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Faith on the Home Front

Aspects of Church Life and Popular Religion in Birmingham 1939–1945

Introduction: The Scholarly Context

Popular Religion and the Secularisation Debate

Concluding his examination of recent works on popular religion, David Hempton suggests that even 'more local studies of non-metropolitan urban' contexts are now needed.[1] Writing in the 1980s, Hempton reflected a growing interest in the popular religious dynamic that operates beyond the Church and institutional religious confines. This book contributes to the growing evidence of the importance of the popular religious dimension in British religious historiography, not least in the context of war.

Birmingham merits being a focus for such a study because of its place in the British war effort. The city was a major centre of arms production; consequently, every night of the blitz it endured heavy bombardment. The prevailing conditions of the blitz, and the disruptions to civilian life which resulted, demanded unique responses from the populace and, likewise, from the city's Churches. How popular religion was affected by war and how the Churches responded is the major focus of interest here.

Churchgoing statistics as the index of the population's religious commitment and sensibility have, of late, come to be regarded with suspicion. Reliance upon such figures to prove the theory of creeping secularisation within British society has given way to evidence for the continuing and vital influence of the Churches and of Christian symbol, ritual, and practice well beyond the previously accepted bounds, and well into the twentieth century. Gradually, historical research has unearthed evidence of the persistent relevance of Christianity within the people's communal life, and as a referent in the construction of individual character. Popular religion may be defined as:

1   Hempton, 1986, p.201.

a generally shared understanding of religious meaning including both folk beliefs as well as formally and officially sanctioned practices and ideas, operating within a loosely bound interpretative community […] a system which gives meaning to the world.[2]

Arguably, the historical study of the phenomenon of popular religion now has its own integrity equal to that of other perspectives on the history of religion in Britain. Landmark contributions to the historiography of English and British[3] popular religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the works of Jeffrey Cox, Sarah Williams and Callum Brown.[4]

Jeffrey Cox's book, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1830–1930*, challenges the accepted understanding of secularisation as having its advent in urbanisation, industrialisation and scientific advance.[5] Far from being peripheral to late nineteenth-century life, the Churches were, in fact, central to its social functioning. Cox asserts that:

public worship was only one of a great number of church-related activities which enrolled thousands […] By the 1880s both Anglicans and Non-conformists, drawing upon different ideological traditions but responding to similar urban problems, were deeply involved in the provision of charity and social services.[6]

However, despite the Churches' critical involvement in local life, which in part was driven by its 'civilising mission',[7] its leisure, educational and relief activities resulted in neither increasing, nor safeguarding, churchgoing figures.[8] What did result from the various ways in which the Churches succeeded in binding people to it was an increased exposure to religious symbols and language amongst the

2   Williams, 1999, pp.11 and 13.
3   As much of this work is about the local conditions prevalent in an English city, much that will be asserted can only be properly descriptive of the character of English popular religion.
4   In particular Cox, 1982; Williams, 1999; Brown, 2001.
5   Cox, 1982, pp.266f.
6   Cox, 1982, pp.23 and 58.
7   Cox, 1982, p.83.
8   Cox, 1982, p.83.

populace. The outcome for Cox was, in the words of Bishop E.S. Talbot of Rochester in 1903, a 'diffusive Christianity' amongst the general population. This 'diffusive Christianity', though clearly reliant upon and influenced by orthodoxy, characteristically maintained its own integrity and detachment from official norms. Thus of such 'diffusive Christianity' in Lambeth, Cox asserts: 'the people of Lambeth thought of themselves as Christians but insisted on defining their own religious beliefs rather than taking them from clergymen.'[9] 'Diffusive Christianity' proves a useful working concept descriptive of the dynamic and persistent popular religious life functioning elsewhere in this period and beyond.

For Cox, it was the erosion of the network of Church involvement in the communal life of English society, from the 1880s onwards, that defined the onset and cause of secularisation. Similarly, it was the decline in the Churches' pervasive participation, rather than the people's non-attendance at worship, that led to the Churches being viewed as remote and irrelevant.[10] What will be demonstrated in this work, contrary to Cox's conclusions, is the continuing resilience of the identified 'diffusive Christianity' some years on from his focus period, without the intricate props of Church social involvement that he identifies. Neither popular religion nor the Churches were peripheral to the people's lives during the Second World War. Nevertheless, Cox's contribution is foundational to this study in querying the assumed marginalisation of Christianity from popular life and culture heretofore.

Sarah Williams's work, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c.1880–1939* (1999) augments Cox's contribution. Where Cox's focus is predominantly the institutional aspects of the Churches' role in society, Williams's work approaches the subject of religion, and its place in Victorian and Edwardian life, from the people's recollected perspective. Drawing upon oral testimony, as Cox suggests should be the way forward,[11] Williams argues that it is the people themselves – rather than contemporary clerical commentators – that should

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9   Cox, 1982, p.92.
10   Cox, 1982, p.273.
11   Cox, 1982, p.90.

characterise popular religious life.[12] From her oral history accounts, she finds evidence of 'the multidimensional character of religious experience', that is to say, that there may be a mixture of motives for engaging in a particular ritual (e.g. baptism) and that both orthodox understandings and quasi-magical beliefs may be operating at the same time.[13] What Williams succeeds in demonstrating is that popular belief and practice functioned outside the confines of the ecclesiastical and its orthodoxies, creating its own social meaning and purpose.

