have to count money immediately after the service. On the other hand, I know that my church treasurer still appreciates the offering, for it still yields a tidy sum. So what do we do? Ideas please on a post-card!

PS: From a York Minster order of service: "I heard the voice of Jesus say: The collection is taken during this hymn"!

THINGS ARE NOT AS BAD AS YOU THINK: MINISTRY IN A SECULAR AGE

Martyn Percy

One of the great paradoxes of modernity is that churches believe in the steady decrease of public faith almost more than any other group. During the last half of the twentieth century, it has been popular to believe in a new credo: secularization. Promoted by a few busy sociologists in league with disenchanted voices in the media, the faith is simple enough: the more advanced of modern society becomes, the less it looks to the spiritual and the religious. Ergo, church attendance declines, and the once golden age of Christendom, at least in the West, is coming to its end. The thesis appears to be supported by statistics; less people go to church than, say a hundred years ago, so it must be correct. But is it?

As with most things, the truth is not nearly so simple. Granted, less people belong, formally, to a Christian denomination when compared to the inter-war or Victorian periods. But almost all forms of association have declined steeply since those days. There are fewer Scouts and Guides; Trade Union membership has waned; and there are now less members of the Conservative Party than there are Methodists. Recreationally, there are fewer people in our cinemas and football grounds than seventy years ago – yet no one say these activities are in decline. Indeed, it is a sobering thought that in so-called secular Britain, there are still more people turning to God each weekend at a church than watching a game of football. In fact, last year 35 million people visited an English cathedral.

Another problem with secularization is that, after sociologists and the media, the body that believes in the thesis most passionately

are the churches themselves. Many, if not most, have bought the idea that modernity leads to the gradual and incremental loss of faith. Correspondingly, various interest groups emerge, hoping to make some capital out of the perceived crisis. Liberals propose stripping the faith to its bare essentials in order to make religion more credible. Evangelicals also strip the faith to its essentials, and promote 'the basics' of religion through courses like *Alpha* (and perhaps we need to remember that courses such as *Alpha* are seldom the cure-alls churches sometimes hope for – vitamin supplements for the body, yes, but medicine, no). Most Christians in the middle ground are bewildered by these approaches to faith and society. For in their day-to-day existence, they do not encounter a 'secular' world at all, but rather one in which spirituality, religion and questions of faith remain public and widespread. In short, they do not believe in the modern 'disease' of secularization, and consequently they are unpersuaded by those groups that seek to promote their cures.

But surely there is some truth in the idea that fewer and fewer people are turning to official or mainstream religion? Well, yes and no. To a large extent, it depends on what periods in history are being compared to the present. For example, the Victorian period saw a revival of religion and religious attendance that lasted about forty years. Yet the beginnings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the very opposite of this: church attendance was, on the whole, derisory.

The Medieval and Reformation periods are often characterized as ages of great faith. Certainly, individuals and communities did die for their beliefs. However, the general scale of apathy and antipathy should not be underestimated. The eleventh century monk, William of Malmesbury, complained that the aristocracy rarely attended mass, and even the pious heard it at home, "but in their bedchambers, lying in the arms of their wives". At least they heard mass though; according to one scholar, "substantial sections of thirteenth century society – especially the poor – hardly attended church at all".

Were the clergy any better? Hardly. William Tyndale complained that, in 1530, few priests could recite the Lord's Prayer or translate it into English. When the Bishop of Gloucester tested his clergy in 1551, of 311 priests, 171 could not repeat the Ten Commandments – this is hardly surprising, as there were few

seminaries. Did any of this matter? Not really. It seems that the impact of the clergy on their congregations was very slight. As Keith Thomas notes in his magisterial *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), "members of the population jostled for pews, nudged their neighbours, hawked and spat, knitted, made coarse remarks, told jokes, fell asleep and even left off guns", with other behaviour including "loathsome farting, and scoff speeches", which resulted in "the great offence of the good and the great rejoicing of the bad".

This haphazard, semi-secular, quiet (but occasionally rowdy and irreverent) English Christianity continues well into successive centuries. James Woodforde's *Diary of a Country Parson* provides an invaluable window into the life of the clergy and the state of English Christianity in the eighteenth century. Again, a close reading of the text suggests that whatever secularization is, it is not obviously a product of the Industrial Revolution. Woodforde clearly thinks it is reasonably good to have "two rails" (or thirty communicants) at Christmas or Easter, from 360 parishioners. Such figures would be low by today's stands in some rural communities. Woodforde tells us that the only time his church is ever full is when a member of the royal family is ill, or when there is a war on. Generally, the context of his ministry is one where he baptizes, marries and buries the people of his parish, but the week-by-week Sunday attendance is not something that would get many ministers into a frenzy of excitement. But Woodforde is not bothered by this – not because he is lazy – but because the totality of his contact with his parish constitutes his ministry. He is *with* his people in all their trials and tribulations, not just with his congregation. He is their man for all seasons; an incarnate presence in the midst of a community that waxes and wanes in its religious affections.

