

Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain

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This study by Callum Brown, Professor of Religious and Cultural History at the University of Dundee, forms part of a larger series of general survey volumes entitled 'Religion, Politics and Society in Britain' under the general editorship of Keith Robbins. As such its brief is wide, and, as the preface lays out, it aims to provide the 'first comprehensive narrative of religion in British society and culture throughout the twentieth century' (p. xvi).

There have of course been general survey volumes before, perhaps most notably Adrian Hastings' *A History of English Christianity, 1920–1985* (1). Brown's study ranges a great deal more broadly than this, and it is indeed a most significant and welcome aspect of the book that it considers areas of the subject that have been comparatively neglected: it pays particular attention to non-English, and in particular Scottish material, and to the trajectories taken by faiths other than Christianity. It is also wholly un-ecclesiastical in character, and indeed the reader requiring a summary of the subject matter of traditional church history of this period—liturgical change, bishops, and synods—will probably need to look elsewhere. The subject of this study is the people, and not the churches.

Brown rightly chooses to situate his account in the context of three major world trends: firstly, the secularization, or perhaps de-Christianization of greater Europe; secondly, a worldwide growth of militancy in various forms in many of the religious traditions; and thirdly, the rise of the 'new age' or 'spiritual revolution', the de-centring of religious experience and the move away from structures, membership, and codification of doctrine, particularly in the Christian west. The pattern of much of Brown's narrative will be

familiar to those acquainted with his earlier study *The Death of Christian Britain* (2), with the disintegration of Christian culture happening very suddenly and catastrophically in the 1960s, rather than being part of a century-long gradual decline. Bringing the narrative of Christian Britain up to the turn of the millennium, Brown rightly focuses on the experience of non-Christian minorities in the UK, the progressive adaptation to and accommodation with change happening within the Christian churches, and on a rise in religious militancy in the last two decades (of which more below).

In short, Brown has written an important study which is wide-ranging and stimulating in its selection of source material, ranging from printed periodicals to oral testimony and autobiography, and from statistics on church attendance to naming practices. The writing is often evocative, and particularly so on the ferment of the 1960s, the most colourful of decades, and his eye for a vivid detail is acute: the story of the notorious Rector of Stiffkey finds a place, along with the jostling of Billy Graham by a Soho crowd in 1966, and the silence of Evan Roberts.

It may be considered invidious to criticize a general study such as this for omissions and weight of emphases, given the diversity of British religion during the period. However, as noted above, the study does lay some claim to comprehensiveness, and I should like to raise a series of points at which different emphases might have produced a different account.

The first concerns Brown's treatment of the motors of religious change. Whilst the book notes the principal historiographical frames through which the question may and has been viewed (pp. 8–15), the body of the text, whilst masterly in its description of the progress of religious change and its effects, seems less concerned as to its causes. It is perhaps in the realm of religious *ideas* that the lack of focus on causation is most acute. For instance, Brown rightly groups together the sweeping legislative change in the later sixties (the Sexual Offences Act and Abortion Act of 1967, and the earlier Lady Chatterley trial) but touches only lightly on the tangled cluster of debates relating to the nature of the state, sexuality, human nature, and the person that were both implicit and explicit in the debates surrounding them. The 1950s and 1960s were a period of remarkable intellectual change, and the study would have profited from giving those changes greater weight.

Whilst the decline of religious behaviour, as measured by the traditional indicators of church attendance, baptisms, and so on, was indeed dramatic in the middle and latter part of the century, one feels from Brown's account that such changes can be taken as read—that they were simply an inevitable result of the victory of right-thinking people and the shrugging-off of prurience and conservative cowardice. Brown on occasion allows his authorial objectivity to slip, which needlessly obscures his argument. The churches in 1900 were 'past-masters in producing good spin on their own performance' (p. 76). The 36,431 Londoners responding during the Billy Graham meetings of 1954–5 are described as a 'minute' total (p. 195), but the 350 initiates of Hare Krishna between 1976–83 were 'immensely influential ... shattering narrow conceptions of religion' (pp. 263–4). There are also explicit value judgements on some of the issues under examination, with the authorial 'we' occasionally allowed to presume to speak on behalf of the reader. The 'new world' envisioned by Archbishop Randall Davidson at the close of the First World War is 'a chimera to us' (p. 99) Before 9-11 'we comprehended our world as a glide from religion to reason, from talking redemptive states to talking welfare states' (p. xv). The arguments advanced against the ordination of women may well have been 'sexist, absurd, illogical and hypocritical' (p. 253), but in the context of this study, their correctness is beside the point.

A second issue, which is closely connected to the first, relates to Brown's treatment of the religious 'establishment'. Brown is often careful to note the divisions within the churches into liberal and conservative positions. The stir caused by *Honest to God*, by John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, is skilfully evoked, and Robinson was indeed to appear for the *defence* in the Lady Chatterley trial. This care over detail is, however, frequently undermined by a rhetorical tendency to speak of an undifferentiated 'establishment', a stubborn obstacle to change. Thus the 'forces of puritanism' rose up against the sexual revolution, represented by Mary Whitehouse, 'an artless parody of anti-intellectualism', but the same 'forces of church reaction' finally fall silent in the face of the legislative changes of the late 1960s (pp. 248–9, 267).

