

## The Religious Crisis of the 1960s

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Peter Webster

The 1960s, it seems, are always with us. The media weakness for anniversaries and the broadcast time afforded by digital television issued last year in a series of programmes on BBC4 concerning the double anniversary of the Wolfenden Report (1957) and the consequent Sexual Offences Act (1967). Similarly, at the time of writing there are the first stirrings of what promises to be an extended media retrospective on *les événements* of 1968. This media interest is not purely historical, since, Austin Powers-style nostalgia aside, the 1960s are still widely made to carry significant symbolic weight in contemporary social and political argument. Veteran *soixante-huitard* Tariq Ali has reflected on the lost vision and idealism among those on the political left, in an article in *The Guardian* entitled: 'Where has all the rage gone?' In the same paper, another columnist confessed that he had not been born to see 1968, 'but I yearn for its dizzying spirit'.  
[\(1\)](#)

Among religious commentators, the assessment of the legacy of the 1960s has tended to be more downbeat. Events of the period, both within and outside the churches, are often central to narratives of how the churches came to be in their present (supposedly) denuded state. The path forward now often involves the reversal of much that was done and said then. In Roman Catholic debate, the central event is the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) which (as Hugh McLeod outlines) is often regarded either as a brave and prophetic attempt at reforms that were both inevitable and right, or the precipitant of calamitous decline in church attendances and vocations to the priesthood (pp. 11-12). For the contributors to the 1980 collection *Ritual Murder*, the process (as they saw it) of the wholesale abandonment by the Church of England of the poetic riches of the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorised Version was begun in earnest in the 1960s; 'a course redolent of the botched idealism and class paternalism of that lost decade'.  
[\(2\)](#) Differently again, British conservative evangelical critics of the moral decline of the nation have tended, both at the time and

since, to see the cluster of reforming legislation of the late 1960s as the insertion of the thin end of the wedge into the nation's moral fibre. (3) Common to all these strands of criticism is the sense of *trahison de clercs*; that the line against change might well have held had it not been for the collusion of muddle-headed reformers within the churches.

It is into this far from neutral field that Hugh McLeod's new study comes. While professing a qualified sympathy for the reforming ideas of the period (p. 12), McLeod scrupulously eschews both cheerleading and lament. In patiently sifting out what may actually be known, rather than merely supposed or half-remembered, it gives some qualified support to most of the variants of present polemic while capitulating to none. It is perhaps invidious to attempt to summarise what is in itself a summary treatment of a period of very great diversity, and so this review will be confined to some aspects of scope and method.

Even if the causation and significance of the crisis is disputed, common to almost all writing on the religious history of the 1960s is a sense that *something* very important did happen. In the 1950s, the majority of the population were, at least nominally, affiliated to one of the Christian denominations; the numbers of those professing other religions, or none at all, was relatively small; the churches remained highly influential institutions in national and social life; and the majority would still have articulated the identity of the nation in Christian terms. By the end of the period, the kaleidoscope had been vigorously shaken: the range of practically available alternative systems of belief had widened; the churches faced severe difficulties in the recruitment and retention of clergy, and a sometimes catastrophic fall in the traditional statistical indicators of religious affiliation; a significant linguistic shift had occurred in the articulation of national identity, from the 'Christian country' to 'civilised society'; and the concept of Christendom had been wounded, perhaps fatally. As McLeod suggests, it may not be putting it too strongly to suggest that the period may eventually be regarded as seeing a 'rupture as profound as that brought about by the Reformation' (p. 1).

There has been an upsurge in professional historical work on the period in recent years, as the 1960s move far enough away from the present to come into clearer focus, and McLeod provides a review of the field (pp 6-15) which may well find its way onto reading lists in its own right. McLeod notes the disparity between very long-term explanations of religious change (such as that associated with Alan Gilbert, p. 8) and the emphasis on the importance of very sudden changes (Callum Brown and Peter van Rooden, p. 9). He argues, with Leo Laeyendecker (p. 10) for an analysis which combines the long-term secularisation narrative with medium-term processes, such as growing affluence or intellectual change, and with the immediate impact of events, such as the Second Vatican Council and the Vietnam war. The whole study is characterised by a scrupulous and highly successful weaving of these threads into a comprehensive narrative of the period.

