

## RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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### 1. Introduction

The sociology of religion in the UK has been dominated for thirty years at least by the secularization debate. It continues to shape discussion because it is virtually unique in offering a fairly economical overview of developments in religion and non-religion. No other 'master idea' commands nearly as much attention. The best non-technical evocation of the idea is Kenneth Minogue's (1992: 152) claim that 'Christianity in Britain (and in many places elsewhere) is a largely abandoned building given over to political squatters'. But this definitely does not mean that the idea is accepted uncritically. In fact, the critics seem to be more vociferous than the defenders, judging by the tone of contributions to Steve Bruce's (1992) recent collection entitled *Religion and Modernization*. Nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to claim that secularization theory has approached the status of a paradigm.

My aim will be to ask how far this ruling paradigm can help us to understand the patterns of religious belief, sentiment and practice in the UK. Even when explicit agreement with ideas of secularization is relatively rare, the paradigm can still serve as a useful expedient. At worst, it serves the function of an Aunt Sally. At best, it identifies the kind of questions that we should be asking ourselves.

Most of my remarks will concern the mainstream Christian churches, but it is essential to establish the growing significance of religious minorities in both the Christian and non-Christian spheres.

I shall begin by reminding you of the two main components of the idea of secularization so that the so-called commonsense version of what is happening can be established in your minds. Then I shall question this commonsense view.

First, I shall sketch the position of Christian and non-Christian minorities so that the ground can be cleared for a longer treatment of mainstream Christian churches.

Second, I shall ask how well the evidence about mainstream churches fits the commonsense view of religion in the UK.

Third, I shall discuss what seem to me to be some of the major issues affecting religion in the UK today.

## 2. Main theoretical components of secularization

### (a) Differentiation

Religion used to be the '*sacred canopy*' of meanings, values and practices which symbolized and protected the sanctity of human life and the integrity of major social institutions/whole societies - invariably with a supernatural referent. But various social changes since the early modern period have undermined the canopy and damaged its plausibility/credibility:

- the rapid pace of division of labour
- the ascendancy of economic-related activity/organizations over other institutions (rationalization)
- the eclipse of social communities which had shared religious belief/practice

e.g. Religion may be said to have its source in, and to draw its strength from, the community, the local, persisting relationships of the relatively stable group... [But] industrial society needs no local gods, or local saints; no local nostrums, remedies or points of reference... The large-scale societal system does not rely, or seeks not to rely, on a moral order, but rather, wherever possible, on technical order. (Wilson 1982: 154, 159, 161)

The strong implication of Wilson's thinking is that religion has no future except on the margins or in occasional, exotic outbursts of nativism.

A weaker version is that religion has a future but only as a way of handling existential questions: not integrating whole communities or societies.

### (b) Privatization

A closely related theme centres on the changes in consciousness and identity which follow from differentiation. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann have contributed most in this respect (especially *The Social Reality of Religion* and *The Invisible Religion*). The main points are:

- the erosion of monopoly churches opened up the possibility of personal choice in religion - the collective dimension shrank as preoccupation centred on the self.

- competition among the plurality of religious organizations has led to the 'spiritual supermarket' with marginal differentiation of products and brand loyalty as the main features.
- the necessity of personal choice has encouraged 'bricolage' and a search for the sacred in everyday life ('little transcendences').

In Berger's words:

The religious traditions have lost their character as overarching symbols for the society at large, which must find its integrating symbolism elsewhere. Those who continue to adhere to the world as defined by the religious traditions then find themselves in the position of cognitive minorities - a status that has social-psychological as well as theoretical problems... It is safe to predict that the future of religion everywhere will be decisively shaped by... secularization, pluralization, and "subjectivization". (Berger 1969: 152, 171)

There are many variations on these themes of differentiation and privatization, but the fundamental ideas are the same - and they point to similar *scenarios* for the future of religion:

- religion virtually retreats from public life because it is no longer concerned with integrating cultures and societies via the sacred canopy,
- existential, personal questions are all that is left to religion,
- anything can count as religious, provided that it confirms subjectivity.

The question will be whether we can accept these accounts of broad changes in British religion as adequate? Some of the most challenging evidence comes from minority religious groups, so I shall deal with them next.

### **3. Religious communities outside the mainstream of British society**

Long before 1945 the UK contained numerous religious groups which were either unconventional expressions of Christianity or expressions of non-Christian religions. Apart from the very small communities of foreign expatriates who practised their own versions of various world religions, especially in the major centres of trade and commerce, there were also small bands of British enthusiasts for a bewildering variety of imported religions. Some originated in Asia (Oliver 1979; Wilson 1989), while many others arrived from the USA (Wilson 1975). This pre-World War II diversity blossomed in the 1960s into a considerably more variegated set of religious practices. The impact of, first, immigration from Commonwealth countries and, second, so-called new religious movements (NRMs) has been striking. No single discussion of these innovations and changes could possibly do justice to them all, so my strategy will be to concentrate only on the largest

communities or categories which fall outside the mainstream of religion in the UK<sup>1</sup>.

### 3.1 Relatively exclusive Christian or quasi-Christian organizations

Religious organizations which depart in some important respects from what have come to be regarded as the norms of open, tolerant and pluralistic outlooks include, for example, the Plymouth Brethren, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Science, the Mormons, the Christadelphians, the Unification Church and some of the more militant communities of evangelicals. In terms of doctrines and forms of worship these organizations have very little in common but they share varying degrees of exclusiveness in regard to admission, obedience to leaders, subscription to normative beliefs, moral rigour and relations with non-members. This exclusiveness has been the cause of friction between some of these organizations, the state's regulatory agencies, investigative journalists and critical outsiders or apostates (Wilson 1983).