This rhetorical tendency to adopt too straightforward a progressive-reactionary typology (which, it must be stressed, is belied by much of Brown's detail) tends to obscure the intricacy of the negotiation between continuity and change going on within the 'establishment' and the constitution of that establishment itself. The 'establishment' was a remarkably amorphous and mobile construct, capacious enough to embrace the usual corporate bodies of church, law, and politics, but to a large degree populated by the looser groupings of civil society. The establishment was also able eventually to embrace an outsider figure such as Benjamin, eventually Baron Britten, and it was W. H. Auden who expressed equivocatory gratitude that his homosexuality had 'saved me from becoming a pillar of the Establishment, and it *might not even have done that* if I hadn't bolted to America' (my italics) (3). A great deal of work remains to be done to trace the shifting and overlapping subsets of the several establishments in British society, and the varying trajectories of resistance and adaptation to, and adoption of, changing ideas, and such a bi-polar picture of progress and reaction as Brown seems to present tends to obscure them.

It was also the case that change within the churches was sometimes *driven* by the clergy, with little enthusiasm, and often opposition, from the laity. Brown rightly notes the efforts to introduce 'pop' church music (pp. 264–5), but implies that it was primarily a reactive movement, driven by changes in popular culture. The present author has argued at length elsewhere that the introduction of pop into church provoked several varying trajectories of reaction, with clergy, church musicians, and the laity lined up on each side of the arguments for and against its adoption (4). The same might also be argued in relation to the introduction of modern art into Anglican churches, with the experiments of Walter Hussey, Vicar of St Matthew's, Northampton and Dean of Chichester being often supported by a minority of clergy, vigorously supported by art-critical voices (notably Sir Kenneth Clark, an establishment figure par excellence), but often vehemently opposed by laity, both active members of the church and not (5). The reactions prompted from *outside* the churches to the advent of revised liturgies in the Church of England in the 1970s show that lay religious conservatism could remain as vigorous outside the churches as within them, if not indeed more so.

The final area with which I should like to engage, which is related to the question of the conservative nature of the establishment, is that of the labelling of conservative religion. This is by way of an elaboration on themes left implicit in Brown's study, and arguably unavoidable so, given the constraints of a chronological narrative. Several terms denoting conservatism appear throughout, including 'fundamentalism', 'puritanism', 'militancy', 'evangelicalism', and 'revivalism'. 'Puritanism', when conceived of as a daily, lived concern with personal behaviour, is perhaps reasonably stable as a term, although its historic and pejorative overtones cannot be reckoned without. Fundamentalism, a much more problematic term, does not receive a clear definition at any point. Christian fundamentalism, in its US incarnation, is characterized by high levels of adherence, increased political activism, and the adoption of Creationism or 'intelligent design' (p. 12). In the UK, where (as Brown rightly points out) Christian fundamentalism has not been as strong, it has tended to be characterized by a strict adherence to the literal sense of Biblical injunction (pp. 117–19). When defined solely in these terms of attitudes of sacred texts, there are (as Malise Ruthven has suggested) reasonable grounds for labelling the vast majority of Muslims as 'fundamentalist', when defined very narrowly on the basis of the orthodox view of the authorship of the Koran (6). Given the present state of our public discourse, particular care is needed to distinguish between forms of militancy, and to delineate more precisely what is meant by 'fundamentalism'.

An urgent task, and one which Brown begins to undertake but is restrained from completing by the dictates

of the shape of the book, is to begin to examine the different causes of religious activism. Such activism can be motivated by the simple desire to preserve a societal status quo (which may often be evident among those of only the loosest relationship to any established church). It may be motivated by a desire, when under perceived pressure, to carve out space, be it legislative or physical, in which one might continue to practice one's faith in private and unmolested. In its highest key, such militancy may be motivated by a more thorough-going intent to re-convert secular society to the true path, whether by door-to-door evangelism or by lethal force. When Ian Paisley, Mgr Bruce Kent, Peter Tatchell, or the London bombers of 7 July 2005 might all reasonably be described as 'militant', more precise terms of art are needed for the task of understanding religious activism in late-twentieth-century Britain.

These cavils aside, Brown is to be applauded for his attempt to encompass a period of often bewildering religious diversity. The study will doubtless find a wide readership amongst scholars, students, and general readers and, like *The Death of Christian Britain* before it, provoke and shape debate on religion and society in modern Britain.

Notes

1. First published in 1986, and subsequently revised twice, to extend to the year 2000. The fourth edition appeared in 2001, published by SCM Press. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (London, 2000). It was reviewed by Sheridan Gilley for *Reviews in History* (see <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/gilleys.html> [2]). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Auden to Christopher Isherwood, quoted in N. Jenkins, 'Historical as Munich. Auden at 100: Who is he now ?', *TLS* 9/2/2007, 12–15, at 12. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. (co-authored with Ian Jones, University of Manchester), 'Anglican "Establishment" Reactions to "Pop" Church Music in England, c.1956–1991' in *Elite and Popular Religion*, ed. K. Cooper and J. Gregory, *Studies in Church History*, 42 (2006), pp.429–41. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Some sense of the reactions to Hussey's commissions may be found in his *Patron of Art* (London, 1985), pp. 67–73. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. M. Ruthven, *Fundamentalism. The Search for Meaning* (Oxford, 2004), p. 60. On Christian fundamentalism, see the classic study by James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London, 1977; second edition 1981). [Back to \(6\)](#)

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