

The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding secularisation 1800-2000

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Sheridan Gilley

Despite a certain academic heaviness, with no fewer than fifty-seven pages of notes, bibliography and index, and despite an occasionally disagreeable academic vocabulary, of which more anon, this book has a pleasantly simple knock-down argument, that Christianity in Britain enjoyed a long nineteenth century of prosperity, between 1800 and 1960, and only began to go into terminal decline in the early 1960s. Indeed the first page declares that this happened 'really quite suddenly in 1963', irresistibly suggesting the famous verse by Philip Larkin:

Sexual intercourse began

In nineteen sixty-three .

Between the end of the Chatterley ban

And the Beatles' first LP.

Brown's thesis is directed partly against Christian optimists, especially of the liberal kind, who consider recent social and religious change as being for the good of Christianity. It also, however, has as its target the historians and sociologists who believe that the decay of Christianity in Britain has a much longer history, going back to the eighteenth or nineteenth century, and that the recent movement towards secularity has merely been its acceleration. Brown conceives the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, 1800-1960, as the era of an ascendant puritan Protestant Evangelicalism, stronger among women than among men. Secularisation consists in good part in the abandonment by women of these religious values, but it is a secularisation that is no older than the contraceptive pill.

Brown derives the idea of secularisation from the collection and study of religious statistics by Evangelical movements and individuals like the early Methodists and Thomas Chalmers. The figures which they assembled of converts and church members created 'the myth of the unholy city' which was taken up by Marxists, sociologists and historians as the history of secularisation. Statistical enquiry, however, dispenses with large areas of religion which are not simply quantifiable. Brown sets out instead the idea of a 'discursive Christianity' or 'Christian discourse' which defined the 'protocols' of ordinary personal belief and behaviour in terms of the Protestant conversionism of Evangelical Christianity, and which determined the ordinary Briton's definition of the self and its history. This makes much of Brown's work read as an account of the rise and decline of Evangelicalism, not as an ecclesiastical movement but as a body of opinions and attitudes, which were reflected and expressed in popular literature and oral testimony about the detail of ordinary lives and about how religion helped or failed to make sense of them.

This is the great delight of the book, its pleasure in the riches of the literature of propaganda and personal testimony about the role of religion. The chief characteristic of this literature was that women were regarded as innately pious, and men as naturally irreligious. Men were inclined to drunkenness, smoking, gambling, lust and sport on Sundays, so that religion itself was a profoundly gendered thing, recommending the female values and virtues of chastity, modesty, temperance, sobriety, thrift, Sabbath observance and good house keeping to a partly or mostly anarchic male population. Even in its decline between the wars, when an explicitly female religiosity was transformed into a more secular domesticity as a 'cult of contentment', there was still a Christian discipline required of women. In the era before 1960, this 'discourse' was dominant far beyond the world of militant or conventional churchgoers. Brown's conclusion is that the term secularisation should be ditched to describe the period until 1960, because the general 'discourse' of Britain, the ideological system in terms of which women made sense of themselves, and through them, the 'discourse' of a great many men, was still a Christian one.

It is one of the artless elements of the book that Brown sets out the materials for an older, alternative view, which saw secularisation in terms of urbanisation or social class. Yet the easy judgement that religious behaviour was a bourgeois rather than a proletarian matter, or a rural rather than a city one, breaks down upon a closer analysis of ecclesiastical statistics. Recent study indicates a much higher level of urban working class participation in religious institutions than has hitherto been suspected, a majority of churchgoers being working class between 1800 and the 1960s, even if these were mostly from the skilled working class or were women. Statistics for church membership in Britain peaked in 1904-1905, but those for the later high level of 1959 were not far below them, and the 1940s and early 1950s actually witnessed a major church revival.

Church attendance fell more sharply than church membership or affiliation in the first half of the twentieth century, but Brown is striving to show that in the end, the hegemony of an idea is not simply demonstrable by statistics, but exists in the form of a more intangible ethos and atmosphere, and is no less real for all that. In his view, secularisation is chiefly a matter of the transformation of the mores of women, and that suggests that the changes of the 1960s were more of degree than of kind; or perhaps, were of so great a degree that they constituted a degree of kind.

I would subscribe to the latter version of Brown's thesis. This sort of change had been seen before, but it was on a new scale, and it happened now to the female population who had been most affected by religion in

general and who constituted the mass of churchgoers.

There is a nice paradox about Brown's argument. A conventional feminist might regard the Churches, which were nearly all led and conducted by men, as an instrument of control of passive and virtuous women. There are some hints of this in what Brown writes about feminine domesticity, but generally, he regards the Evangelical ethic as the means by which women feminised the general culture and tried to curb male vice. There is, however, a considerable lacuna in his work, in that Catholics are treated simply as a species of conversionist Protestants, which would have astonished both Protestants and Catholics. In fact, practising Catholics rather better exemplify some of Brown's themes than practising Protestants: they were predominantly working class and female, and their Church continued to grow until the late 1950s. Again, there seems to me to be little attempt to relate these changes to the wider breakdown in the stable communities which had been gradually civilised and christianised after the Industrial Revolution, and which began to disappear with the Blitz and the post-war reconstruction and dispersal of working class neighbourhoods, and then the marginalisation and decline of heavy industry, while in a work which depends so much upon understanding women, there is no entry in the Index for contraception.

In spite of my irritation with Brown's highfalutin' language of `discourses' and `discursiveness', which could be put in simpler English, this is one of the most entertaining, moving and stimulating works which I have read upon its subject, modern British Christianity. It has the ring of authenticity to me, coinciding, as its author also says about himself, with my own memories of the world I knew when I was young.

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[2]

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