While the fortunes of Christian Science, Christadelphianism and the Plymouth Brethren have tended to deteriorate since 1945 in terms of members, buildings, local groups, Sunday Schools and financial support, there has been a tendency for the other relatively exclusive organizations to prosper in most respects in spite of occasional scandals, journalistic exposés and critical monitoring by statutory authorities. This is due in part to the relative success of some older organizations in retaining the allegiance of a high proportion of the children born to members; in part to their adventurous and methodical programmes for recruiting new members; and in part to the pressure brought to bear on members to conform with the organizations' requirements for obedience to authority. Although Restorationist groups or 'house churches' (Walker 1985) modelled on New Testament principles may be slightly less exclusive than the older, sectarian organizations, it is clear that the former have also prospered for similar reasons associated with the attractions of firm doctrine, strong authority and tight community.

The Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, House Churches, African-Caribbean churches (Gerloff 1992; MacRobert 1989), and Seventh Day Adventists (Porter 1992), for all their differences, have experienced the most sustained period of growth in the last three decades, no doubt in association with the economic and managerial expertise of the parent organizations that some of them have in the USA.

Unfortunately, information is virtually non-existent about the religious 'career' of people who join these exclusive groups. It is not possible, therefore, to know at present whether they illustrate the 'circulation of the saints' phenomenon whereby apostates from more liberal churches are

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1. It is an odd fact about the sociology of religion in the UK that studies of the mainstream are almost outnumbered by those of the sectarian minorities. See Beckford, 1975.

resocialized into more conservative types of religious group (Bibby & Brinkerhoff 1973) or whether they are first generation recruits to any Christian organization.

But what is clear about the UK is that the relatively *new*, exclusive movements such as the Unification Church, Scientology and the Jesus People have failed to capitalize on the impact that they made on British youth in the early-1970s. Their membership strength has grown to modest totals very slowly despite (or perhaps because of) the extensive coverage of their activities in the mass-media (Beckford & Cole 1988). It is unlikely that full-time participants number more than a few thousands, although tens of thousands of other people may be loosely affiliated and/or sympathetic to the movements (Barker 1989).

More importantly, there is no evidence to suggest that the new exclusive movements have had any positive influence on other religious organizations. In this respect, the proliferation of NRMs in the 1960s and 1970s does not appear to have heralded a 'consciousness reformation', although the humanistic psychological foundations of the less exclusive movements oriented towards the realization of 'human potential' have definitely entered into mainstream thinking about management training, personnel selection and the caring professions. At the same time, some features of the 1960s Counterculture have fed, directly or indirectly, into changing public sensitivity about issues relating to, for example, ecology, alternatives to bio-medical health care, the quality of food, and meditation. Some NRMs of the less exclusive kind have also helped to mediate these 'New Age' cultural influences. On balance, however, the lasting impact of NRMs (both exclusive and tolerant) on the UK's religious life has been slight. The controversies to which they have given rise in association with recruitment methods, financial practices and members' life-style are probably their most significant, if negative, contribution (Beckford 1985).

### 3.2. Islam

Like many other migrants to the UK, Muslims from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India (who represent about 40% of the country's South Asian communities) did not necessarily envisage settling there permanently. But the introduction of the first controls on continuing immigration from member states of the British Commonwealth in 1962 provoked a change of outlook. It necessitated, for example, the migration of the wives and children of men who had previously been working in the UK and sending part of their earnings back to their dependent relatives in the country of origin. Once it became clear that permanent, or at least long-term, settlement in the UK for all members of their immediate families was likely, Muslims took seriously the establishment of mosques, schools, cultural centres and other institutions for preserving their religio-cultural heritage.

According to census data, people born in Pakistan numbered about 5,000 in the UK in 1951. This figure rose to 135,000 in 1981, but they were outnumbered by people who had, in the interim, been born to Pakistani parents in Britain. The total community of people with Pakistani ethnic origins is now about 400,000, or roughly 40% of Muslims in the UK. Other largely Muslim communities in 1981 included Indians (130 000), Turkish Cypriots (60 000), Arabs (50 000), East Africans (27 000), Malaysians (23 000), Iranians (20 000), Nigerians (15 000) and Turks (5 000). Experts are agreed that Muslims now number at least one million in the UK, with particular concentrations in Bradford, the West Midlands and the East of London.

The creation of stable ethnic communities in areas where employment was available, where fellow-religionists and fellow-countrymen could provide support, and where employers and/or trade union leaders were prepared to permit the employment of non-white workers helped the establishment of Muslim facilities. The number of mosques registered as places of worship grew from nine in 1960 to about 350 in the late-1980s. Some Muslim agencies and centres have achieved national prominence and authority, but there is also competition between different schools of spirituality. Most recently, in the wake of the 'Salman Rushdie affair', a Muslim political party has been launched, and attempts were made during a parliamentary by-election in 1990 to weaken the loose allegiance that had developed in Bradford between Muslims (as well as non-Muslim Asians) and the Labour Party. In the opinion of one expert, 'Muslims are having to rediscover what it means to be Muslim' (Nielsen 1989: 236). In the process, Muslims in the UK are gaining a fresh sense of the importance of their religion.

A further indication of the growing strength of Muslim identity and consciousness in the UK is campaigns to gain state subsidies for Muslim schools<sup>2</sup>, to defend Muslim ways of preparing meat, to widen the scope of the law against blasphemy to cover offences against Islam, and to gain exemption on religious and cultural grounds from some of the requirements for clothing and conduct in state schools. Some observers believe that these campaigns are fuelling a wider movement for not only Muslim integrity but also a degree of Muslim purity which is out of keeping with the village cultures from which many migrants were originally drawn. It is as if the confrontation with secularism and British indifference towards organized religion has sparked off a revitalization movement among Muslims. Financial and moral support from Muslim organizations in the heartlands of Islam has certainly contributed

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2. The Department for Education denies that Muslim schools are in principle ineligible for state subsidies as 'voluntary-aided' bodies but it has never approved a request for such support. The decision to turn down a request for voluntary-aided status for the Islamia primary school in the London Borough of Brent was originally taken in 1990 and confirmed in 1993 after judicial review and a second inquiry by a different Secretary of State for Education.

towards this revitalization, reinforcing the argument that nation states are not necessarily the best units for the analysis of modernity.