One of the many and great virtues of the book is its breadth of geographic scope. While it is admittedly most detailed in its treatment of Britain, its scope is very much wider, taking in much of northern and western Europe, Australasia and North America. This has two effects. The first is to free the account from the constraints of either too narrow a national or denominational focus - tendencies which have in the past severely limited much religious history writing. It also allows the study seriously to engage with the international aspects of the crisis, such as the effect of the mushrooming of diverse religious ideas which may be grouped under the label of the 'counter-culture' (chapter six) and the effect of the political ferment of 1968 and the churches' engagement with Marxism (chapter seven).

A second most welcome aspect of McLeod's study is a refined chronology of the period. Taking Arthur Marwick's 'long' 1960s (1958-74) as the outermost frame, McLeod sees the period as falling into three broad stages. The early part of the period, to 1963, was characterised by a cautious questioning of the status quo within the churches, but without fully developed programmes having yet emerged. There followed a period of 'aggiornamento'; the high-water mark of reforming activity, attended by a sense of optimism among the reformers about what might be achieved. This period up until 1966 is splendidly evoked in chapter four, with the prophets of the New Reformation, John A.T. Robinson and Harvey Cox, publishing their most significant work simultaneously with the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council. The later part of the period saw a reaction against much of the reforming activity, from figures such as Mary Whitehouse, along with a marked loss of nerve among the reformers in the face of continued decline in the churches' vital

statistics. While counter-examples might be advanced over the 'borders' between them, these three stages seem to this reviewer on the whole convincing and useful.

Finally, McLeod is able impressively to balance the analysis of motivation, with every heroic, conscious act of rebellion against the churches balanced with an act of omission born of forgetfulness or mundane inconvenience. There are vivid examples of the former here. In 1971 the feminist theologian Mary Daly descended from the pulpit to lead a procession of sisters out from the university chapel at Harvard in a highly symbolic act of renunciation: 'our Exodus from sexist religion' (p. 178). At the same time, chapter five lays out very effectively the processes by which rising affluence led to a good deal of simple forgetting to go to church. McLeod gives a most careful examination to the disputed effect of the 'sexual revolution' on women's engagement with the churches. However, the study also draws out the gradual effects of home ownership, television sets in the home, Sunday sport for children, and an increased emphasis on companionate marriage, all of which provided reasons for the previously loosely committed to stay at home (pp. 169-75). Similarly, McLeod explores the several factors behind the crisis in ordinations to the Roman Catholic priesthood (pp. 189-97). Simple loss of faith, and principled objection to the reassertion of clerical celibacy and the renewed ban on artificial contraception are given due weight. However, evidence from the west of France suggests that the decline was in part due to the expansion of secondary education, meaning that a seminary education was no longer the most attractive option to young men of limited means. It is one of the great strengths of McLeod's book that this interplay of the conscious and demonstrative with the inarticulate and accidental is kept in view throughout. To a significant degree, the west lost its religion in a fit of absence of mind.

In a summary account of complex and fast-developing change, readers may doubtless find one point or other which might have merited greater or lesser attention. For instance, this reviewer should have been most interested to read more about the parallels between the elevation of the arts to quasi-religious status in 19th-century Germany and the attention paid to 'prophets' such as Bob Dylan; a connection tantalisingly made, but not pursued, on p. 25. However, such minor points are merely testament to the range of this splendid study and its success in opening up new lines of enquiry. It is lucidly written, admirably concise and includes a daunting bibliography containing works in several languages and the most recent unpublished theses and seminar papers. Professor McLeod has produced a work that is likely to remain the starting point for new research into the period for many years, perhaps for a generation.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further

## Notes

1. *The Guardian*, 22 March 2008 [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Ritual Murder: Essays on Liturgical Reform*, ed. B. Morris (Manchester, 1980). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for instance, D. Holloway, *A Nation Under God* (Eastbourne, 1987). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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