

Christianity in Britain in the 20th century

Despite all the changes which had taken place in the 19th century, the predominant culture of Britain at the beginning of the 20th century was one largely imbued with Christian belief. But by 1990 the situation was summed up by the Bishop of Southwark as one in which 'we have moved from where Christianity is culture to where Christianity is choice' and in 2000 the Archbishop of Canterbury said that in our society 'a tacit atheism prevails'. So how did this come about? With the caveat that it is hard to write recent history, as developments are still continuing, and hard to separate trends in the UK from those in other parts of the globe, as our world is now so interconnected, I shall attempt to highlight some themes.

Two world wars in which Britain was involved shook society, and although we hear of people turning to prayer at times of crisis, the overall effect on Christian belief was negative, with church attendance declining between the wars and from the 1950s onwards. Other big political and social changes included: loss of empire; immigration, initially from the Caribbean and later from Africa and Asia, resulting in a multicultural and multi-faith society; greater interaction with the rest of Europe after we joined the EU in 1973, and an influx of East European workers late in the century; more mobility within the country; people living longer; changes in women's roles and family structures; significant shifts in moral frameworks. All these have impacted on the church, which has sometimes struggled to know how to respond. There have also been challenges to belief from within the church. One high profile example was in 1963 when Dr. John Robinson, the Bishop of Woolwich, published a book entitled *Honest to God* in which he questioned absolute moral standards and the divinity of Jesus, but this was only part of a more widespread trend of Biblical criticism and liberal theology.

On the positive side, there have been prominent evangelical scholars; a plethora of new Bible translations; a groundswell of new life in the Church of England; evangelistic outreach, notably the crusades led by Billy Graham in the 1950s and 1960s and more recently initiatives such as the Alpha course; and in the latter half of the century more interdenominational understanding and cooperation, involving the Roman Catholic church as well as different branches of Protestantism. Other developments were the birth of the Pentecostal church early in the century, and the charismatic movement, affecting all denominations, from the 1960s onwards. This has not been without controversy, but although there have been divisions, there has also been new life in many mainstream churches and new churches have been formed. Other growth areas have been African and Afro-Caribbean churches, especially in London and other cities. Patterns of leadership and ministry have changed over the past few decades, with many more lay people involved, and towards the end of the century an increase in the number of women in leadership in all Protestant denominations, with the first Anglican women priests appointed in 1994.

So where did that leave us as we approached a new century and a new millennium? Despite some positive trends, the overall picture has been one of decline. By the end of the 20th century only a small minority were attending church regularly, even if about 70% of the population identified themselves as Christians for census purposes. The average age of church attenders has risen; Sunday Schools have dwindled, many children leaving once they are in secondary school. This, coupled with changes in the nature of religious education, means that many younger people have virtually no knowledge of the Bible or Christianity. Nominal faith and church adherence have given way to none at all, and in an increasingly secular society many see the church as irrelevant. The flip side to this is that Christians have become more of a distinct faith community and more aware of the need for mission, realising that people are not going to come flocking into churches. There has also been more of an interest in spirituality in general as materialism has failed to satisfy.

One development at the end of the century was something called Emerging Church, arising out of disillusionment with the institutional church and seeking new ways of 'being church', being culturally relevant and living out mission, drawing on a wide variety of traditions and crossing many theological boundaries. Whether this will make a significant impact, fizzle out, or become institutionalised and form yet another denomination as have so many initially radical movements, remains to be seen.

The story of 21st century Christianity in our country will be told by future generations, but it is a story in which we are all players now.