Sarah Williams's work also demonstrates that even though formal religious observance, evidenced by declining Church attendance, waned across the early and middle years of the twentieth century, Christian rites of passage, symbols, hymnody and stories remained deeply embedded in the social and cultural psyche of the British people. Christianity's idiom and influence, she argues, were:

> incorporated as part of a distinct popular identity and heritage […] within a wider repertoire of religious belief [and within] a broader definition of religiosity [than that subscribed to by religious commentators]. The church was seen and its presence felt beyond the parameters of the institutional […] within popular culture.[14]

Perhaps because Sarah Williams anticipated that the populace of Southwark would have been dispersed by the blitz, its community life disrupted and its patterns of life distorted, she concludes her study at the beginning of the Second World War. In so doing, however, Williams inadvertently creates a sense of false discontinuity between peacetime and wartime popular religion. What will be seen in this book, however, is that, in reality, the contours of wartime popular religion were similar to those of peacetime; 'diffusive Christianity' as such remained intact. Yet, despite this underlying consistency between wartime and peacetime popular religion, war gave rise to particular and unique characteristics in response to events; what may be termed an air-raid shelter spirituality emerged from experiences. Moreover, what will become clearer as this study goes on is that the character of

12   Williams, 1999, p.9.
13   Williams, 1999, p.10.
14   Williams, 1999, p.162.

wartime popular religion was shaped as much by wartime propaganda and popular culture as by the traditional sources of its popular heterodoxy.

Callum Brown, in *The Death of Christian Britain*, seeks to further revise assumptions concerning the genesis of the secularisation of British society.[15] He argues that the real death knell of people's enthralment to Christian notions of personal identity and to the Christian world view did not occur in the nineteenth century, as previously assumed, but in the 1960s.[16] Up until then, Christianity so 'infused public culture and was adopted by individuals, whether churchgoers or not, in forming their own identities' that it becomes reductionist and deceptive to rely simply upon statistics of churchgoing as the primary measure of the process of secularisation.[17] Brown's distinctive contribution lies in his utilisation of the notion 'discursive Christianity', which he classifies as:

> the people's subscription to protocols of personal identity […] derived from Christian expectations, or discourses[: these are] rituals or customs of behaviour, economic activity, dress, speech and so on […] manifest in [e.g.] going to church on a Sunday, or saying grace before meals [but also] discerned in the 'voices' of the people [and circulated in] the dominant media of the time […] autobiography and oral record show a personal adoption of religious discourses [i.e.] 'subjectification' […] where people have been reflexive to the environment of circulating discourses.[18]

He argues that it is when people no longer tangibly define themselves according to such Christian discourses, that is to say when there is 'decay in discursive religiosity', that the decline in Christianity's sway over British religious life begins.[19] For Brown, it is the post-1960s generation who when questioned display no such 'religious or quasi-religious discourse, motif or activity whatever' and, for him, this is conclusive proof that the secularisation of British society begins at this

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15   Brown, 2001.
16   Brown, 2001, p.1.
17   Brown, 2001, p.8.
18   Brown, 2001, pp.12–13.
19   Brown, 2001, p.14.

point.[20] As well as finding evidence of so-called 'discursive Christianity' in a wide range of media (tracts, films, literature, and so on) up until then, Brown also demonstrates that the various discourses contained in these media shaped gender identity across the period. Personal narratives (such as those recounted in oral histories) were similarly reflexive of the particular religious protocols that formed such gender identities.

Brown's work challenges narrow understandings of the British people's personal and cultural attachment to Christianity. He demonstrates that Christian discourses continue to be circulated explicitly in the way that people live their lives, and implicitly in the way they define who they are, well on into the twentieth century. By listening to the people's voices and by examining some of 'the voices that speak to' people, he provides conclusive evidence of the persistent liveliness of Christian influence.[21]

In recent years, a number of other scholars have contributed to the historiography of British popular religion. Richard Sykes, for example, writing about another Midlands locale,[22] Dudley and the Gornals, provides significant evidence of the character of popular religion in this geographical area. However, his is a brief, and rather more negative, assessment of the impact of the Second World War upon popular religious belief and behaviour than that presented here. Similarly, Dorothy Entwistle, writing of rural Lancashire, discovers a religious vitality beyond the boundaries of institutional Christianity.[23] Alongside the work of Sykes and Entwistle, this locally focused study of wartime Birmingham adds to a now substantial volume of works attesting to the persistency of Christianity's influence over British life and the dynamics of such popular belief and practice.

20   Brown, 2001, p.183.
21   Brown, 2001, p.115.
22   Sykes, 1999.
23   Entwistle, 2001.

The Literature of the Impact of War on the Churches

The military historiography of the First and Second World Wars continues to proliferate. By contrast, the available literature concerned with the religious aspects of these two conflicts is decidedly limited, particularly that pertaining to the Second World War.[24] Presented below is a synopsis of some of the noteworthy contributions to the religious historiography of the two world wars.