### 3.3. Hinduism

Concern with specifically *religious* identity is probably less pronounced among the majority of the 250 000 Hindus in the UK than among Muslims or Sikhs. This is partly because Hinduism is a very loose assemblage of beliefs and practices which are common to the majority of people in India who do not belong to a different religion but which are also bewilderingly diverse. Moreover, this diversity is not an accident of religious history: it has always been constitutive of the Hindu tradition. The regional, linguistic and caste layers of identity are likely, therefore, to predominate over the narrowly religious.

Concern with religious identity is also likely to be less than dominant among Hindus because Hinduism does not require corporate worship at public temples. It is more deeply rooted in rituals which can be performed in the home without the need for priests, although it must be added that the celebration of public festivals forms a significant part of Hinduism and that Hindu priests have a major role to play in celebrating rites of passage. Nevertheless, the fact remains that most of a Hindu's religious obligations concern daily rituals which are performed at home with the aim of preserving states of caste-related purity.

Hinduism in the UK is therefore highly fragmented for most purposes, reproducing the situation in India in many respects; but at the same time there are signs that it is developing institutions which have few counterparts in its South Asian homelands. In particular, distinctive kinds of community are emerging in connection with several specialized movements of Hindu spirituality as well as with residential concentrations of Hindus in large cities. According to Knott (1988: 247), these innovations owed much to the experiences of Hindus displaced from newly independent countries of East Africa in the 1960s. Hindus who fled from persecution and policies of africanization had already formed defensive communities in, for example, Uganda and Kenya. Removal to the UK called for a second phase of adjustment to being a religious minority in a hostile or, at best, indifferent environment. In fact, Burghart (1987: 14) argues that it is only in the alien cultural context of Britain that Hinduism has become an ethnic religion.

Mainstream temples have grown rapidly in number since the late-1960s, some of them being affiliated to national organizations. But popular interest has probably been greater in the services offered by specialist or sectarian movements such as the Swaminarayan Mission, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Satya Sai Baba Fellowship or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. These services include regular worship, spiritual instruction, schools, opportunities for full-time religious devotion, festival celebrations and mutual assistance. To some extent these newly forged communal bonds

among Hindus are in competition or tension with the solidarity of family, caste and village of origins. It is possible, therefore, that sectarian and social divisiveness will intensify as Hindu migrants and the much larger number of their dependants born in the UK seek new identities in a generally inhospitable society. On the other hand, it is also possible that Hinduism will emerge as the focus of a new kind of religio-ethnic identity.

### 3.4. Sikhism

As a religious minority in India, the Sikhs found it easier than Hindus and Muslims to cooperate with the British colonial regime, especially its military apparatus, when their kingdom of Punjab became part of the Empire in 1849<sup>3</sup>. Migration to East Africa and Canada occurred early in the 20th century as a response to population pressure at home. Several thousands of Sikh traders were operating in the UK between the two World Wars, but, as with Muslims and Hindus, the major migration occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. Again, it initially concerned men alone, but the threat posed by the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1962 drove many Sikh wives and children to join their husbands and fathers in the UK before admission to the country was denied. The spread of Sikh 'gurdwaras' or places of worship accelerated once family-based Sikh communities began to develop in certain cities. A further boost to community building in the UK followed the expulsion of relatively prosperous Sikhs from Uganda in the early-1970s.

Cole (1989) estimates the Sikh population of the UK at about 400,000, but Brierley's (1988) estimate is only half of that number. Knott's (1988) 'compromise figure of 300 000 therefore seems sensible, and she adds the important consideration that the Sikh community is divided along lines of caste (contrary to the founder's prophetic wishes) and theological schools. Nevertheless, attempts have been made to cultivate Sikh identity and communal activity under the auspices of organizations such as the Sikh Missionary Society which aim to cut across the divisions based on kinship, caste or village of origins. There has also been a tendency, virtually unknown in the Punjab, for gurdwaras to serve the functions of a community centre in British cities. Nevertheless, some observers claim that British Sikhs tend to place greater emphasis than do their fellow-religionists in India on preserving the custom of arranged or 'assisted' marriage as well as more general divisions along lines of caste.

If a more all-encompassing Sikh identity emerges in the UK, however, it will owe much to the fact that British Sikhs have had to struggle for the legal right to maintain aspects of their corporate identity. Protracted litigation was necessary, for example, to secure exemption for male Sikhs from the legal requirement to wear styles of uniform in schools and workplaces which were

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3. But for evidence that distinctions between Hindus and Sikhs are actually blurred among some Indian communities in the UK, see Nesbitt, 1990.



incompatible with the obligation for them to wear the beard and turban. An Act of Parliament was eventually passed in 1976 for the purpose of allowing Sikh motorcyclists to dispense with the otherwise obligatory crash helmet. To some extent, disturbances associated with the Sikhs' campaign for a sovereign state of Khalistan separate from India have also helped to heighten Sikh identity even in the UK, albeit not in a uniform fashion. The community is actually divided, partly along caste lines, over the issue of Khalistan. But even these divisions and the ambient racism of British society serve to keep the issue of Sikh identity on the public agenda.

#### 4. Evidence about mainstream churches

Let us look at only two dimensions: *belief* and *belonging* (or attending). Evidence of religious activity and influence is clearly much more complicated than this, but this is something we can take up in the discussion.

##### 4.1. Believing

I shall discuss the believing dimension under three headings: general, orthodoxy and experiences.

