Growth in Britain*) on which Chapter 1 is built.

Another popular work, this time by the US academic Philip Jenkins, is *God's Continent*. This looks specifically compares the places of Christianity and Islam on the religious map of Europe. Jenkins' main interest is in trying to understand the impact of Muslim immigration to the continent, from both a religious and broader cultural perspective. His excellent book contains a lot of very useful figures and observations, to which my book owes a debt of gratitude. However, we shall be exploring a different field from that which Jenkins surveyed, as well as new data unavailable to Jenkins when he was writing.

Next, I am indebted to a tragically little-known article by Jenny Taylor based on her PhD research called "After Secularism: Inner City Governance and the New Religious Discourse". It was later included in a volume edited by the highly respected sociologist of religion Professor Grace Davie of Exeter University. It was written back in the mid-1990s, yet even at that time it spotted the emerging trends which we will get to later – almost fifteen years before many of those mentioned in this book began to take note of them.

There are a number of prominent "new atheists" in this ongoing dialogue, including the bestselling authors Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. Many of the perspectives in my book challenge Callum Brown's

analysis in *The Death of Christian Britain, Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (2009) where he argues that British Christianity experienced a rapid, catastrophic decline over the course of the last two centuries. Brown's work has therefore been an invaluable source upon which to think about the counter-arguments which form the core of this book.

Closer though to the perspectives in this book are the set of essays found in *Re-Defining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives* (2011), which brings together a distinguished set of scholars to analyse the impact of Christianity on many differing aspects of British culture, from politics to art and beyond. The observations of Jane Garnett and her colleagues have been very helpful in thinking through the direction of this book. The same must be said for Nick Spencer's *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible* (2011).

In 2005 Jim Wallis's bestselling *God's Politics* ("How the Right got it wrong and the Left doesn't get it") explored the way that Christianity gets used (and sometimes abused) on the political scene. Wallis was focused on American politics and on the principles that should underpin religion in public policy, but his observations were certainly pertinent on the opposite side of the Atlantic as well. But I shall not be engaging with the theology of politics in the same way. Instead I shall be trying to debunk the myths and challenge the assumptions about Christianity in the UK which seem to have become so ingrained that even the church itself seems to believe them.

It is important that these perceptions are challenged, not only for the sake of accuracy, but also so that all of us – whatever we think of faith or Christianity or religion in general – can think through the place of the church in public life with both eyes open, rather than only one. For, if current misconceptions are left unchallenged, politicians are more likely to enact policies which take no account of Christian perspectives that will be deemed irrelevant or altogether redundant. Furthermore, I hope that challenging the negativism and the narrative of decline will encourage the wider, non-churchgoing public to think about whether the end of the church in the UK is really so desirable.

CHAPTER 1

Green Shoots

In this chapter we'll look at the body of data which paints a very different picture of church vitality, and explain why there is good reason to believe that the church in Britain will grow in the years to come. Useful sources of data will be those available on the impact of "Fresh Expressions", *Quadrant* from the Christian Research Institute, as well as the excellent work done by Eric Kaufmann at UCL. As we wend our way over the mountain of data, we'll be driving towards a question: "If this is really what's happening, then why is it not being acknowledged?" That will become the pivot around which we'll move from dealing with the "real picture" to deconstructing the misrepresentations that lie behind the story of "decline" that we have heard so much about.

Not so splendid isolation

If ever there was a difficult task, then showing that the church in the UK is actually growing rather than declining has to rank as one of the most impossible of the lot. Even my oldest son, who is a Christian himself, looked at me

incredulously when I said to him that the church in the UK as a whole is actually increasing rather than declining. In reply he didn't come back at me with figures; he simply gave me an anecdote from his own life. It was one that is almost certainly repeated all over the country: "At college, I'm pretty sure that I'm the only Christian. I mean, no one else I know even knows anything about the Bible, and they laugh at me if I talk about it."

This sense of isolation is perfectly natural. Over the past three years the Church of England has been conducting some extensive research on the reasons for growth or decline in church attendance. Some of its findings are expected, such as the fact that areas of growth are generally those which have a church leadership with vision and a congregation which is keen to look outside its own walls.¹ But, in the executive summary of the report, the authors make it clear that there is a real problem with successive generations becoming more and more "secular".

My son's experience would therefore seem increasingly to be the norm. The recent report from the Anglican Research and Statistics unit bears out his observation, for in the summary of their findings they argued:

The reason for decline in affiliation and attendance is the failure to replace older generations of churchgoers. The problem is not adults leaving the Church: it is that half of the children of churchgoing parents do not attend when they reach adulthood.²

All this provides fuel for the notion that the church in the UK really is in decline.

A light in the darkness

A report came out in 2013 by the Parliamentary Research Service which showed in clear figures that the decline been reported up to the 2011 census was being sharply reversed. In 2011 the Christian population of the UK had stood at 59.3%, whereas in the Parliamentary paper the Christian population was cited as 59.9%.³ If we assume the accuracy of both figures, this means that in just two years the Christian population had risen by approximately 320,000 people. That is pretty astonishing growth for a two-year period. Put in perspective, it is the same as the entire population of Reading being added to the church within two years.

So has this come out of the blue? Back in 2007 Wooldridge and Micklethwait's *God is Back* spoke of Europe's signs of life in the church. The research they cited is solid and extensive but, on the evidence of the Parliamentary paper, perhaps conservative and cautious.⁴ Maybe, at the time they were writing, the signs were not that obvious. Certainly not many analysts were pointing out the shifts, which remained either missed or ignored. We'll get into why so many have failed to acknowledge the change later in the book, but first we need to spend some time making sure that the findings of the Parliamentary paper, and Micklethwait and Wooldridge's observations, do have a solid foundation.