By his two major works, one wholly concerned with the role of the established Church, the other with the nonconformist Churches in England across both conflicts, Alan Wilkinson has confirmed the significant part played by the mainline Protestant Christian denominations during the two world wars.[25] From an examination of their involvement, predominantly from a hierarchical and clerical level, it is clear that the Churches' response to the war, though diverse, was in the main supportive of each conflict. During the First World War, in particular, there existed a degree of belligerence amongst clerics bolstered by particular theological interpretations of events. Second-World-War clerics were much more tentative and subtle than this, and in the case of figures such as the renowned Bishop of Chichester, George Bell, critical of the way in which the war was being fought.

Wilkinson presents an extensive survey of the Churches' responses to the two world wars in his two books on the subject. By contrast, this study examines the religious aspects of the Second World War through the lens of the local experience of Birmingham's clergy, Church workers and general population. Whereas Wilkinson's work is little concerned with the popular religious experience of war, this study seeks to explore the distance between clerical teaching and popular faith.[26]

Adopting a similarly ecclesiastical focus, Arlie Hoover's book, *God, Britain and Hitler in World War Two*, examines in detail the

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24 For First World War, for example: Mews, 1973; Marrin, 1974; Hoover, 1989. Ceadel, 1980; Hastings, 1991; Wolffe, 1994 deal with both conflicts.
25 Wilkinson, 1978; Wilkinson, 1986.
26 E.g. Wilkinson, 1978, p.179; Wilkinson, 1986, p.276.

published and private thinking of senior clerics across denominations concerning the Second World War.[27] Hoover is able to detect dominant themes in the life and theology of the wartime Churches. The responses of the Churches to pacifism, the changing theological landscape from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy and the extent to which the Second World War was understood to be a war for Christian civilisation are the key themes Hoover identifies. However, he does not deal with the day-to-day ministrations of the Churches, nor is he concerned with the extent to which clerics' ideas were diffused amongst the populace, two major considerations here.

Michael Snape's paper *British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War* fills a demonstrable gap in the religious history of this denomination.[28] Through this piece Snape demonstrates the wider dynamic that shaped the Roman Catholic Church's response to the conflict, namely the need to exhibit Catholic loyalty (particularly in the context of Irish Nationalism and the neutrality of the wartime papacy), as well as uncovering the realities of the Catholic chaplains' and soldiers' trench experience. Snape's work is of particular relevance in providing evidence of the soldier's recourse to religion as a way of coping, which is in accord with the recorded experiences of many on the home front in the Second World War.[29] What Snape's work also reveals is that some chaplains tolerated the unorthodox application of religious devotion and the sacraments (by, for example, believing they provided protection in some way).[30] This contrasts well with the usual disparagement of such religious responses as 'second-rate religion' during the Second World War and at other times.

Adrian Hastings and Ian Machin, in their respective works, *A History of English Christianity* and *Churches and Social Issues in Twentieth Century Britain*, set the religious historiography of the Second World War in continuity with the rest of the century.[31] Hastings takes a global approach, setting the English Churches' history in the

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27   Hoover, 1999.
28   Snape, 2002.
29   Snape, 2002, p.340.
30   Snape, 2002, pp.346−347.
31   Hastings, 1991; Machin, 1998.

context of socio-political events rather than in ecclesiastical isolation. His is a broad-brush but thoroughgoing and wise assessment of events. However, once more their impact upon the local citizen is little considered. Machin demonstrates how, even in the midst of hostility, the Churches' wider concerns differed little from their peacetime ones; ill-used leisure time, weak Sabbath observance, concerns about sexual promiscuity, the abuse of alcohol and the resort to gambling.[32] Despite the particular social problems, such as those highlighted by the evacuation of children, and challenges to the Churches to contribute to ideas for social reconstruction, Machin chooses to leave unexamined the wartime pastoral care and concerns of clerics, and the religious response people made during a time of fearful need.

Similarly, John Wolffe, in *God and Greater Britain*, has a broader canvas in mind in his study of the part religion played in bolstering national identity across the period 1843−1945.[33] Undoubtedly of relevance in underscoring aspects of wartime popular religion reported on here, his focus is more the First than the Second World War and his sources are less the voices of ordinary people and more the assessments of other scholars and commentators on the importance of events.

In *Pacifism in Britain 1914−1945*, Martin Ceadel analyses the form of Christian idealism exhibited by the pacifist movement of the interwar period, exploring its roots and the outworking of its ideology and surveying its chief protagonists.[34] Whilst an indispensable study of this particular aspect of Christian political life, Ceadel's is a focused study singularly concerned with a particular facet of interwar history. What he highlights, however, is that pacifism was one of the dominant political lobbies of the period, and that the Churches were by no means compliant when it came to support for the war; nor were Churchmen uniform in their outlook. However, the layer of socio-political life with which Ceadel deals overlaps little with the life of the ordinary majority of people, who during the Second World War were satisfied that this war was just from a moral and religious point of view.

32   Machin, 1998, pp.115−125.
33   Wolffe, 1994.
34   Ceadel, 1980.