###### (i) General:

Recent surveys of religious belief, sentiment and experiences indicate that the level of subscription to the most *general* types of Christian outlook remains quite high but that it is accompanied by a much lower level of subscription to *specific* tenets of doctrine except in the case of participants in small, enthusiastic religious groups or movements. The surveys conducted for the IBA (Svennevig, 1988: 20), for example, indicate that, between 1968 and 1987, the only increase in self-identification as 'very religious' occurred (a) in the category of churches other than the Anglican and Catholic, and (b) among Catholics in Northern Ireland. This is probably a function of the growth of minority, non-trinitarian, charismatic and evangelical expressions of Christianity in Great Britain and of a stronger polarization of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

Leaving aside these two exceptional cases, however, and amalgamating the categories of 'very religious' and 'fairly religious' into a single measure of positive attitude towards religion, the evidence suggests that there has been a *decrease* in this 'very and fairly religious' attitude of 14% among Anglicans, 12% among Catholics, 9% among the Others, and 12% among people with no denominational affiliation in Great Britain. The same surveys have revealed corresponding increases in the percentage of respondents denying that they are 'at all religious'. In Great Britain, the increase was 17% among nominal Anglicans, 8% among nominal Catholics, 8% among Others, and 32% among those without a religious affiliation. In Northern Ireland, the

increases were 10% for the Church of Ireland, 4% for Catholics, and 8% for Others.

Given the generally low levels of adult participation in religious activities in the UK, it is perhaps surprising that only 13% of the 1,496 people surveyed for the IBA (Svennevig, 1988) claimed to have no religious affiliation in 1987. The same survey discovered that 40% of the sample reported that their everyday life was affected a great deal or quite a lot by their religious beliefs, whereas 50% denied that it was important to them; 60% considered the Bible to be the actual word of God; 50% were very likely to think of God when they were happy; 47% believed that God watches every person; 45% think that Jesus Christ was certainly the Son of God; 42% were certain that there is a God; and 35% were very likely to think of God when they were worried.

Results from the Leeds survey (Knott 1984) indicated similar levels of belief and practice among its sample of 1 627 adults in a Northern industrial city in the early 1980s. 72% professed belief in God; and 71% said they prayed at some time or other.

Broadly supportive results also emerged from the survey of 1,231 adults conducted in Great Britain in 1981 by a team contributing to the European Value Systems Study Group (EVSSG) (Abrams 1985). 76% of respondents claimed belief in God; 58% defined themselves as religious; 50% found God important in their life; 50% reported that they needed moments of prayer; 46% drew comfort and strength from religion. By contrast, only 4% described themselves as atheists, thereby suggesting that total abandonment or non-possession of religious belief is rather rare.

(ii) Orthodoxy:

Yet, the evidence of relatively high levels of general acknowledgement of the importance of religion is not matched by comparable levels of Christian orthodoxy or even specificity. In fact, only 31% of the EVSSG respondents believed in a personal God, whereas 39% thought of God as a spirit or life-force; and belief in life after death was shared by only 45% (despite the fact that 57% professed belief in heaven!). In short, no more than a quarter of the sample can be said to hold the basic set of Christian beliefs despite the evidence of much higher levels of support for religious beliefs which are non-specific. There is support for this interpretation in the findings of the Leeds survey. Knott reported that 'although 83% of people have what could be called a "religious" view of God and Jesus only 42% of the sample had a "traditional Christian" view' (Knott 1984: 26). In fact, as many as 29% thought that Jesus was only an ordinary human being.

This suggests that the UK contains on the one hand a relatively small, and probably shrinking, population of subscribers to specific Christian beliefs and, on the other, a much larger population of supporters for religion in

general - either as a set of personal commitments or as a set of convictions about the social and cultural value of religion to the community.<sup>4</sup>

(iii) Religious experience

By contrast to the prominence of studies of religious belief, the study of religious *experience* is underdeveloped. The EVSSG survey reported that 19% of respondents had had a religious experience, compared to the European average of only 12%. Similarly, 17% of the IBA's respondents reported having had a religious experience which was described as 'a particularly powerful religious insight or awakening' (Svennevig 1988: 49), and 9% of the Christians in the sample claimed to have had a 'born-again experience'. Unfortunately, questions about religious experiences had not been asked in the 1968 survey, so there is no way of assessing the extent of change. The difference in wording between the questions asked by the EVSSG and the IBA also makes comparison of the findings hazardous.

A more reliable source of information about modern levels of reported religious experience in the UK is the series of inquiries conducted or directed by David Hay (1979, 1982, 1990; Hay & Heald 1987; Hay & Morisy 1978, 1985). Using a question previously formulated by the doyen of researchers into religious experience, Sir Alister Hardy, Hay has detected frequencies of religious experience far in excess of those reported above and roughly in line with those obtained by American researchers (Greeley 1975). 36% of a random sample of approximately 2 000 adults representing all regions of the UK answered in the affirmative in August 1976 to the following question,

'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self ?'

The proportion of affirmative answers to the same question rose to 48% in a survey of 985 adults conducted by Hay & Heald (1987) with the assistance of the Gallup Poll, London in 1985. The frequency of report of different types of experience is shown in Table 1.

The main conclusions of the 1985 survey were that the rate at which religious experiences were being reported was increasing and that they tended to be associated with positive and benign characteristics such as 'good mental health, good education, happiness and social responsibility' (Hay 1990: 57). Nevertheless, 40% of respondents said that they had not told other people about the experience.

Hay's research found that 41% of the women and 31% of the men in his national sample reported the experiences of a 'presence or power...'. There

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4. A theologian reflecting on the results of the EVSSG's survey of Britain found it difficult to resist the conclusion that 'Britain is at present largely a society possessed of a vague religiosity which should not be probed too far and which makes little conscious impact on people's lives' (Mahoney, 1985: 258).

was a positive association with age, length of education, occupational class, and residence in rural areas or small towns.