Statistical surveys continually support the thesis that Britain is a place where the vast majority of the population continues to affirm their belief in God, but then proceed to do little about it. So church attendance figures remain stubbornly low. yet this is mot a modern malaise, but is rather a typical feature of western societies down the ages. Granted, there have been periods of revival when church attendance has peaked. But the basic and innate disposition is one of believing without belonging; of relating to the church, and valuing its presence and beliefs – yet without necessarily sharing them. Or as one wit puts it, "I cannot consider

myself to be a pillar of the church, for I never go. But I am a buttress – insofar as I support it from the outside." So what are the churches to do about the statistics that apparently point to the imminent funeral of organized religion? Is the future really so bleak? It seems unlikely. While it is true that Britons are rapidly turning from being religious assumers to religious consumers, and are moving from a culture of religious assumption to religious consumption, in which choice and competition in the spiritual marketplace thrive, there seems to be little cause for alarm. The churches need to panic a little less about the apparently bleak statistics and concentrate more on maintaining religion as something that is public, accessible, and extensive, whilst also being distinct, intensive, and mysterious. In particular three things need to be remembered.

First, even in the most modern societies, there is still demand for religion that is public, performative, and pastoral. Furthermore, there are thousands and thousands of private spiritualities and beliefs that flourish in modernity, demonstrating that faith does not wither and die in our culture. Many churches have seen a rise in numbers since September 11th. Religion mutates and lives on; churches, to take advantage of this, must continue to try to be open to the world, and not closed to it.

Second, religion is remarkably resilient in the modern age. Much of our 'vernacular religion', such as the celebration of Christmas, reveals a nation that still enjoys its carols, nativity plays and other Christian artefacts that long ago moved beyond the control of the church to become part of the cultural furniture. Religion is still in demand, and where it is absent, it is more often than not created, or the gap filled with new forms of spirituality. In the absence of religion, people tend to believe anything rather than nothing, and the task of the church must be to continue to engage empathetically with culture and society, offering shape, colour, and articulation to the voices of innate and implicit religion.

Third, the churches can respond to the challenge of an apparently faithless age with a confidence founded on society which refuses to leave religion alone. Often, the best that churches can do is to recover their poise within their social and cultural situations, and continue to offer a ministry and a faith to a public that wish to relate to religion, without necessarily belonging to it. With rare

exceptions in history, this is what all clergy have had to work with most of the time: it is both an opportunity and a challenge.

So the recipe is this: relax, have faith in the resilience of God and the church, but also respond to the many tests of faith that dominate every age with tenacity, compassion, and wisdom.

In short, the statistics for church attendance, if read crudely, retell one of the great lies of the modern age. For the figures say very little about the faith of the nation – believing and belonging should not be confused. Very few people choose not to relate at all to the church, or to mainstream religion. In any secular age, there is space and demand for religion, faith and spirituality. This is important, for it reminds us that religion provides enchantment within modernity, and that churches are often the only bodies that provide public and open places within a community for tears, grief, remembrance, laughter and celebration .So rather than cursing the alleged darkness of secularisation, churches should perhaps ponder the virtues of striking the odd match, and begin to start pointing to the signs of religious life – millions of them – that thrive beyond the porous margins of the church. These signs are not competition for organized religion, but are rather an indication that the hunger for spiritual illumination has never gone away. Ministry and evangelism needs to be shaped around a more positive disposition to the world and its complexities, and begin to learn to appreciate the richness of the church's texture for communities. Building imaginative bridges and links with society, keeping ministry public and engaging in mission are vital tasks, as they always have been. The church and the Christian faith have many more supporters than members. We do not live in a secular age, as the sociological prophets of the 1960s once foretold. Our era continues to be a time of questions, exploration, wonder and awe.

So what we need now is more ministries that engage with contemporary culture in interrogative, empathetic and critical-friendly ways, and perhaps a little less of the prevailing panacea mentality (e.g. 'ten quick ways to fix the church') that drives so much of our present thinking on mission, and claims to be able to rescue or resuscitate the church from its death-bed. Rumours of the imminent funeral are always greatly exaggerated. Come to think of it, I'm not even so sure that the church is quite as sick as many of our missiological quacks are wont to claim.

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EVERYBODY HURTS: HELPING THE VICTIMS OF CHILD ABUSE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Allen Holmes

Society's thinking on the issue

Society has continually reconstructed definitions of maltreatment which sanctions statutory intervention. In 1871 the concern was abuse by adoptive parents; in 1885 it was teenage prostitution; in 1908 incest; then, later, neglect, physical, sexual, emotional and substance abuse. [83] Early in the 20th century child care legislation made provision for the protection of children. Those under the age of sixteen years were not to be found begging, purchasing intoxicating liquor or tobacco nor providing care to those younger than themselves. Children over the age of four years were not to be accommodated in brothels nor those under twelve years of age placed at risk from burning. None of this legislation has been repealed. [84] At present child sex abuse attracts the greatest public condemnation. Just as society takes steps to prevent child abuse wherever it is discovered and to deal sensitively with adult survivors, so must churches if they are to have any credibility with the communities they claim to serve.

The need for caution

The Children's Act 1989 offers some definitions of child abuse, but these are not all-encompassing. For example, the Act does not define child abuse. [85] This is a real dilemma for both professional

[83] *Messages from Research: Child Protection* (HMSO, London) 15.
[84] *Children and Young Persons Act 1933*.
[85] Hilary Cashman, *Christianity and Child Sex Abuse* (SPCK, London 1993) 29; Patrick Parkinson, *Child Sex Abuse and the Churches* (Hodder, London 1997) 9; Christine Lyon,