Although the link between this experience and denominational allegiance was not clear, the findings did show that respondents who attended church at least occasionally were more than twice as likely to have had a religious experience as those who never attended church except for rites of passage. Nevertheless, only 56% of church-goers reported the experience, and only 7% of the sample claimed that the experience had occurred in a communal context such as a worship service. Indeed, 61% of respondents experienced even the most direct communication with God when they had been completely alone. On the other hand, the best predictor of religious experience was the belief that the spiritual side of life was very important. 74% of those who subscribed to this belief reported having had a religious experience.

Hay obtained more detailed accounts of religious experiences from a random sample of 107 adults in the city of Nottingham. Perhaps the most striking feature of these accounts is that, although religious experiences tended to be overwhelmingly of brief duration (less than ten minutes) and to occur at times of distress or unease when people were completely alone, 61% of respondents claimed that the experiences left them feeling at peace, happy or uplifted. Roughly two thirds of the sample (and of comparable samples examined by Hay and others in the UK) felt that the experience had altered their outlook on life in positive ways.

On the other hand, 12% of Hay's Nottingham sample were left in a state of confusion, 15% alarmed or troubled, and 7% in an unchanged state of mind. Indeed, the alarm stemmed from sensing the presence of an *evil* power or from having an unnerving premonition. These findings suggested to Hay that it would be better to categorize these experiences as 'paranormal' instead of 'religious'.

Mention must be made here of the most recent product of the Sir Alister Hardy Research Centre. Geoffrey Ahern's (1990) report on 'Spiritual/religious experience in modern society' investigates the possibility of using computers to analyse the content of the 5,000 written accounts of personal religious experiences which have accumulated in the Centre's archives. His work is marked by conceptual discrimination and caution about the inferences which can logically be made from his pilot study of a very small sample of the available accounts. But it is clear that Ahern's cautiousness has helped to construct a computer-assisted method of content-analysis which is now ready for application to much larger samples. Moreover, the pilot study has incidentally clarified a number of interesting questions for future research. For example, the categorization of experiences suggested that many young people are more likely to report experiences of the psychic than of the religious or the spiritual. The findings also indicated that, despite the variety of experiences and of ways of expressing them, there is a strong likelihood that they all point towards an underlying sameness.

The interpretation of all these findings about the persistence of generalized Christian beliefs, the declining frequency of creedal beliefs and the prevalence of non-specific religious experiences will necessarily reflect the observer's prior expectations. From my point of view, the data do not self-evidently support crude versions of secularization. The reported rates of believing and experiencing appear to be higher than might be expected in view of the findings about religious belonging which I shall now review.

## 4.2. Belonging

I shall limit myself to an overview of changes in *membership and attendance* at all major Christian groupings between 1975 and 1989 (based on censuses of English churches - with all the methodological problems associated with a one-off, voluntary census producing an overall [but uneven] response rate of 70%). See Table 2.

The overall decline has been 9.4% in fifteen years. I shall deal separately with the major groupings in turn.

### 4.2.1. The Free Churches

Figure 1 illustrates the trajectory of membership statistics for the major Protestant denominations in Britain of Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterian Church of England and the Presbyterian Church of Wales. The two world wars were followed by relatively sharp upswings in membership, but the overall trend from about 1925 was definitely downward.

Some notes of caution are necessary at this point, however. The rate of decline was not the same for all denominations; the Methodists have declined most sharply; the Independents and Pentecostals have increased; and every denomination has continued to experience some membership growth in certain localities. The picture since 1975, as Figure 2 and Table 3 show, is not therefore one of uniform decline.

These figures conceal the fact that, while the annual rate of decline remained more or less constant for the United Reform Church in both decades, the 1980s witnessed a slowing down of member loss in the Methodist Church and a very slight gain of members in this period for the Baptists. But the age profile of Free Church members is such that continuing losses in the future must be anticipated as (a) the proportion of the nation's children in Free Church Sunday Schools keeps on declining, and (b) as the cohort of elderly members grows larger as a proportion of the total membership. There are also grounds for thinking that the number of people attending Free Church services nowadays may be lower than the number of members and that the rate of decline in attendance may be even more dramatic. If so, this represents a significant reversal of the situation which obtained in many Free Church congregations in the late-19th century.

The African-Caribbean, Pentecostal and Independent Churches deserve special analysis. They have been an area of growth and vitality for the past 25 years. There are more than 150 separate churches with members and participants predominantly drawn from the African-Caribbean communities. Most of these churches are small and local in their outreach, but a few like the New Testament Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy have as many as 10,000 members. Their rate of growth was rapid in the 1970s but has now slowed considerably to the point where Peter Brierley (1991) suspects that they are beginning to lose members to mainly white churches. In addition, of course, West African and South African denominations have also put down roots in the UK.

The Pentecostal denominations, including the Assemblies of God and the Elim Pentecostal Church, have grown more steadily since the 1970s and continue to maintain a slow rate of growth. But the absolute numbers are far from large.

The highest rates of growth since the 1970s have been in the Independent Churches including the House Church (or Restorationist) movement, the Brethren and all the myriad groupings associated with the Federation of Independent Evangelical Churches and the Union of Evangelical Churches. Between 1975 and 1989 the number of attenders grew by 75%. They now amount to one quarter of all Free Church attenders.

#### 4.2.2. The Roman Catholic Church

The trajectory of membership and attendance trends in the Roman Catholic Church in the UK during the 20th century is almost the inverse of the Free Church patterns. The estimated Catholic population of Great Britain grew steadily, mainly by natural increase, until 1945 and then began to increase more rapidly until 1970. Since 1970, however, the Catholic population has been shrinking at an annual rate of almost 1.4%. Mass attendances represent a shrinking proportion of this population, as shown in Table 4.

Nevertheless, self-defined Catholics (including children) now represent about 14% of the UK population and are the largest single category of church attenders (almost 60% of 1989 census attenders).

To date, the parish has been the main focus of religious life for British Catholics. The parish is the nodal point which connects the church hierarchy with the day-to-day life of lay Catholics, and its premises serve as the location for crucial sacraments and rites of passage. It is significant, therefore, that the changing level of ritual activity in parishes, as shown in Table 5, indicates a slow but steady falling away from practices which had previously been considered essential to normal Catholic life.

These data also show demographic changes which hardly portend well for the church in the future - the declining numbers of marriages solemnized in church, the increasing proportion of exogamous marriages, and the

disproportionate growth in funerals associated with the ageing of the Catholic population. In combination with the declining levels of child baptisms, adult conversions to Catholicism, first communions, and confirmations, the pattern of changes suggests that a gap may be widening between the extent of active participation in the church in future and the extent of at least nominal allegiance to Catholicism. It may be too early to speak of polarization between active and nominal sections of the laity, but there are sound reasons for suspecting that this may be a long-term outcome. According to Mike Hornsby-Smith,

[T]here is a pluralism of Catholic types, such as "core" Catholics and "ordinary" Catholics, or "nuclear" and "dormant" parishioners, which differ from each other in terms of doctrinal and moral beliefs, and levels of practice and institutional involvement. There is also a pluralism of beliefs ranging from "official"; through "customary" to "implicit" or "popular" Catholicism, and these beliefs are at least partially cross-cut by levels of religious practice. (Hornsby-Smith 1991: 220)

#### 4.2.3. The Church of England

In view of the enormous variations in the Anglican Church's position in different geographical locations, *national* statistics of participation are not very helpful. But a more helpful image of the Church of England's changing position in the market for identities and loyalties in the postwar period emerges from Leslie Francis's (1985) investigation of one rural diocese of half a million people in England. He was able to show that the proportion of the adult population enrolled on the Church's Electoral Rolls declined from 17.5% in 1950 to 7.4% in 1980. This is a good measure of changing attitudes towards identification with the Church and towards active participation in its internal affairs. By comparison, the rates of participation in Easter Day and Christmas Day communion services have dropped by smaller amounts. In 1956 the rates were, respectively for Easter and Christmas, 11.0% and 8.6% of the adult population. By 1980 both rates had fallen to 6.9%, suggesting that allegiance to these rituals is still not negligible. On the other hand, the practice of having infants baptized in the Church of England seems to be rapidly losing popularity. The number of children undergoing baptism as a percentage of all live births recorded in the diocese declined from 63.2% in 1956 to 38.8% in 1980. But an alternative explanation is that, as the Church ceases to function as the taken-for-granted national church, some clergy are making it more difficult for parents to have their children baptized unless they show signs of active interest in the Church.

#### 4.2.4. Judaism

The history of Jews in the UK parallels that of the much larger community of Roman Catholics in some respects. Both were subject to disqualification from political activity and from certain positions in the state bureaucracy until the

mid-19th century. Both communities also grew rapidly as a result of immigration: Catholics from Ireland in the 1840s and Jews from Eastern and Central Europe after 1880. The Jewish population rose from about 60,000 to 300,000 in the forty years following 1880 and was again boosted by refugees from European fascism in the 1930s. Finally, both communities have been largely assimilated into mainstream culture and have experienced disproportionately high rates of upward social mobility this century (Alderman, 1980). But the structures of the Jewish community in the UK are different from those of the Catholics in several important respects.

Firstly, although it is notoriously difficult and contentious to gauge the size of the Jewish community, there is widespread agreement that it has been shrinking since 1945. Roughly 108,000 Jewish households, or two thirds of all Jewish households, are affiliated to synagogues. They are served by about 450 full-time rabbis. The total population of Jews is about 330 000. Secondly, Jewish institutions and organizations lack the cohesive capacity and the controlling power of the Catholic parish system. The body representing Jews in the day-to-day life of the UK is the Board of Deputies but it enjoys none of the attributes of a parish system. Indeed, religious affairs are not directly part of its responsibility; they lie in the hands of the Chief Rabbinate. Thirdly, the social and intellectual differences between the majority Orthodox and the minority Progressive orientations of Judaism have fragmented the Jewish community in ways which have no parallels in Catholicism. Finally, the charitable campaigns and causes of British Jews, especially in support of the state of Israel, function as underlying forces for continuity in collective identity. The experiences and memories of persecution in many countries over many centuries have also helped to preserve this distinctive religio-ethnic identity in the face of countervailing influences. The growing number of formerly non-practising Jews who are now learning to live in an Orthodox manner indicates that Jewish responses to modernity are complex.

#### 4.2.5. Summary

The problems of measuring religious beliefs and church attendance or membership are bad enough. Trying to make sense of the whole scene is dauntingly difficult. But a few general patterns can be identified:

1. Levels of very general, non-specific religious belief and experience remain quite high in relation to general levels of church participation. Customary, conventional, implicit and folk religion all seem to be surviving, although I have not had time to discuss all these varieties of 'informal' religion.
2. Smaller, more doctrinally specific churches have been an area of growth.
3. African-Caribbean and Pentecostal churches have managed to prevent numerical decline.



4. The gap between core and nominal members of both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church has been widening, while the total number of participants continues to decline in absolute terms and as a proportion of the adult population.

The overall pattern therefore combines a background of highly generalized beliefs and indifference towards churches *and* a foreground of growth in specialized and doctrinally specific groups or currents within large churches.

## 5. Discussion

To return to the opening questions, are differentiation and privatization (in short, secularization) the only concepts which can make sociological sense of this mixed pattern of Christian belief and belonging? Does it necessarily signify religious decline, and nothing else?

It would be time-consuming, not to say tedious, to go through Wilson's and Berger's interpretations of secularization point by point (see Brown, 1992). But I think that the evidence is clearly too complicated to be fully consistent with one or both of them. There is obviously confirmation for many of their points, especially on the declining strength of mainstream churches and the growing prevalence of privatized expressions of religiosity. In this sense, it would be entirely fair to reach the conclusion that the UK is secularized. But this assessment does not take sufficient account of all the other pieces of evidence. I am therefore moving towards a 'Yes, but...' type of conclusion. For it seems to me that the picture is incomplete if we simply stop the search for interpretation at the point where we accept that the process of secularization is taking place. *In addition to secularization*, then, other features of religious change in the UK are no less important. Some of these other features are not necessarily compatible with either version of secularization. Let me suggest a few reasons for wanting to insist that secularization is not the whole story, even if it does amount to the main plot.

The first reason is associated with the 'believing without belonging' thesis (Davie, 1990a, 1990b). It certainly is true that the gap between levels of religious belief and formal religious participation is widening. But

- (a) this does not apply to the doctrinally specific or exclusive groups,
- (b) the growing gap between 'core' and 'nominal' participants implies that many of those who do belong are increasingly inactive, and
- (c) the kinds of things that non-participants report as belief are mostly non-specific and more akin to 'folk' religion than to Christianity.
- (d) how can we be sure that the beliefs which are reported are actually the basis for people's actions if they don't at least participate in their church?

So, 'believing without belonging' is only partially applicable and may actually obscure some more interesting changes (see Hornsby-Smith 1992a for other criticisms).

The second reason for thinking that secularization is not the whole story has to do with the claim that a shift has taken place from the dominance of liberal to conservative Christianity. There is a tendency in some quarters to regard the growth of theologically and morally conservative evangelical churches as evidence of a major shift in religious sensibility. But I have three critical responses to this:

- (a) The proportionate growth of the conservative groups is impressive, but their absolute numbers remain small.
- (b) In any case, the importance of their increase appears greater than it is because of the shrinking numbers of participants in more liberal churches.
- (c) Recent decades have seen the revival of more liberal evangelical interests, especially in connection with Social Gospel, social justice and Third World concerns.

So, I have difficulties with two of the most popular interpretations of religious change which try to avoid wholesale agreement with the secularization theses. I have greater sympathy with a third, rather different type of argument.

The tendency for some religious activists (especially liberal clergy) to adopt controversial positions in debates about public policy seems to be out of keeping with most scenarios of secularization. This is not to deny that the much discussed privatization of religion has taken place, but I wish to add that the very public airing of disputes about religion has also occurred in parallel with privatization. My opinion is that both privatization *and* the increasing controversiality of religion in public are features of the fragmentation of the formerly taken-for-granted moulding of religious activity to the contours of residential localities, social classes, and kinship. Moreover, many of the issues at stake in these controversies cut across the public/private divide. They are controversial precisely because they show that private troubles are inextricably interwoven with public problems. An excellent illustration of religion's capacity to confound modernity's supposedly widening gulf between the public and the private is Malcolm Bull's (1990) claim that Seventh Day Adventism and some other therapeutically-oriented sects energetically propound a policy for public health which requires modification of private lifestyles.

A fourth reason for being suspicious of the 'secularization is all' scenario is that it makes no allowance for the role of religion beyond themes touching purely personal identity. But British religion since 1945 has shown that, when religion is set free from its traditional points of anchorage in local communities, social classes and networks of kinship, it becomes generally available as a vehicle for ideological struggle. The language of religion is particularly well equipped for the task of advancing ideological claims based on supposedly ultimate or universal principles, provided that it is not closely associated with particular social roots. If Giddens (1990) is correct to claim

that two of high modernity's main characteristics are its capacity to separate time and space and to recombine them in unprecedentedly disembedded forms, the response of many religionists is to insist on re-placing things in the perspective of eternity. Paradoxically, then, the decline of church attendance has facilitated the development of more autonomous forms of religious critique based on overarching, though not necessarily supernaturalist, principles (Beckford 1989, 1990). Some leaders of campaigns and movements for peace, ecology, human rights, and social welfare, for example, nowadays find it advantageous to have non-denominational, principled support from all manner of religious groups. This would have been much more problematic and unlikely at a time when most religious organizations were numerically larger, ideologically stricter, and socially more exclusive. The transformation of English Catholicism, for example, includes a measure of privatization *and* the growth of concern with social justice (Hornsby-Smith 1992b).

Finally, many models of secularization assume that processes of 'societalization' erode collective identity based on such particularistic criteria as ethnicity and strongly held religious views. Indeed, Talcott Parsons anticipated the replacement of marked interdenominational differences in Christianity with a generalized, undifferentiated faith based on love. Again, there is evidence that this has happened to some extent among liberal Protestant groups, but, at the same time, there is also evidence of widening gulfs elsewhere on the religious spectrum. The theory of secularization tells only half the story; and the other half is incompatible with it.

The growing controversiality of religion is associated with both liberal and conservative agitation. Deep political divisions run through many churches, but the most conservative groups also tend to be the least divided. Muslim separatism and Sikh nationalism are further assertions of intransigence in the name of religio-ethnic solidarity. Resistance to Parsons's idea of the blandness of modern religion was most recently exemplified by the 76 000 Christians who protested to the Queen about multiculturalism in the compulsory syllabus of religious education in British schools (*Independent* 19/12/90). The revocation or liberalization of laws governing commercial activity on Sundays, abortion and homosexuality is at the centre of intense religio-ideological struggle (Davies, 1992). And there are grounds for thinking that the loose alliance of British fundamentalists, Pentecostals, charismatics and conservative evangelicals has actually been more successful than the Moral Majority in the USA in affecting public debates about morality (Thompson, 1992).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, radical and liberal leaders in many churches have protested against the perceived growth of inequalities in British society. For example, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas produced a report in 1985, *Faith in the City*, which was highly critical of the government's alleged failure to take seriously the problems facing unemployed and/or poor people in areas of urban decay and

deprivation. Other recent reports include a condemnation of the British government's housing policy by the Catholic Bishops of Conference of England and Wales in December 1990; a call by the interdenominational Church Action on Poverty to abandon a controversial new tax in October 1990; and an Anglican report on *Living Faith in the City* in January 1990 which repeats the criticism raised five years earlier. It would be a mistake, however, to pretend that the progressive philosophy underlying these reports is shared equally by all sections of the churches which produced them. Evidence suggests that clergy in mainstream denominations tend to be more liberal than their laity and that they react to particular political problems instead of advocating long-term consistent policies. But the central point is that, whether Britons live in a secular society or not, religion remains an important vehicle for social criticism and protest.

Table 1**Frequency of report of different types of religious experience in the United Kingdom, 1985.**

<u>Types of experience</u>	<u>%</u>
Patterning of events	29
Awareness of the presence of God	27
Awareness of receiving help in answer to prayer	25
Awareness of the presence of the dead	18
Awareness of a sacred presence in nature	16
Awareness of an evil presence	12
Experiencing that all things are 'one'	5
Proportion of sample reporting an experience	48
N = 985	

Source: Hay, D 1990. *Religious Experience Today*, 83. London: Mowbray.

Table 2**Changes in adult churchgoing by major groups - 1975-1989**

<i>Church</i>	1975	C	1979	C	1985	C	1989
		%		%		%	
Free Church	1,209,000	+3	1,247,000	-1	1,229,700	+2	1,249,000
Anglican	1,302,000	-4	1,256,000	-6	1,181,000	-3	1,143,900
Roman Catholic	1,576,000	-4	1,515,000	-12	1,335,900	-2	1,304,600
Orthodox	6,000	+17	7,000	+20	8,400	+12	9,400
Total	4,093,000	-2	4,025,000	-7	3,755,000	-1	3,706,900

C = Percentage change

Source: Brierley, P 1991. *Christian England*. London: MARC Europe.

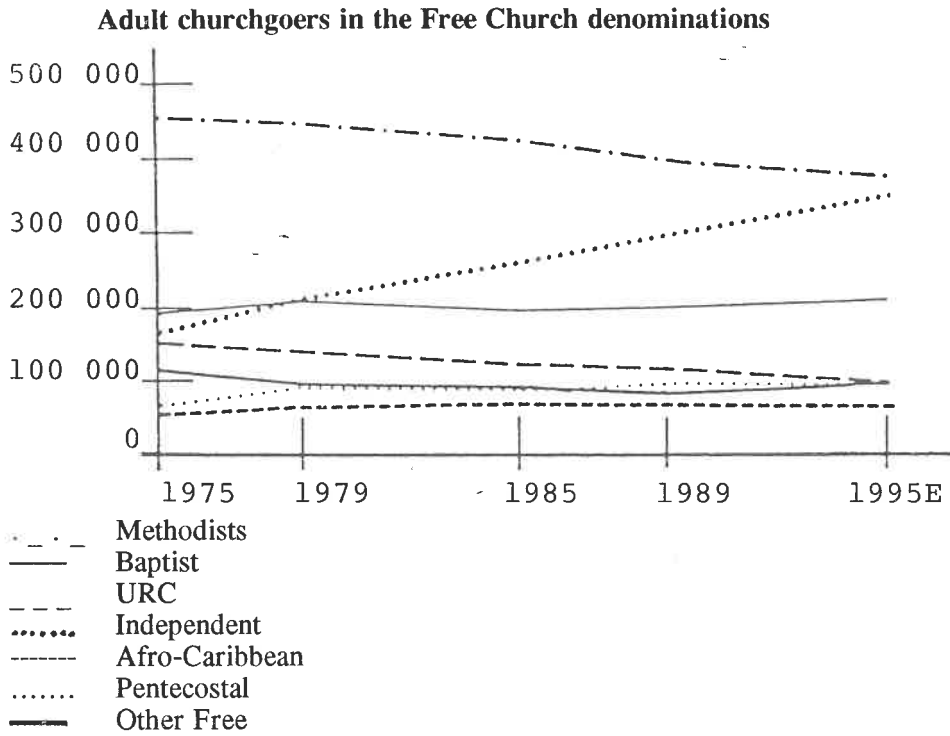
Figure 1

Membership of the major Protestant churches:  
Great Britain - 1900-1968



Source: adapted from Currie *et al.* 1977. *Churches and Churchgoers*, 29.  
OUP

Figure 2



Source: Brierley, P 1991. *Christian England*. London: MARC Europe

Table 3

**Membership of selected Free Churches - 1970-1990**

	1970	1980	1990	*% decline
Methodists	694 323	558 264	509 010	- 26.68
Baptists	295 341	239 874	244 625	- 17.00
United Reform (after 1972)	1 806 736	1 508 509	1 287 630	- 28.73

\* estimate

Source: adapted from Brierley, P 1988. *UK Christian Handbook 1989/90 Edition*, Bromley, MARC Europe/Evangelical Alliance/Bible Society

Table 4

Proportions of Catholics attending Mass			
	Catholic population	Mass attendance	% attending Mass
1970	4 114 000	1 935 000	47
1974	4 174 000	1 752 000	42
1978	4 221 000	1 694 000	40
1982	4 243 000	1 560 000	37
1986	4 164 000	1 425 000	34

Source: adapted from Brierley, *UK Christian Handbook*, cit.

Table 5

Selected rites of passage and sacraments Catholic church, England and Wales - 1945-1985						
<u>marriages</u>						
	Child baptisms	First communions	Confirmations	% both		Deaths
				total	RC	
1945	73 400	n/a	n/a	36 553	n/a	n/a
1960	123 430	n/a	80 602	46 480	50	n/a
1965	134 055	n/a	69 672	46 112	45	n/a
1970	108 187	95 382	71 956	46 105	37	36 596
1975	75 815	84 887	74 013	35 197	35	39 251
1980	76 3522	68 365	54 803	31 524	34	41 715
1985	74 491	53 334	46 427	27 422	35	44 947

Source: Hornsby-Smith, M 1989. *The changing Parish. A study of Parishes, Priests and Parishioners after Vatican II*, 3. London: Routledge.



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